

Dieselbe – ‘Not a bloody bit like the man ... whoever done it.’¹

A Note on the Cover Art for this Issue by the Artist

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Human existence de Selby has defined as ‘a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief,’ a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films. Thus, motion is also an illusion. He mentions that almost any photograph is conclusive proof of his teachings.² Animation is a medium that is queerly appropriate to representing the atmosphere of Flann O’Brien’s literary universe, in that it is a distorted and distilled version of reality and real time, which implies the artist’s manipulation of every frame to a point beyond perception and their dissolution into the very medium.

The image reproduced as the cover of this journal is taken from an animated sequence, titled ‘Dieselbe Noman,’ which I made in the spring of this year. This animation depicts two charcoal drawings of photographs of Brian O’Nolan. One is a damaged photograph taken of the author and his younger brother during their childhood in Strabane in Northern Ireland. In this image O’Nolan’s face has been obscured by water damage. The image is drawn from *Flann O’Brien – An Illustrated Biography*, in which the authors have accompanied the photograph with the foreboding subtitle ‘... a hint of things to come.’³ I selected this image due in part to the fact that O’Nolan’s face was obscured, ‘hinting’ at death and the dissolution of identity while simultaneously representing the author’s formative childhood years. Perhaps within this duality lies what Roland Barthes called the *punctum* of the photograph, or that which ‘pierces the viewer.’⁴ The second photograph of O’Nolan – the provenance of which is subject to debate – was supposedly taken during his later life. In this image, he appears contemplative as he ponders something just outside of the image frame. In the animated sequence and on the cover of this journal it is the mirror image of himself that O’Nolan appears to study and reflect on.

Dieselbe is a German word meaning ‘the same’ (used when describing a noun of a feminine gender). I felt this word was implied whilst reading Keith Hopper’s work on Flann O’Brien: ‘...de Selby (metafictionally translated as ‘the self’ or ‘the same

person').⁵ Given O'Nolan's knowledge of German and love of word play, I do not feel it is too much of a leap of imagination to suggest he played with phonetic translations to generate this metonymic metafictional surname. Continuing in the spirit of intertextuality, the Noman of the animation's title also borrows from the term used by Hopper to describe the nameless narrator of *The Third Policeman*.⁶ The title reflects the complexity and duality of the images and readings incorporated into the artwork by positing a tension of meaning: the same and no one.

Photographs of O'Nolan seem relatively scarce in the public domain, and since I created this artwork I have been made aware that the images reproduced in published works are not all accepted as authentic.⁷ Indeed, the authenticity of one of the images of O'Nolan, which I selected for this artwork, is actually contested. I had accepted this image in good faith as genuine not simply because of its prevalence in all manner of media but also due to the fact that it cohered with the mental image I had of the author. (Perhaps it fits with this mental image rather too well.) However, a wide circle of people evidently accepts the image as legitimate. For instance, this image is for sale at a rather extortionist price in an online American archive, where it is purported that it is actually Flann O'Brien/Brian O'Nolan. Indeed, it was used as the illustration on the dust jacket of the 2007 Everyman edition of *Flann O'Brien: The Complete Novels*. The fact that the photograph may not be of O'Nolan combined with strangely appropriate name of the publishing house generates a serendipitous pun that would have surely elicited an approving smile from O'Nolan. In any case, the dispute over the image's authenticity actually serves to strengthen the conceptual thrust of the artwork, providing as John Wyse Jackson put it 'an extra layer of pseudonymity.'⁸ It almost seems as though O'Nolan is playing games with his identity from beyond the grave, leading us to the conclusion that there was actually more than one Brian O'Nolan and that they worked together as co-conspirators in fabricating a literary labyrinth.

The drawings and animation represent an attempt to visually inhabit O'Nolan's linguistic labyrinths. Various metaphoric devices have been employed to reflect and crystallise the atmosphere that pervades some of his work, especially the work created under the pseudonym of Flann O'Brien. These include the repeated mirror inversions of the author, which have been executed in charcoal on paper and then in turn copied by hand to create the inverted images. It was important to me that they each were original drawings and that these drawings had overtones of some form of mechanical reproduction while also referring obliquely to Hermann Rorschach's inkblots and thus forging a link with psychology. The figures appear to contemplate one another as their respective *Doppelgängers* or alter egos.





