

Review

Flann O'Brien & Modernism, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), x + 235 pp., ISBN: 9781623568504. €24.58, £17.99, \$29.95 (paperback)

Ronan Crowley

University of Passau

What's in an ampersand? The symbol's name stems from its traditional placement at the tail-end of a recited alphabet, as etymologists and other bores will tell us. Indeed, Myles na Gopaleen tackled the subject himself in *Cruiskeen Lawn* for 10 September 1956. X, Y, Z, 'and *per se* and' yielded the corruption 'ampers&' (as Myles has it): 'a congealed mumble of English and Latin' in the mouths of rote learners.¹ A locus of belatedness or coming after, then, and the by-product of unruly repetition and inventiveness, the ligature yokes together the vectors of Brian O'Nolan's present-day reception, a 'complicated tangle' whose elaboration this volume does much to advance.² Proceeding from and building on the centenary conference *Strange Enlightenments*, co-organised by the University of New South Wales's John Hume Institute for Global Irish Studies and Centre for Modernism Studies in Australia, *Flann O'Brien & Modernism* offers fifteen original and thought-provoking essays that 'seek the higher places' of O'Nolan's complex relationships to literary modernism and the stuff of modernity: from bicycles and the (demon) drink to A. N. Whitehead and Georg Cantor.³ Under the sign of the logogram, the collection situates O'Nolan's *oeuvre* within and without, a part of and apart from the eddies and crosscurrents of the cultural field of the 1930s through the mid-1960s.

Representing something of an Antipodean O'Nolan – though valuable contributions also hail from Antwerp, Fiji, and London – the collection turns on its head the avowed direction of critical inquiry in O'Nolan studies. One of two volumes of essays on your man published last year and one of five issued since the centenary, this unprecedented vitality testifies to what Joseph Brooker characterised in the previous number of *The Parish Review* as 'literally scores of people' now writing on O'Nolan.⁴ With an international society, dedicated journal, and biennial conference to their names, Flanneurs and Mylesians are in a position to trace the contours of a rapidly expanding field. No longer Flann simply as prophet or precursor – and it is always *Flann* – the portrait of the artist sketched in Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet's useful introduction is less one of the prolepsis of a young postmodernist,

in Keith Hopper's influential formulation, than O'Nolan as a second generation modernist or late modernist; even, as Stephen Abblitt proposes in a felicitous coinage, as a 'reluctant modernist' (55).

In this respect, McDonald and Murphet can profitably be put in conversation with the excellent *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *The Parish Review*. But whereas Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber describe the critical choice between textualism or contextualism rather diplomatically as 'two flags in the sand,'⁵ the present collection reorients these approaches – and quite rightly, to my mind – as part of a broad critical migration from questions of language and form to the more finely historicised accounts of culture and society that nowadays are par for the course in treatments of the major and minor modernists alike. Indeed, this reconfiguration of the terms of modernist reception and what it might mean for O'Nolan was spelt out as long ago as Brooker's perceptive review essay 'The Man in the Hat' in *Modernism/modernity*.⁶ McDonald and Murphet proceed by way of an accessible run-through of modernism's vertical expansion and temporal bleed-over into the period hitherto flagged as the postmodern. From Tyrus Miller's 'late modernism' to Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's 'bad modernisms' they're all here, and alloyed to an appreciation for 'the wider transformation of the relationship of Ireland to modernism' (4), the editors' critical scene-setting will be required reading for anyone seeking to understand the state of the field. Moreover, they project a number of very real directions for future scholarship. Within this enabling rubric, individual contributions revisit and reflect on questions of 'form, style, voice, characterisation, irony and parody in O'Brien's major works,' but significantly 'in relation to ideas of "the modern," encompassing scientific, religious, sexual, linguistic, literary, socio-economic and technological contexts' (8). That timely comingling translates into a concern with theology and philosophy; to questions of ethics and commitment not usually broached for our stanceless ironist; to comparative forays that look beyond familiar horizons; to theatricality, sexuality, names, and naming in the postcolony, influence and the affluence of incohol (as the Aussies say).

Hoary topics such as the legacy of Joyce remain largely free of what Neil Murphy and Hopper have elsewhere termed 'the paralysing comparisons of old.'⁷ Indeed, in David Kelly's hands such truisms as the burden of authorial originality and the whole kit and caboodle of high-modernist anxiety are reworked as 'matters of intense comic amusement' to O'Nolan (74). For my part, however, I cannot see how the copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* presented to Joyce constitutes an attempt 'to provoke a famous literary feud,' as Abblitt argues (58); highlighting the phrase 'Diffidence of the author' in the Longmans volume seems an extraordinarily defensive strategy in his opening repertoire for so seasoned a chess-player as O'Nolan. Dirk Van Hulle, by

contrast, confines Mylesian belatedness to the marginalia written in the copy of *Ulysses* that O'Nolan shared with Donagh MacDonagh. As 'thinkers on paper' (108), the two evince precisely the response to Joyce that Anthony Cronin anatomised in his mid-century peers: 'making him a mere logomachic wordsmith.'⁸ For aside from noting some orthographic errors in the names of Dublin premises, most of the annotations are 'intratextual references (often just page numbers), indicating internal correspondences and echoes in the book' (113). Here one might think of the indices and lists of cross-references that Denis Johnston compiled over a lifetime of reading *Ulysses*. Joyce's early Irish readers recorded no illuminating glosses or displayed no insider knowledge of Edwardian Dublin, and Van Hulle's work on the 'Modernist Mind' explains why. Margins and manuscripts became instead a productive site of thinking through Joyce.

