

# Report

*Metamorphoses: The III International Flann O'Brien Conference*  
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I am penning these lines, dear reader, under conditions of great emotional stress, being engaged as I am in the composition of a post-conference report upon my return to mundane reality. Before these lines were in neat rows of print, the writer was to be found wandering the labyrinthine city of Prague, which provided an appropriate setting for the latest symposium on the elusive temporality and complex spatiality of Brian O'Nolan's work.<sup>1</sup> After Flanneurs and Mylesians had reacquainted themselves with authoritative studies in the field at the inaugural *100 Myles* conference in Vienna (2011) and subjected the very concept of authority to critical questioning at *Problems with Authority* in Rome (2013), the third instalment in this conference series focused on the idea of metamorphosis, or transformation, in the wi(l)dest sense.

In their opening addresses held in Room 200 at Charles University, where a magnificent view of the castle claimed our attention outside the grand hall window to our left, the triumvirate of hosts approached the overarching topic of metamorphosis from different perspectives. Ondřej Pilný, director of the Centre for Irish Studies at Charles University and essential figure in the promotion of Irish studies in Europe and Brian O'Nolan's work in particular, welcomed the assemblage and gave us our bearings through a series of 'housekeeping notes' that would become a leitmotif throughout the proceedings. Ruben Borg (*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*) introduced the theme of 'metamorphosis without Flann,' covering a wide range of writers and filmmakers who have engaged with this trope, including Dante, G.B. Shaw (*Pygmalion*), and, indeed, Michael Bay (*Transformers*). Pointing to a heavily annotated section in O'Nolan's personal copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Paul Fagan (*Salzburg University*) discussed the centrality of the Narcissus myth to O'Nolan's poetics, highlighting the tension between self and Other that underpins compositions such as 'Two in One' and 'John Duffy's Brother.'<sup>2</sup>

Headliner Joseph Brooker (*Birkbeck, University of London*) opened the conference with a fascinating keynote ('Do Bicycles Dream of Molecular Sheep?') that left us vowing to read more science fiction in the future.<sup>3</sup> Building on Jonathan Lethem's

estimation of *The Third Policeman* (1967) as a 'highly Dickian' novel *avant la lettre*,<sup>4</sup> Brooker productively compared and contrasted the novel with Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *Ubik* (1969), uncovering unexpected parallels and similarities between two writers whose writing appears quite different at first glance. Brooker updated the idea of the purgatorial state in which the narrator of *The Third Policeman* finds himself, likening his situation to a 'cryogenic state.' Most importantly, according to Brooker, both O'Nolan's work and science fiction *à la* Dick share an underlying 'ontological instability': the dividing line between reality and fiction becomes blurry; the texts display a 'profound ambiguity' towards reality. However, while there are striking similarities between O'Nolan's work and this type of genre fiction, Brooker made it clear that he considers O'Nolan's particular type of 'whimsical' humour and other features of his writing quite unique, which would make *The Third Policeman* a borderline case of this genre at best, but certainly not a case of hard science fiction.

The increased interaction and gradual convergence between human beings and technology, which has spawned an ongoing discussion in recent critical theory, proved a fruitful metaphor for metamorphosis throughout the first day's papers. Yael Levin's (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) talk 'Who Hobbles after the Subject: Parables of Writing in *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*' considered the disabilities of O'Nolan and Beckett's protagonists less as defects than as 'keys to their maker's poetics.' Arguing that the *Complete Index* of de Selby's works, which the reader never sees in its entirety, constitutes a 'physical lack,' Levin likened the footnotes in *The Third Policeman* to prosthetics that 'leech onto the host, hijacking the main text.' As such, the novel's exegetical apparatuses are not static addenda but rather interact with their host in a way that furthers, rather than hinders, creativity. A physical lack in a different sense also characterises the protagonists in 'John Duffy's Brother' and Joyce's 'A Painful Case,' on whom Paul Fagan's (first) paper focused. Drawing on Foucault, Sedgwick, and recent work on celibate modernism by Benjamin Kahan, Fagan explored the idea of celibacy as a 'site of radical indeterminacy' in these two texts, pointing out the 'pregnant silences' (pun intended?) by which the texts 'manage to keep secrets' and question heteronormative notions of desire. Another particularly productive translation of the act of writing to the realm of the body was undertaken by Maebh Long (*The University of the South Pacific*), who used the concept of immunity and the autoimmune to illustrate the 'breaking down of boundaries between self and other' in O'Nolan's texts. Suggesting that 'part and whole become meaningless categories in an auto-immune system,' Long traced this concept through a number of texts, most notably 'Two in One' and *The Third Policeman*. Alana Gillespie (*Utrecht University*) and Katherine Ebury (*University of York*) rounded out the panel with papers on Myles's

