

Report

Problems with Authority: II International Flann O'Brien Conference
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The truth is that I almost didn't make it to *Problems with Authority: II International Flann O'Brien Conference*. Three hours before my flight from Boston Logan to Rome Fiumicino airport, I discovered that my passport was missing. Well, I was really more at fault than that. I had lost – no, misplaced – my passport. There was the usual cycle of denial, panic, strategising, desperation, grief, and relief that we've all experienced at one point or another; this one ending inside a hot 5' x 10' self-storage unit in Cambridge, MA, the 14th most likely place my passport could be. And so it was that my issues with authority started even before our similarly themed conference began.

The first time we all shook hands and toasted to our gathering was on the night of 18 June at Bar San Calisto in Trastevere, though the conference didn't officially start until the following morning. That night was engaging, casual, festive, and congenial, and it presaged our 3-day event hosted by the Department of Comparative Literature at Università Roma Tre. Before bed that night, I thought about what a special, odd thing it was for all of us to be there, gathered in a little Roman square, because of an interest in one man's work. It was nearly 1 am, and the earliest I would fall asleep for the next 3 nights.

The papers given in Rome ran the gamut of topics and approaches, which reflect the diversity of the scholars, artists, and fans who attended from all over the world. Presenters read, performed, ad-libbed, stumbled, and joked through their papers and renderings. Dirk Van Hulle (*University of Antwerp*) began the conference with a keynote address that positioned O'Nolan's *The Third Policeman* between works by Joyce and Beckett. What was unique about his paper was his employment of enactive cognition, or a form of theoretical psychology that emphasises an individual's interaction with his or her environment as it relates to self-organisation, as a literary-critical approach. While the self-organisation here relates to O'Nolan's characters, it also carries over into the author's arrangement after, before, and between other artists.

We heard many papers that not only looked at O'Nolan with respect to other authors, but that did so also in light of various art forms and genres. Adam Winstanley (*University of York*) considered musical authority, Kerry Wendt (*Emory University*)

discussed Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect, and Jed Esty's (*University of Pennsylvania*) concluding keynote compared authority and authenticity in O'Brien's writing and John Ford's films. There were also papers that took even more unusual approaches, like Alison Lacivita's (*University of Southern Mississippi*) Skyped-in talk on agriculture (read: manure) in *The Third Policeman*. Or Alan Girvin's (*University Centre Doncaster*) ruminations on the meaning of health and the echoes of the eugenics movement in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (a claim I was sceptical about myself until I found a Keats and Chapman typescript titled 'Eugenics and Horseplay' in the Burns Library archive).

The matrix of association and the 'creative cannibalism' – as Thomas Jackson Rice (*University of South Carolina*) put it – between O'Nolan and his influencers is something most, if not all, presenters thought about, in one way or another. Authority, as we normally think of it, implies a hierarchy. More specifically, those in authority are perceived to be at the top of a chain of command. But in art, where does this chain end? Or is it: where does this chain begin? In art, problems with authority are, essentially, conundrums of influence and genealogy.

Rome could have just been our host city. But instead it was an integral, influential aspect of how we learned about one another and from one another. A recap of the second International Flann O'Brien Conference would not be worth reading if it didn't also discuss the social program. On the first night, Mr Patrick Hennessy, the Irish Ambassador to Italy, hosted our group at the Villa Spada Gianicolo. The embassy was magnificent and welcoming, with a cocktail hour on the terrace and dinner in the patio amongst orange trees, and atop a hill everyone walked at least 50 flights of stairs to reach. The pattern of rewarding great physical exertion with great food and drink continued on night two, when conference goers arrived at the *Fiddler's Elbow* after a rigorous bonding session within a packed public bus. I won't go into detail, but the survivors of that fateful trip will forever call themselves The Survivors and I've heard some talk of commemorative 'I Survived' t-shirts.

Once the exasperated, sweating, hungry survivors arrived at the *Fiddler's Elbow*, drinks had never been in greater demand. Lucky for us, the performances that night were so entertaining that they nearly occluded our memories of the bus trip. Julian Gough read his short story 'The iHole,' which managed to be simultaneously insightful, creative, and extremely funny. Mark O'Halloran reminded us why we keep inviting him to these things when he performed 'Two-in-One,' by our man Myles. From where I was sitting, a single lamp hung over O'Halloran's head, casting a sinister shadow over parts of his face, making his already enthralling performance unforgettable, if not haunting. Flanneurs closed the bar down that night, and I heard a rumour that a pair of loons did push-ups on the cobblestones once the bartender kindly kicked us out.

Night three went 'till morning, though it started respectfully at St Isidores College. Here, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Aibhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, and Aifric Mac Aodha read selections of their poetry in English and Irish during a wine reception supported by The Irish Literature Exchange. Our farewell dinner, complete with farewell speeches, was followed by farewell drinks around town, or one of the most drawn-out goodbyes an academic conference has ever brought about.

Samuel Butler, in *Genuine Remains*, reflects, 'authority is a Disease and Cure/ Which Men can neither want, nor well endure.' However, the authority of the International Flann O'Brien Society to ensure that our meetings continue and grow into an institution is, to me, more curative than it is diseased (unless you consider the liver ailments we all left Rome with). The best thing to happen to the Vienna conference is the Rome conference; that is, for it to have happened again. As I sit here, reflecting on our time in Rome, I cannot help but feel that we have stumbled upon a good kind of authority: that which ensures these conferences continue, if not traditionally, then as tradition.