

Report

#Flann50 in London: Re-Reading Some Scenes from an Anti-Novel

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In London, Joseph Brooker and I had the perfect opportunity to mark #Flann50 as part of Birkbeck College's annual Arts Week by running a special *At Swim-Two-Birds* workshop on 17 May 2016 (with the support of the Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Literature). Since Arts Week is all about academic outreach to the 'community,' what better thing to do, we thought, than invite The Plain People of London to read and discuss O'Nolan's best-known work? Aimed at both new and familiar readers, the workshop consisted of a short scene-setting followed by collaborative readings of five or six key passages. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is better known among the reading public for its anarchic formal characteristics; sometimes, we felt, to the detriment of the richness and detail of the writing itself. By focusing on a few select passages, we wanted to celebrate what might be viewed as its more traditionally novelistic components: the detail of its stylistics, the uproarious humour of its dialogues, and the jumble of its colliding genres.

Participants in the workshop took up their places in the finely restored surroundings of 46 Gordon Square, now part of Birkbeck School of Arts and formerly the residence of both Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes. The audience included familiar faces from the Irish studies community in London, graduate students, old flames of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and several of that class who are more or less totally new to O'Nolan's work. I started with a short introduction to draw attention to the formative years of Brian O'Nolan and the lost text recounted by Niall Sheridan: *Children of Destiny*, or the 'first masterpiece of the Ready-Made or Reach-Me-Down School' of novel writing.¹ Then, having recently been examining O'Nolan's student writing in Irish, I also suggested some reasons for the extensive presence of translations of medieval Irish poetry in the novel and shared a photo I had taken of my best approximation of where the eponymous 'Swim-Two-Birds' or *Snámh dhá Éan* is reputedly located: a ford somewhere between Shannonbridge and Clonmacnoise in County Offaly. Our new readers found that the novel lends itself surprisingly well to rapid acclimatisation: when it came to summarising the plot, we had to look no further than the synopsis helpfully provided 'FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS...'²

Where (I hope) once stood *Swim-Two-Birds*
(picture by Tobias Harris)



We began by losing our diegetic footing in the 'Chapter One' that does not lead to a 'Chapter Two' and the novel's trio of beginnings. Whereas I had attempted in my opening remarks to

localise the book's origins in Grogan's Pub or the banks of the Shannon, the group's response to *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s multiple openings and its literary manifesto for the 'modern novel'³ threw up a host of comparisons that ranged much further afield. The similarities of the novel's framing strategies with Bulgakov's contemporaneously written (although only unpublished in 1967) *The Master and Margarita* (a comparison also noted by M. Keith Booker) introduced this internationalising strain.⁴ There was talk of Russian Formalism and the play of *fabula* against *syuzhet*, and a discussion of the novel as a retelling of stories led to a comparison with the work of the Dominican modernist Jean Rhys and her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Most intriguingly, one participant pointed out that the novel's atypical multiple beginnings and endings prefigure the typical narrative conventions of video games: a genre in which authorial impropriety would involve not supplying enough endings, rather than too many. *At Swim-Two-Birds* has been explored a few times in terms of its ludic quality; perhaps a new reading which compares its stated aims to the assumptions of contemporary video games is now needed. Yet another comparison was drawn between the way that the novel juxtaposes axiomatic statements such as 'truth is an odd number,' clichés, and socialistic pronouncements like 'the gift of god is a working man,' and Jenny Holzer's poem 'Truisms,' which delights in the commonplaces of everyday speech at the same time as it interrogates them. All these internationalising comparisons helped to broaden the focus of the workshop, setting *At Swim-Two-Birds* at swim amid a sea of global connections to modernist and postmodernist fiction. Many of them could well inspire further research.

From a choice of passages to explore, those involving the Red Swan Hotel gang, Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan, proved most popular. The most fun was had when we joined Shanahan in reciting the working man's poetry of Jem Casey, and few pairs of lips were able to resist voicing the refrain: 'A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN.' We found much to be gained by reading aloud Casey's anthem and the crescendo of his comrades' unqualified praise ('By God there's a lilt in that,' 'I'm telling you it's the business,' 'There are things in that pome that make for what you call

permanence, 'A pint of plain, by God, eh?'.⁵) Regulars at Joyce reading groups in attendance drew comparisons with the Dublinese in *Ulysses* and, when re-reading a novel typically couched in terms of its metafictional formal devices, it was refreshing to experience aloud the affectionate realism in which these high-spirited conversations about poetry and language are rendered. O'Nolan, we felt, is laughing with them at least as much as he is laughing at them. The way that the cast of characters in this 'self-evident sham' step forth from the page when the novel is read aloud supports a sense that, of the many materials which *At Swim-Two-Birds* cannibalises, spoken conversations are consumed just as eagerly as found texts and literary influences.

Equally good fun was Shanahan's retelling of his role in William Tracy's novels, 'cowpunching down by the river in Ringsend with Shorty Andrews and Slug Willard.'⁶ The story of shoot-outs and cattle-rustling, it was observed, unites a constellation of cultural contexts: from the cattle-raids of Cuchulain in the Ulster Cycle to the practice's modern re-emergence during the years of the Civil War and, equally, the cowboys of imported Hollywood Westerns. There was a discussion of how this part of *At Swim-Two-Birds* celebrates the way global pop culture is transmuted into local pub talk, as we heard Shanahan recount:

Be damned to the lot of us, I roared, flaying the nags and bashing the buckboard across the prairie, passing out lorries and trams and sending poor so-and-so's on bicycles scuttling down side-lanes with nothing showing but the whites of their eyes.⁷

It was remarked accordingly that it isn't just in the overall design of the novel, but within many of the individual speech-acts it contains that the diverse cultural influences at work in 1930s Ireland are blended together and played out. In this way, it is more montage than cut-up. The eloquent speechifying continued when we covered the reincarnation of Furriskey, Shanahan, and Lamont in Orlick's text as erudite men of letters engaged in learned dialogue. We noted here how Orlick's stylistics is subordinated to the need to play to the novel's internal audience of self-styled critics, just as they interject their aesthetic judgements on Casey, Finn, and Sweeny. At last, having begun with three beginnings, we concluded with the three conclusions. But since one ending to a workshop was a thing we did not agree with, the evening continued with many pints of plain consumed at a bar nearby where the dialogues of Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan continued to dominate discussion. While it may be the most critically analysed of Flann O'Brien's novels, we were left with the sense that there is still plenty of untapped material in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to reward close reading and re-enactment. Most pleasingly, all of those in attendance

who hadn't read the book beforehand expressed a firm commitment to pick it up for the first time. The University of London hosts several regular seminars devoted to Joyce and Beckett. Who is to say that there's no room for a few more readings of *At Swim-Two-Birds*? It does, after all have a certain 'permanence, if you know what I mean.'⁸

Notes & references

¹ Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles,' in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien/Myles na Gopaleen)*, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe (London: Martin Brian and O'Keeffe, 1973), 42.

² Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 136–8.

⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.