engagements with Dr Noël Browne's 'Mother and Child Scheme' and capital punishment, respectively. A fair number of uncanny Doppelgänger sightings (also known as 'double vision') were reported the same night after the Conference Reception at the Irish Embassy, which ended with an enthusiastic rendition of Kafka's recently discovered 'Bohemian Rhapsody' fragment (falsely attributed to Freddie Mercury in the past).

The first panel on the second day, 'From Monads to Nomads: The Philosophies of *The Third Policeman*,' featured the canonical League of Extraordinary Gentlemen in the field of hardcore philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Leibniz and Burke featured in Einat Adar's (*Charles University, Prague*) investigation of the striking similarities between *The Third Policeman* and Enlightenment philosophers, among other things drawing a parallel between Leibniz's concept of monads – the basic elements of the world that are at the same time souls and particles of matter – and O'Nolan's omnium. Both Camus and Heidegger were invoked when Daniel Curran (*Maynooth University*) tackled the equally intriguing topic of 'Flann O'Brien, the Absurd, and the Authenticity of Death.' Rejecting the long-held idea that the anonymous narrator's plight in *The Third Policeman* can be regarded as Sisyphean, since he is not in fact aware of the absurdity of his own condition, Curran argued that No-Man's state is one of 'perpetual alienation,' in which death itself functions as 'eternal punishment for No-Man's pursuit of authentic selfhood.' Ruth Clemens (*University College London*) concluded this rich and thought-provoking panel by discussing the philosophical idea of death in connection with Rosi Braidotti's concept of the Posthuman and its 'politics of life as relentlessly generative force.' Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Clemens explored to what extent *The Third Policeman* can be read as a 'transgression of the life-death dichotomy' in terms of a merging between human and machine.

After a highly enjoyable lunchtime reading with Val O'Donnell in Prague's Cyclist's Restaurant, *Kolonial*, we attended a screening and Q&A with Alana Gillespie, director of the forthcoming 30-minute animated film version of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, which O'Nolan himself adapted from *The Insect Play* by local boys Karel and Josef Čapek (<http://www.rhapsodyshort.com>). We gained fascinating insights into the editing process and the advantages and challenges of international projects, as well as the life of beetles ('are beetles ever naked?'). The Q&A also touched on the social and political relevance of O'Nolan's 1943 play and revealed possible reasons as to why the play was not as successful as Myles's journalism or O'Brien's fiction (as Val O'Donnell noted, O'Nolan's skills 'lie in monologue rather than dialogue').

In another engaging and superb keynote, "'Everybody here is under arrest": Translation and Politics in *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' Catherine Flynn (*University of California, Berkeley*) showed O'Nolan's circumventing of Irish language varieties associated with

the past (e.g. Munster Irish) and his experimental appropriation of Irish as a way of 'representing the modern world.' Flynn convincingly argued that O'Nolan's occasionally hilarious transliterations follow their own 'logic of mistranslation,' which is not devoid of a political dimension. Flynn is currently working on a scholarly edition of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* with fellow Flanneur David Wheatley, which we are awaiting with great eagerness.

