Review

Flore Coulouma, *Diglossia and the Linguistic Turn: Flann O'Brien's Philosophy of Language* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), 240 pp., ISBN 9781564784117. €39.33, £27.50, $39.95.

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Dalkey Archive Press's latest Flann O'Brien book is *Diglossia and the Linguistic Turn: Flann O'Brien's Philosophy of Language*, by Flore Coulouma, associate professor of English linguistics at the Université Paris–Ouest Nanterre La Défense. Despite a lack of promotional activity on the part of the press, it is a valuable and refreshing addition to a growing body of critical work on the writing of Brian O'Nolan. Oddly conspicuous by the absence of promotional material at the International Flann O'Brien Society's Prague conference last September, perhaps the 'hopelessly quixotic venture' that is Dalkey Archive Press (its founder's words)[1] was trying a new tactic in 'subversive' literary publishing, or just following the injunction of Myles na gCopaleen to 'say nothing' lest it be misinterpreted.[2]

Coulouma's book is a very readable critical assessment of that most central of questions in the writing of Brian O'Nolan: how language is bound up with identity and authenticity. Coulouma argues that O'Nolan's concern with language 'parallels […] the Linguistic Turn in the history of Western philosophy' (10). She does not claim active awareness on O'Nolan's part of the Cambridge school of analytic philosophy, but claims his 'philosophical intuitions attest to a linguistic turn in world literature,' in such a way that prefigures the 'ordinary language philosophy' movement in analytical philosophy associated with John L. Austin (author of *How to Do Things with Words*, 1955), Peter Strawson, and later Paul Grice ('Logic and Conversation' lectures, 1967) and John Searle (10–11). Coulouma explains that 'ordinary language philosophy is concerned with formalising the logic of implicit meaning in language and defining the rules of communicative interaction' (11). The movement's origins are indebted to Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Coulouma's introduction shows the importance of Wittgenstein in this constellation, arguing that the 'question of nonsense is central to both the early Wittgenstein and to Flann O'Brien's fiction,' as both are concerned with whether it is possible to 'express the inexpressible,' linguistically and/or metaphysically (12–13).

Then on to diglossia, the central concept in Coulouma's reading of O'Nolan. Coined by the American linguist Charles Ferguson in 1959, diglossia is the 'sociolinguistic phenomenon affecting communities in which two languages are spoken in mutually exclusive contexts, with a strong hierarchical ranking between idioms, and a subsequent socioeconomic, political, and psychological domination of the higher ranking idiom.' *Diglossia and the Linguistic Turn* focuses on 'the implicit in discourse, speech acts, reflexivity and subjectivity, and the relationship between language and reality' in O'Nolan's work (15).

Academics will appreciate the continental critical perspective that Coulouma takes to O'Nolan's writing. In a literary critical context of linguistics and (not just continental) philosophy, Coulouma supports her argument that O'Nolan presents monologic speech as unsound and nonsensical with reference to Bakhtin and M. Keith Booker, claiming that language in O'Nolan 'is always, systematically dialogic' (25). Journalism is dialogic by nature, and Coulouma rightly devotes considerable attention to *Cruiskeen Lawn*, which is one of the strong points of the book. With aplomb, she presents illustrations from the column to elucidate a critical reading that draws on the work of a number of linguists and Francophone scholars whose work is rarely applied to O'Nolan: Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Frantz Fanon, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, among others.

'Chapter 1: Orality, Literacy and the Storytelling Tradition' explores the primacy of conversation in O'Nolan's texts, which constantly 'underline the fixity of written discourse' (19). This chapter also examines transcribing the spoken word and the privileging of orality in *At Swim-Two-Birds* over written texts. This focus introduces O'Nolan's treatment of the identity politics of speech and writing in Ireland, which are dealt with in greater detail in chapters 3 and 5, while focusing on the materiality of language in O'Nolan's writing, from eroticism to hunger/sustenance to musicality.

The second chapter, 'A Philosopher of Ordinary Language: Communication, Cooperation, Irony' explores O'Nolan's linguistic intuitions about everyday language in relation to speech act theory and agonism. The chapter's strength is linguistic, with Coulouma demonstrating the ludic and phatic elements in O'Nolan's dialogue, whose speakers often 'do not seek to convey meaning but only relish in proffering articulated sounds' (56). Following an interesting commentary on types of irony bolstered by linguists Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, Coulouma turns to the failings of O'Nolan's dramatic writing. She convincingly argues that O'Nolan's hybrid writing 'blurs the distinction between reality, fiction and theatricality,' but that his 'staged fiction' is not theatre because of its 'self-conscious hesitation between orality and literacy, direct speech and ironical mentions, performance and meta-narrative commentary' (64).

