

# Report

*Acting Out: IV International Flann O'Brien Conference*  
Salzburg University, 17–21 July 2017

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For five days in July, in the beautiful city of Salzburg, a group of scholars and artists convened for the biennial International Flann O'Brien Society conference, as the Irish author took centre stage. The themes of performance, theatricality, and illusion were explored in over 40 papers covering Brian O'Nolan's dramatic works, the elusiveness of his multiple constructed personas, and the significance of narratological puppeteering, masks, costumes, and the carnivalesque to his fiction.

This year's conference displayed a return to the early staples of O'Nolan research, with a considerable amount of critical emphasis laid on the two major novels, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and *The Third Policeman*. By contrast, the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns and the short stories, which had been the major focus at the 2015 Prague conference, were returned to the margins in the 2017 programme. However, the renewed focus on the novels offered a repetition with difference. An influx of young new delegates took up these works with an unapologetic rigour, building upon a rapidly growing body of research that has established O'Nolan as a figure of import in modernist studies. The result was a shift in register from previous conferences, a productive critical dialogue between the more recent recruits and the veteran Flanneurs, and, as a consequence, the sense of a conversation carried across layered generations of scholarship.

Maebh Long (*University of Waikato*) kick-started the week with a spectacular keynote address. Her talk on 'The Politics of Friendship' explored O'Nolan's personal and professional relationships with Niall Sheridan and Niall Montgomery against the coordinates of influence and plagiarism. Drawing on her work editing O'Nolan's letters, Long examined how some of his joint projects resulted in disputes, while remarkably, a short story by Sheridan with striking resemblances to *The Third Policeman* was never referred to as a shared work or a point of contention. The talk touched on the difficulty of reaching a stable author identity beyond O'Nolan's masks and pseudonyms, offering the more radical conception of shared authorship, while also referencing more material concerns such as O'Nolan's constant financial anxiety. These insights resonated with a number of papers throughout the week. Notably,

Catherine Ahearn (*Boston University*) delved into O'Nolan's absences from the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column to characterise his relationship with *The Irish Times*. Supported by detailed and meticulously presented data, Ahearn charted the various gaps in the column's publication throughout its 26-year run due to illness, vacation, disagreements with the editors, and fall-outs with collaborators, including O'Nolan's objections to the paper's publication of *The Liberties* by 'Rosemary Lane' (Niall Montgomery), which he saw as a competing column.<sup>1</sup> The question of O'Nolan's many personas was also taken up by John Greaney (*University College Dublin*) in a talk on performing pseudonymity, in which he considered O'Nolan's masks as a destabilising force characterised by a resistance to representation.

Despite the invitation by the organisers to focus on drama and the stage, only a small number of papers dealt directly with O'Nolan's plays. In a noteworthy exception, Tobias Harris (*Birkbeck, University of London*) analysed the connection to Goethe in O'Nolan's three-act satire of Irish politics *Faustus Kelly*, inviting readers to look beyond the superficial parody of Faustian elements that dominates existing scholarship on the play. Joseph Brooker (*Birkbeck, University of London*), attempting to explain the relative success of *Thirst* among O'Nolan's stage plays, evoked concepts of theatricality and J. L. Austin's theory of language performativity to unpack O'Nolan's strengths at creating dialogue.

O'Nolan's intersections with other authors was a prominent topic. A particularly intriguing panel included Dieter Fuchs (*University of Vienna*) on *The Third Policeman* and Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*; Eglantina Rempert (*Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest*) on O'Nolan's connection to both Lady Gregory's Irish myths and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*; and Michael McAteer (*Pázmány University, Budapest*) on Samuel Ferguson's poem *Congal* as a common inspiration for *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Yeats's *The Herne's Egg*. These papers provided a welcome exploration of O'Nolan's place in the Irish canon beyond the familiar context of the Joyce-Beckett-O'Brien trinity. Later in the week, Joseph Nugent (*Boston College*) presented on the ideology of the olfactory, addressing shifts in the perception of smell in connection to rural Ireland, as evident in *An Béal Bocht*.