The second night ended with an entertaining reading by Kevin Barry (author of *City of Bohane*, *Dark Lies the Land* and winner of the Goldsmiths Prize 2015 for his newest novel, *Beatlebone*) and further degustation of local produce for strictly scientific reasons. The third day again featured an impressive array of philosophical approaches and thinkers, ranging from Aristotle and J. W. Dunne to Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>6</sup> Ruben Borg started off with a 'three-minute history of tragic and comic thought' (*Guinness Book of World Records* entry pending), focusing on moments where tragedy turns into comedy in O'Nolan's work. In 'John Duffy's Brother,' such a transformation occurs when the protagonist is laughed at by his colleagues in a scene which eventually triggers a cathartic moment in him. Borg suggested that laughter can be read historically as a 'nervous reaction,' a way of 'covering up embarrassment' or (in this case literally) blowing off steam. Comedy thus becomes a mask which veils uncomfortable silences and lacunae in the text while at the same time drawing our attention to them. John Greaney (*University College Dublin*) followed on with an analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in connection with Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the 'schizophrenic body.' As Greaney argued, O'Brien's novel can be considered a 'schizoid work'<sup>7</sup> in terms of 'its constant reorganisation of form, its tendency towards hybrid conjugation' – the fact that any attempt at unification or organisation is bound to fail in this text is already indicated in the enthusiastically labelled but soon abandoned 'Chapter One.' Paul Fagan then gave a second paper on 'Wasting Timelessness in Lewis Carroll and Flann O'Brien,' focussing on alternative temporalities in two 'permeable worlds': Wonderland, where it is 'always 6 o'clock' and The Parish, where it is 'always five o'clock in the afternoon.' Contrasting ancient and modern notions of time and timelessness, Fagan argued that Alice rejects the Victorian idea of productivity by wasting time; similarly, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* cannot obey a logical course of action during the time he spends in Eternity, since that world does not adhere to common notions of cause and effect. In the sense that neither the schizoid text nor the protagonist of Carroll's story can stop producing waste, Fagan's and Greaney's papers converged most productively. In both cases, the eventual outcome is a rejection of teleology, or an ultimate goal.

The day continued with a (strictly scholarly) foray into 'Writing under the Influence,' as Noam Schiff (*Brandeis University*) gave an enticing talk on the subject of 'Alcohol, Alchemy, and O'Brien's Metamorphosis,' likening the effects of alcohol to those of a Stevensonian potion. This was followed by a talk by John Wyse Jackson, a pioneer in O'Nolan studies, that picked up on the topic of 'Translation, Transliteration and Transgression' previously introduced by Catherine Flynn. The walking tour of Prague with Miloš Čuřík, a former DJ and concert organiser, taught us much more than official biographies of famous international writers and celebrities ever could. That evening, *Will the Real Flann O'Brien...? A Life in Five Scenes*, a theatre performance by Gerry Smyth, David Llewellyn, and Andrew Sherlock (of *The Brother* fame), featuring visitations from a flamboyantly obnoxious Joyce and a traditionally defeatist Beckett (complete with sucking-stones), was a blast.

