

Review

Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 277 pp., \$8.

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Last year saw the publication of three collections of essays devoted to the voluminous writings of Brian O'Nolan. Jennika Baines's *'Is it about a bicycle?' Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (Four Courts Press) grew out of a 2006 conference at University College Dublin marking the 40th anniversary of O'Nolan's death. The centenary of his birth was celebrated shortly thereafter – a chronology recalling nothing so much as the revenant Sir Myles (the da) stepping cheerily from his coffin to greet reporters¹ – and occasioned special issues of the Irish-language literary journal *Comhar* and the Dalkey Archive Press journal *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Fittingly so; as Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper note in their editors' introduction to *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays*, O'Nolan is the 'patron saint and presiding deity' of the press.²

The collection opens with a piece from the back catalogue of Aidan Higgins, 'the direct descendant of Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien' (14), in which he recounts his sole meeting with Myles on the set of an early RTÉ arts programme. At that time 'few knew him by sight' (29), a state of affairs not improved when the disastrous live broadcast was cut short by the writer's drunkenness. If nothing less, the republication of Higgins's piece from *Asylum Arts Review* means Flanneurs now have a heftier citation for O'Nolan's dismissal of Joyce as 'that refurbisher of skivvies' stories.' Hitherto, critics were in the curious position of padding out their scholarship with reference to Anthony Cronin's citation of Higgins's 1981 recollection (in the October 1981 broadcast of Higgins's *Discords of Good Humour*) of what Samuel Beckett told him (Higgins) in the late sixties of O'Nolan's 1939 (or thereabouts) sneer at Joyce. 'The Hidden Narrator' mercifully abbreviates the circuit of mediation, though Flanneurs will also want to consult the edition of *Discords* published in *Darkling Plain*, also from Dalkey.³

The emphasis of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* on the postmodern and on writing construed as *avant-garde* or metafictional sets the tone for a number of the 14 essays gathered together here. The best of the contributions fly free of simply affirming the precepts of a given critical orthodoxy and instead use philosophical frameworks

to carve out a space for their particular brand of O'Nolan (or, indeed, Ó Nualláin), Flann O'Brien or Myles na gCopaleen. For the 'broad church of opinion' (13) for whom Murphy and Hopper canvas is distinguished as much by the run of names it employs for the Man in the Hat as by the range of his texts it brings into focus. (That no one saw fit to recast the same worthy as 'President of the Republic of Letters' or 'literary *Uachtarán*' proves there is still room for the rest of us).⁴

In terms of the *œuvre*, *At Swim-Two-Birds* has largely surrendered the limelight to *The Third Policeman*. It gives one pause to recollect that 'by 1941, O'Nolan had written three of the most innovative novels in the Irish canon' (11) – that is, when he was all of thirty years of age – and the collection largely concentrates on the first two novels. Fully half of the essays deal, in part or in the main, with *The Third Policeman*. But its final third is pleasingly given over to treatments of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *An Béal Bocht*, *The Hard Life*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and *Slattery's Sago Saga*. This attention to the wider body of writing does more than give a crack of the whip to the less studied texts. In describing the critical trajectory of *The Hard Life*, for instance, Neil Murphy underlines 'a general movement, in critical terms, away from a consideration of the novel as a postmodern or poststructuralist text, or as self-referential epistemological satire, towards an emphasis on the socio-political implications of a novel that, in O'Brien's catalogue, offers a relatively direct realist focus' (149). While Murphy's interest lies in playing out the consequences of the putative realism of the novel, it is somewhat hasty to render historicist readings a concomitant of O'Nolan's surface engagement with social reality in *The Hard Life*. Why should *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *The Third Policeman* offer any less of a site for a 'discussion of ideological readings' (149) than the 1961 novel? Increasingly, the migration from language games to cultural critique that Murphy discerns is a feature of the entire enterprise of O'Nolan criticism – one thinks here of Carol Taaffe's groundbreaking *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate*⁵ and of the essays brought together by Baines – and it is of a piece with the 'material turn' in modernist studies.

Inasmuch as this recent orientation is generally read as unsympathetic to the more radical trends of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking, one of the real strengths of the *Centenary Essays*, then, is to preserve within the general drift towards versions of thing theory a space for Mylesian scepticism. Six essays centred on *The Third Policeman* plumb the limits of knowability in a variety of philosophical, religious, and even moral registers. Thierry Robin draws on Clément Rosset's ontology of the ineffable object to articulate an 'eminently disastrous' (34) epistemology operative in the novel. Similarly, Robert Lumsden emphasises 'the untrustworthiness of ordinary appearances' (53) to contrast O'Brien's bleak vision of eternity with the Parmenidean infinite, Nietzschean recurrence, and the Freudian uncanny. The approach of Carlos