Befitting this year's title of 'Acting Out,' the conference included a rich programme of theatrical works and artistic engagements with O'Nolan, including Val O'Donnell's one man show *Flann's Yer Only Man*, guest writers Arthur Riordan and Alan Titley performing readings of their O'Brien adaptations, and productions of *Thirst* and *Two in One* by the Liverpool Irish Literary Theatre. A particularly memorable evening was spent at a screening of *In Schwimmen-zwei-Vögel*, the Austrian cult classic adaptation of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, followed by a Q&A with its creator Kurt Palm, who seemed delighted at the chance to revisit his film directorial debut of the

1997 surreal and experimental indie flick. Palm resisted the audience's repeating attempts to attribute scholarly interpretations to his choices in the film, insisting on an intuitive, fluid, and at times accidental process in the rendering of the novel. Many of these artists not only shared their work, but also played an integral part in the conference through workshops and talks, allowing for a collaborative discussion across different fields. Alana Gillespie shared thoughts on her highly promising animation project of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*.<sup>2</sup> During her workshop, Gillespie brainstormed with participants on the challenges of the adaptation, noting issues such as communicating the play's local politics to international audiences, representations of gender, and the possibilities of experimental form within the medium. The conference also included an exhibition of Flann inspired artworks by David and Edward O'Kane,<sup>3</sup> among them an evocative stop motion animation piece filmed in (what is probably) O'Nolan's Strabane home. David O'Kane serves as the International Flann O'Brien Society's resident artist, his work appearing on the conference posters and the covers of several scholarly publications. The newest of these, *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority* (Cork University Press, 2017) was unboxed and launched during the conference.

As the conference wound to a close, a last-minute cancelation in the programme was replaced by an impromptu roundtable, yielding one of the most fascinating events of the week. After four conferences dedicated exclusively to O'Nolan's works (Vienna, Rome, Prague, and now Salzburg) the community took the opportunity to reflect on its current state. The panellists discussed gaps and challenges in the research, possible directions for the future of the society, and the state of artistic adaptations of O'Nolan's works. Joseph Brooker opened the panel, commenting on the sense of a still expanding archive. Works, letters, and even objects that are currently inaccessible to most scholars, offer new and exciting avenues of investigation.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the forthcoming volume of letters, edited by Long, bears the potential to revolutionise and revitalise O'Nolan studies, and seemed to produce a genuine sense of anticipation among the participants. Alongside the publication of new materials was the suggestion of a greater effort to broaden the existing canon of texts under critical discussion to focus on the less commented on columns, plays, and short stories. Excellent examples of the fruits of such a shift were papers dealing with *Blather*, a magazine co-written by O'Nolan in his student years. These included a talk by Paul Fagan (*Salzburg University/University of Vienna*) on the magazine's fake letters and their connection to the tradition of literary hoaxes, and Julian Hanna's (*Madeira Interactive Technologies Institute*) reading of *Blather* as an *avant-garde* anti-manifesto. Prompted by comments from the audience, the roundtable also addressed the need for multi-lingual

approaches to the texts, and for a revisiting of O'Nolan's biography, with Long calling for a more nuanced approach to inherited conceptions on the author.

The week concluded with an informal dinner and the partaking of many 'pints of plain.' The particular spirit of the Flanneurs is one that is difficult to put into words and is perhaps best captured by the lively Twitter feed (<https://twitter.com/2017Flann>) that followed the week's proceedings under the hashtag #flann2017, or better yet, by attending the coming conference in Dublin 2019.

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### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> For more on the 'Rosemary Lane' affair, see Maebh Long's review of *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* in the present issue.

<sup>2</sup> <http://imperialfinch.nl/film/rhapsody-in-stephens-green/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.davidokane.com>

<sup>4</sup> For Brooker's own commentary on the week's events, visit <http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/english/2017/07/25/314/>.