Stills from *Dieselbe - Noman*

High definition animated video & charcoal drawing installation David O'Kane, 2012

To view the animated video visit www.davidokane.com

Each drawing is ostensibly unique, neither is deemed more important than the other and they are subject to deconstruction, disintegration, reassembly, and reappraisal. As is evident in the cover illustration, the drawings are systematically destroyed during the animation through a ritual decomposition. This metaphor reflects O'Nolan's fascination with infinity and logical order, while also highlighting the nature of a journal of academic thought such as this is. The drawing of O'Nolan as a child standing beside his brother has been halved, divided into thirds, quartered, divided into five segments, six, seven, and so on, indicating an infinite deconstruction as far as this is physically/visually possible. Whereas the figure in the drawing representing O'Nolan in adulthood appears to contemplate the image opposite as it is mathematically torn apart. This drawing is divided according to an imperfect version of the golden section. Imperfect in that the drawing's dimensions do not conform exactly to those, which are ideal for the golden section (approximately 5:8). It is a distorted ideal.

O'Nolan's fascination with science, physics and mathematics are further referenced through the use of an almost imperceptible graph of imaginary numbers and real numbers on a complex number plane, with -1 , 1 , i and $-i$ hovering between the four drawings of O'Nolan. This metaphorically reinforces the ideas of reality refracted in imagination and imagination represented in reality, highlighting the necessity and co-dependence of both forms on a logical yet abstract mathematical plane. The i and $-i$ assume a dual function in that they indicate the imaginary through their role as complex number signifiers while simultaneously evoking the i of the first person or identity and the $-i$ of the alter ego or pseudonym. This structuring principle also generates the image of a wooden cross in the negative space between the images, which may be read as the pervasive undercurrent of Catholicism that was endemic in Ireland during O'Nolan's lifetime. The plywood background in the image is reminiscent of exterior hoarding, providing the drawings with an aesthetic vaguely similar to that of obsolete advertising or indeed, more appropriately, missing person posters. All these formal visual exercises relate to O'Nolan's language games and his own spirit of deconstruction, probing and reality testing. The aesthetic of disassembly also refers to the inquisitive nature of this first issue of the International Flann O'Brien Society's journal, *The Parish Review*.

A duality inherent in portraiture is that on the surface it purports to portray something of the true nature of an individual while simultaneously erasing the very objectivity that it ostensibly strives for. To my mind, a visual portrait can only fail conceptually if the task assigned to it is the communication of an inner personality. The failure (in the attempt to portray something) can however be more beautiful and interesting than any potential success. In point of fact, a portrait usually communicates

more about its author and their subjective projections onto the simulacra they have created. From this perspective, I prefer to play self-consciously with the preconceptions and complexities inherent in this genre, probing the portrait and dissecting it for clues that may indicate what we collectively want it to do and what I as the artist want it to suggest. The complexities are of course compounded when the subject 'portrayed' is at a double remove from the artist, as is the case in this artwork, which deals with O'Nolan. I mean double remove in that O'Nolan is known to me not only through the various guises of his pseudonymous writings but also through the scant biographical imagery I have encountered over the past few years. The artwork illustrated on the cover of this journal is therefore a re-presentation of an initially fragmented figure, captured during the process of a systematic disassembly of the drawings, breaking the picture frame. It is a photograph of drawings, which mirror one another and appear (aside from their inversion) virtually identical. These drawings are in turn made of damaged and possibly inauthentic images of a man who intentionally split himself into myriad pseudonymous counterparts for the purpose of his literature. The drawings are in a process of disintegration that can equally be read in reverse as a reconstruction of a figure (albeit through the glass darkly).

Notes & references

1 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2010), 96. My thanks to Joseph Brooker and Paul Fagan for suggesting this quotation from the 'Hades' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was O'Nolan's favourite passage in Joyce, according to Brooker.

2 Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 52.

3 Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp, *Flann O'Brien – An Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 28–9.

4 The *punctum* is a term used by Roland Barthes in his pioneering book *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). As distinct from *stadium*, the term Barthes uses to denote the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denotes a particularly wounding, personally touching point or detail that establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it.

5 Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 98.

6 *Ibid.*, xviii.

7 Thanks to Joseph Brooker and John Wyse Jackson for bringing this interesting debate to my attention.

8 John Wyse Jackson, quoted in an email from Paul Fagan to David O'Kane, 15 May 2012.