The portrait of O'Nolan as a mid-century Irish writer continues in the comparative treatment of Patrick Kavanagh, his Monaghan contemporary, by Brooker. This welcome focus on one of the 'writers with whom he shared pub tables' (93) illustrates just how necessary is the work of articulating O'Nolan's place in the 'Dublin Culture' of 1940, to borrow the title of Alan Reeves's Palace Bar cartoon. But not all of the essays rise to the ambitious programme laid out by the editors; some critical orthodoxies die hard. For one thing, the collection still concentrates in the main on the Big Two, with *The Third Policeman* inching out *At Swim-Two-Birds* for primary focus, even if both are now subjected to a fine-grained historicism. *Cruiskeen Lawn*, surely the natural home for such treatments, is lamentably a creature of the footnotes. It is to be hoped, therefore, that the publication of *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* in 2013 will shift some attention away from the *anni mirabiles* that produced *At Swim-Two-Birds* through *An Béal Bocht*. Here Stefan Solomon's reading of the novels' theatrical dimensions against the failures of O'Nolan's dramatic projects deserves special mention. The relative poverty of *Faustus Kelly*, *Thirst*, *et al.* Solomon locates within a genealogy of modernist anti-theatricality, 'developed first by Nietzsche and then Benjamin' (44), but which O'Nolan forsook to tailor his plays to the Abbey, Gaiety, or Gate stages. In his contribution, Sam Dickson even marshals the journalism and short fiction published under various by-lines ('The Trade in Dublin,' 'Time and Drink,' and 'A Bash in the Tunnel') to explore the links between alcohol and literary composition: drink as, by turns, Person from Porlock or 'productive literary agent' (165). The hard stuff also features in a second comparative piece, in which Sascha Morrell considers how O'Nolan and Frank Moorhouse associate drink with creativity and literary labour.

The bookending contributions, in particular – chapters by Sean Pryor, John Attridge, Mark Steven, and Mark Byron – indicate how amenable O'Nolan studies is to the historicising new modernist vein. But taking up the cudgels on behalf of new modernist studies is perhaps a *fait accompli*. ('Did you ever see me cudgels?' asks Myles

in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* parenthetical. 'I can tell you that they are pretty hefty articles, particularly if you get them on the head!'⁹) What remains unclear is why this critical reorientation has taken so long. Inaugurated 'on or about 1999' with the foundation of the Modernist Studies Association, as a prominent retrospective has it, new modernist studies is now fifteen years old.¹⁰ So why are we playing catch-up? Moreover, given the bias against single-author studies in many journals and conferences, do a stake in O'Nolan's reception and the expansionist platform espoused by new modernist studies make for amiable bedfellows? Flanneurs should rightly be excited by the recent spate of essay collections that began with Jennika Baines's '*Is it about a bicycle?*' *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*. But what of academic journals? World famous in Australia, as it were, is O'Nolan studies gaining traction in the peer-reviewed periodicals? A cursory run-through of prominent journals over the last decade suggests not. Project Muse and the IFOBS bibliography yield only ten hits for single-author essays on O'Nolan in publications devoted to Irish studies or modernist writing. Almost half of these 'hefty articles' appeared in the pages of *New Hibernia Review* (submitters take note). *Éire-Ireland*, by contrast, has not published an essay on O'Nolan since 2003; *The Irish University Review* not since 2007. Why not? Hugh Kenner's early ascription that O'Nolan was 'not bottled for export' has been demonstrably proven wrong by the ongoing surge in consumption at home and abroad.¹¹ While *Flann O'Brien & Modernism* makes for a welcome addition to that growing body of scholarship, it would be a real shame if the energy and enthusiasm unleashed in recent years were to be confined to the proceedings volume.

Notes & references

¹ Myles na Gopaleen, '£ s. d., & c.' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* [hereafter CL], 10 September 1956, 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 158.

⁴ Joseph Brooker, 'The Lads in the Clouds: Myles na gCopaleen in *Kavanagh's Weekly*,' *The Parish Review* 2, no. 2 (2014): 29.

⁵ Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber, 'Editors' Introduction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 6.

⁶ Joseph Brooker, 'The Man in the Hat,' *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 1 (2010): 233–8.

⁷ Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, 'Editors' Introduction: A(nother) Bash In the Tunnel,' in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (2011): 13.

⁸ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 52.

⁹ CL, 31 August 1951, 4.

¹⁰ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies,' *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737.

¹¹ Hugh Kenner, 'The Mockery,' in *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 262.