

Review

Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), xv + 296 pp., ISBN: 9781782050766. €39.00, £35.00, \$50 (hardback)

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One of the aims of this collection is to contest, or bear witness to, Brian O'Nolan's current legacy, particularly 'the myth that O'Nolan wrote two good novels' (14) and nothing more. I am perhaps perfectly positioned to respond to this collection, since I thought this myth true. If I draw a line at judging his journalism to be 'the inferior medium,' it must be because I am not well enough acquainted with George Knowall or Brother Barnabas or even Myles na gCopaleen (14). In fact, while these estimable gentlemen do occupy parts of my bookshelves with their more illustrious colleague Flann O'Brien, these parts are rather dusty for lack of use; I have not delved much beyond those 'two good novels.' I read this collection to persuade me to give up this myth: in an unmerciful world where too much begs to be read, it did just that.

In this regard, I grant the collection's success; it does open up a space for reading across the remit of O'Nolan's eclectic *oeuvre*, highlighting aspects of his technical virtuosity that an isolated reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* would not necessarily draw to the surface. A number of essays offer interesting re-readings of these works in light of the broader canon: I think here of contributions by Tom Walker and Jennika Baines. However, I am not sure that the collection is held together by the theme of contestation. If anything, the full measure of the aforementioned 'myth' was made clear to me by the assurance with which most of the essays did not feel the need to bear witness to the importance of O'Nolan's wider corpus. Clearly, seemed to be the unwritten rule, O'Nolan's legacies can only be contested in their message, not in their value. If individual essays did not agree with each other, these internal disagreements were in their manner of reading: contestation is put forward as a question of epistemological apparatus, not as an act of bearing witness.

Here emerged my first, petty gripe with the collection; it repeats primary material, which sacrifices broad engagement with the newly published wider canon for methodological contestation. Contestation as argument trumps contestation as witnessing. This should not detract from the evident work that Ruben Borg, Paul

Fagan, and Werner Huber have put into editing a work of this range. Essays tended to diverge significantly in their methodologies and the editors should be congratulated on finding three threads that did link the sections together: Broadening the Canon, Inter/National Contexts, and Critical Perspectives. However, for all that it has opened my eyes to some of O'Nolan's under-read works, exemplars of the wider *oeuvre* did tend to repeat: 'John Duffy's Brother,' 'The Martyr's Crown,' and *An Béal Bocht* recur often enough that the wider canon or even *legacies* were granted less witness than were rival methods of reading the same works against each other. Initially, the framework frustrated me; later, I warmed to it as a critical argument since the real strength of the collection manifested itself in the epistemological apparatus each critic deployed to make sense of O'Nolan's writing.

Keith Hopper's reading of 'John Duffy's Brother' covers a staggering territory, from Keats to Eoghan Nolan, and yet initially I came away oddly dissatisfied with it in its place as the first essay of the collection. Without wishing to find fault in its conclusion – that 'John Duffy's Brother' offers a 'real account of sexual anxiety' (32) – I felt it came to this conclusion through a succession of indeterminate vignettes, rather than a definite argument. However, it challenges, in productive ways, Marion Quirici's structural response to the presiding role of the frame device in O'Nolan's short fiction and Jack Fennell's contextual understanding of science fiction in the early and late works. It is therefore as a succession of challenges, or 'contestations,' that I found myself re-reading the essays and developing far greater sympathy for the collection.

Hopper's essay serves as a contextual response to Paul Fagan's excellent evocation of mediation (to co-opt Quirici's term) as a mode of narcissistic misrecognition. Fagan, who shows how O'Nolan incorporates Ovid's Narcissus myth into his reflections on both literary event and literary agency, focuses on a becoming other that is nicely contested by Baines's use of the same stories to evaluate the prominence of murder as a narrative device. However, murder is not merely a device, contends Walker; it becomes a historical context, turning *The Third Policeman* into 'an echo chamber of possible allusions which accumulate to suggest that one of Ireland's past transgressions in 1939 might be art itself' (142). This history may have legal connotations; murder may bring characters before the law, but, as Maebh Long shows in her reconsideration of the Maamtrasna murders, it is often language that is on trial: 'In *An Béal Bocht* the Irish language is other to the law and its speakers must bow to the decrees of a legal system wholly beyond their understanding' (181). If Long challenges the jurisprudential bases for a certain writing of history, Ute Anna Mittermaier and John McCourt demonstrate how our own histories of O'Nolan, either as the 'apolitical humourist' respondent to Oscar Love in the letter-wars of the 1930s or as 'a Joyce reader/promoter/critic/defender/saviour' in the Myles writings of *The*

Irish Times, need to be radically rethought (97, 111). Thierry Robin provides an interesting alternative contestation to this treatment of history since, as he argues, 'all of Brian O'Nolan's major novels aim, in one way or another, at debunking the metanarrative of history' (76).

Against these historical treatments, I found myself placing the scientific analyses of Fennell, Ondřej Pilný, and Alana Gillespie, all of whom contest each other's epistemologies of science in useful and productive ways. Gillespie shows how Myles 'voices at least four different attitudes to science' and how *Cruiskeen Lawn* treats the impact of theoretical physics in contemporary Irish culture (171). Theoretical physics becomes pataphysics, as Pilný uses Alfred Jarry's '(super)imposition of physics and metaphysics' to re-read *The Third Policeman* as Swiftian satire (156). Fennell, who casts O'Nolan's use of science in his fiction into the wider context of Irish science fiction, returns this interplay in physics (theoretical or pata-) to a structured historical context.

Structure, rather than history, provided the basis for contestation in the contributions of Quirici, Neil Murphy, and Thomas Jackson Rice. Mediation, intertextuality, and marriage become the bases for reading of these three critics. Murphy's essay might be more productively aligned with Long's, since both focus on *An Béal Bocht*. However, I was also taken with how the former's use of intertextuality as a form of parody might structurally respond to Quirici's conclusion about mediation in O'Nolan's frame devices, wherein 'that which limits or interrupts the alleged wholeness of the story is, ultimately, constitutive of the story itself' (59). If parody and mediation as technique interrupt the wholeness of the narrative for Murphy and Quirici (and it may not), marriage as theme seems to do the same for Rice's reading of *The Dalkey Archive* and *The Third Policeman*. Neither Murphy nor Rice are quite so structuralist in their analyses as Quirici. Rice, for instance, uses *The Vanishing Irish* symposium to suggest that 'O'Nolan may simply have been a typical Irish heterosexual male of his time and place' (205). But, Rice returns, 'the repressed homosexual may in fact *be* the typical Irish male of O'Nolan's time' (206).

In which case, as I return to Hopper's contribution, there is more consistency to his eclectic reading of 'sexual anxiety' than I gave him credit for in my initial reading: it acts as counterpoint to the insights of the other essays in the collection. If I opened this review by worrying that the 'myth' of Flann O'Brien is insufficiently contested, I conclude it by noting that the collection does something far more interesting and complex: it forms a latticework of methodologies of contestation. In other words, this collection of essays, beautifully bound by Cork University Press, has successfully read me out of my own contestations.