'Chapter 3: Identity and Subjectivity: Interpellation and the Colonial Speaker' investigates the diabolical dialogism of O'Nolan's 'tyrannical voices,' where a 'conflictual polyphony undermines the characters' sense of their own subjective integrity' (70). With this angle, Coulouma begins to argue the prominence of schizophrenic, split subjects and narratives in O'Nolan's writing, culminating in *The Third Policeman*. One wishes that schizophrenia, which turns out to be a central theoretical concept for Coulouma, had been directly foregrounded earlier instead of being embedded in a discussion about the moot homogeneity of the Subject in discourse. Coulouma then addresses the psychic violence of colonial (re-)naming, arguing that 'diglossia is not a mere symptom of schizophrenia but its very substance' and that it affects 'society as a whole, thus translating into a constant hesitation between nonsense and reason, between mute silence and the proliferation of discourse' (95). Overall, the chapter may attempt to cover too much ground, but it succeeds in showing how O'Nolan subverts 'principles of cooperative and informative communication' and foregrounds the 'fundamental ambiguity of language and its effects' in the construction and destruction of subjects' identity, which makes for an excellent transition to the fourth chapter (100).

'Knowledge and Fiction, the Illusory Quest for Truth in Language' contributes to, among others, debates about Menippean satire and the quest for knowledge in O'Nolan's writing. Here too, Coulouma sees O'Nolan's critical obsession with science as linguistic. His 'anatomy of scientific discourse exposes,' she writes, 'our credulity in the face of authoritative dogma and reveals the unavoidable failure of language to make sense of the world, leaving us with a fragmented reality and the anguished intuition of the absurd' (101–2). Dealing with authority, class, faith, dogma, lists, omnium, Dineen, Joyce and Schrodinger, Chapter 4 presents an intriguing picture of O'Nolan's satire of science, one of 'science *as* fiction: scientific progress and positive knowledge of the world are a fallacy' (110). Coulouma asserts that O'Nolan's 'satire is not about a theory but a type of discourse,' where language, with its fraught and unstable referential function, is not up to the task of making sense of the world (112, 114). Again, she makes a strong transition back to philosophy of language and semantic categories, asking 'how can you put your wife in one or the other category (human/kangaroo) when there is no clear-cut conceptual distinction between the two?' (123). Coulouma sets us up for the fifth and final chapter on the language question by arguing that O'Nolan's diglossic philosophy is one of 'non-assertion' and the 'in-between' (129).

'The Language Question: An Irish Conundrum' is in my view Coulouma's strongest chapter. Given the primacy of language in her book, it initially struck me as puzzling to postpone contrasting diglossia with bilingualism until a discussion of the

language question in Ireland.[3] However, this delayed contrast is effective in bringing together all her arguments about O'Nolan's writing and philosophy of everyday language, and the chapter actually provides a stronger conclusion than the Conclusion itself, which noncommittally gives Salman Rushdie the last word. The final chapter argues that it is diglossia, not bilingualism, that shapes O'Nolan's writing, and that the shifting transparency and opacity of language in his work creates uncanny effects that stem from uncertainty in 'a fictional universe [... where] speakers always speak in the shadow of another language, but we never quite know which' (131–2). Here, Fanon, Bakhtin, Booker, Deleuze and others are invoked to provide a provocative and insightful reading of literary exile, colonial linguistic norms and subversion, linguistic hybridity and the 'schizophrenic double bind of the postcolonial subject' (146).

The linguistic angle Coulouma takes is refreshing, and while some of her arguments about language phenomena in O'Nolan's work are more provocative than comprehensive, they go some way towards filling in the terminological gaps left by critics who recognise the importance of O'Nolan's bilingualism and his particular way with words, but may lack sufficient background in linguistics to put the right name on a certain phenomenon. The balance of attention to the novels and the column is good and Coulouma is usually adept at illustrating her claims with appropriate quotes. The conclusion sees her advance a plea for recognising O'Nolan's work, especially *Cruiskeen Lawn*, as 'symptomatic' of a *genre mineur*, one which succeeds in deterritorialising language and tradition by triumphing in fragments and the in-between (169). Just as Humpty Dumpty could not be put back together again, no language, not Irish, English, nor even diglossic discourse, can succeed in putting back together the fragments of experience. However, the fragmentation that characterises O'Nolan's minor literature as *genre mineur* (170) enables readers to examine fragments as they should be: not as parts of a fractured whole, but against other fragments.

Notes & references

[1] See the interview with John O'Brien, founder of Dalkey Archive Press: http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-john-obrien/

[2] Flann O'Brien, *The Hair of the Dogma: A Further Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn*,' ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1977), 49.

[3] In short, in a diglossic situation, 'two languages co-exist in one given linguistic community…with complementary communicative functions,' while in a bilingual situation 'two languages of equal social status are used indifferently by a speaker in the same communicative contexts' (149).