The last morning featured investigations of O'Nolan's recently collected and edited short fiction<sup>8</sup> and a panel (cheekily titled 'Frothing at the Gob') that was haunted by the return of a certain flamboyant Irish modernist who must not be named at O'Nolan events. Yaeli Greenblatt (*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*) looked at 'Visual Transformations of Text in O'Brien and Joyce,' arguing that for both authors 'experimentation with typographic materiality culminates in the novel's transgression of the textual medium, transforming the novel into a graphic-textual hybrid.' Joseph LaBine (*University of Windsor*) suggested that Myles got the term 'Cruiskeen Lawn' from a passage in 'Cyclops,' while Paweł Hejmanowski (*Universidade de Brasília*) explored 'Wakean narratives' in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The last regular panel provided fascinating new insights by 'Re-Reading the Irish Tradition with Flann.' Neil Murphy (*Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*) presented an alternative history of the novel, claiming that anti-realism developed as a counter-tradition alongside realism, rather than as a reaction to it, and can be seen as a constant in European literature. Suggesting that the Irish literary tradition 'had always used narrative invention' to express 'ontological anxiety' and reminding us of the (Anglo-)Irish reinvention of Renaissance 'learned wit,' Murphy argued that O'Nolan's work can be considered 'closer to Sterne than to Joyce and Beckett.'<sup>9</sup> Ronan Crowley (*University of Passau*) challenged long-held assumptions about the Irish Literary Revival: considering O'Nolan's 'penchant for pseudonym' in the historical context of Revivalism, he suggested that this unjustly marginalised movement should not be seen as 'Modernism's literary other' but rather as an Irish variety of it. Lastly, Keith Hopper (*St Mary's University, London*) pointed out interesting parallels and uncannily similar plot lines in the work of O'Nolan and Eimar O'Duffy, suggesting that the latter should not be considered 'a poor man's Flann O'Brien.'

Brian Ó Conchubhair (*University of Notre Dame*), aware that his closing keynote was 'standing between us and free whiskey,' filled in a number of little-known biographical facts about Brian O'Nolan and his extended family and set to overturn the commonplace that *An Béal Bocht* is 'an overlooked classic.' His encyclopaedic lecture culminated in an epic recital of the publication dates of *An Béal Bocht* and its translations that bordered on slam poetry, to great acclaim. With Pilný's proclamation – 'Here endeth the academic programme!' – it was on to the hard-earned *uisce beatha*, graciously provided by Fionnán O'Connor, author of *A Glass Apart: Irish Single Pot Still Whiskey*, who led a hugely entertaining 'Flann-Flavoured' whiskey tasting. With the delegates in high spirits, the farewell dinner (followed by the traditional press-up challenge<sup>10</sup>) showed that the O'Nolan community itself has undergone its own metamorphosis. At the First International Flann O'Brien conference in Vienna, Keith Hopper had likened its attendants to dedicated fans of an 'obscure punk band' – as more and more academics, artists, and aficionados engage with O'Nolan's work and the society is enriched by a multitude of new voices from all over the world, it seems the craze has spread. As O'Nolan once wrote to his distant relatives in America, 'We may be miles apart, but there will always be Myles between us.'

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## Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> In his magnum opus, *Golden Hours*, de Selby likens the hanging gardens and forking paths of the 'Golden City' to a 'mysterious parallel universe in which scholars have been known to disappear at night, only to miraculously resurface in the afternoon of the next day.' Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), 73.

<sup>2</sup> This idea is developed further in Fagan's article "'I've got you under my skin": "John Duffy's Brother," "Two in One," and the Confessions of Narcissus,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 60–75.

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, Philip K. Dick's original question, 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,' was tentatively answered in a recent Guardian article: <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/18/googleimage-recognition-neural-network-androids-dream-electric-sheep>.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Lethem, 'Crazy Friend,' <http://jonathanlethem.com/CrazyFriend.pdf>, 7.

<sup>5</sup> An apocryphal addendum to de Selby's masterpiece *Golden Hours* states the following: 'In order to truly understand Enlightenment philosophy, it is indispensable that the scholar spends the previous night in a local pub and awakes during the golden hours, i.e. as early as possible, on the next day.'

<sup>6</sup> For de Selby's prescient exploration of the health benefits involved in discussing post-structuralism in the wee small hours of the morning, see *Golden Hours*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004), 57.

<sup>8</sup> *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* features as one of the '10 Books That Wouldn't Exist Without Flann O'Brien' chosen by Murphy and Hopper for *Publisher's Weekly*.  
<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/60009-10-books-thatwouldn-t-exist-without-flann-o-brien.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See Catherine Ahearn's society conference report from Rome in *The Parish Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013).