Villar Flor pits postmodern instabilities against 'the sense of purpose of a Christian outlook' (62–3) to unearth a strain of Catholic symbolism and ritual running through both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. Jennika Baines is more circumspect in her treatment of the latter text; while she too takes flight from O'Brien's peculiar breed of Catholicism, she does so to complicate scientific truth with the religious unknowable, an altogether more chilling quantity: 'The answers offered by science were frightening, but they were nothing compared to the mysteries demanded by faith. For as much as scientific advancement boggles the mind at what is possible in the now, the mysteries of Catholicism go on into eternity' (89). Maciej Ruczaj proposes an analogy with the *Commedia* to account for those features of the text generally glossed as postmodern: 'the poetics of distortion, ironic inversion and instability of meaning' (101). Stripped of the 'generic fundament' (102) of Dante's comedy, however, any ethical impulse is evaded in *The Third Policeman*. Finally, Anthony Adams draws on the 'pataphysics of Alfred Jarry – 'the science of imaginary solutions' – to examine the forms of truth captured in the novel's 'language objects' and 'objects to language' (107).

These comparative analyses stress, in Lumsden's words, 'lines of connection and disconnection rather than influence' (51). Joseph Booker continues this trend of drawing ties between O'Nolan and other thinkers or writers in his chapter on 'Flann O'Brien and *Pale Fire*.' If the immediate parallel between O'Brien and Nabokov is slight, their critical enshrinement during the seventies and eighties tended to lump them together. 'In work like Brian McHale's influential *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) they appear as luminal, pioneering figures' (121). Moreover, both were, significantly, writing in the post-Joycean mode. Brooker concentrates, for the most part, on exploring similarities between the genre legerdemain of *Pale Fire* and, by turns, *The Third Policeman*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and *An Béal Bocht*. Even *Comhthrom Feinne* gets a look in. His impressive freewheel through the *œuvre* takes in the footnotes of *The Third Policeman*, 'akin to Kinbote's shifts between serviceably succinct notes on John Shade and wildly digressive accounts of his own escape from Zembla' (127); Bonaparte O'Coonassa's resemblance to Kinbote as a new light on the Mylesian staple of the dim-witted protagonist; and one of Brother Barnabas's improbable adventures, which makes for 'an uncanny foreshadowing of Kinbote's career' (129). For W. Michelle Wang, lines of connection tether O'Brien to Italo Calvino's meditations on the writer's craft in the undelivered Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. She uses the latter's metaphor of lightness and weight to unpack *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 'precisely because its lightness is not immediately apparent.' Structural lightness in the novel hinges on 'the insubstantiality of the characters and by the flattening of its narrative layers' (134), an airiness that grants characters 'the

license to drift between narrative levels in flagrant transgressions of the ontological worlds they are supposed to inhabit' (136).

Alongside Brooker and Murphy, the final four chapters of *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays* set out on some of the roads less travelled of the *œuvre*. Flore Coulouma reviews the recent turnaround in criticism of *Cruiskeen Lawn* and argues that to chide the column for its unliterariness is to fall into 'the same essentialist trap as the one denounced in the first place by post-colonial critics' (163). She deftly attends to the amalgam of speech and writing preserved in the newspaper; the column always tended more to the *ersatz* than to the *echt*. Myles's task, she rightly observes, was 'not about *transcribing* the sounds of oral speech so much as showing how entangled they are with written discourse' (167). Val Nolan argues that O'Brien's fiction represents 'a unique – and uniquely *Irish* – form of speculative writing' (178), bridging the scientific discourses available in mid-century Ireland and a homegrown strain of the fantastical. This approach reverses the critical telos that sees *The Dalkey Archive* as a final falling-off, instead salvaging it as a productive site of 'confrontation between the rational and the irrational' (179).

Brian Ó Conchubhair charts a route through the critical impasse that has dead-ended readings of *An Béal Bocht* in Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* (1929) by, paradoxically, returning to the scene of the crime and the copy of the Blasket island memoir that is now part of the Flann O'Brien Collection at Boston College. Insofar as the two texts have been 'symbiotically linked' since 13 December 1941 (191), which was all of ten days after the publication of Ó Nualláin's novel, Ó Conchubhair leverages the glosses and annotations recorded in the margins of the precursor volume to argue for 'a postmodern literary sensibility' to *An Béal Bocht* (202). His interest is less in Ó Nualláin's husbanding of a word horde to be resown in the thin soil of his parody text, though Ó Conchubhair does highlight the origin of the phrase '*Lá an Ghátair*' and such deliberate stylistic tics as '*fé loch*' in underlined passages of *An tOileánach*. Rather, he is concerned with the response to the memoir of Ó Nualláin as annotating reader.⁶ A handful of marginal comments, all of which are notably in English, evince the black humour that distinguishes this act of reception.

The volume closes with another outrider of the O'Nolan canon, the 70-page fragment *Slattery's Sago Saga*. John Updike once summarily dismissed the novel in the *New Yorker*, writing 'Not only is the saga unfinished, it scarcely gets started,' but Amy Nejezchleb draws on the archive – this time the Carbondale holdings – to usefully locate that incompleteness in tensions operative within both the text and its author and not simply as a result of an ill-contrived storyline ('the greased pig of a plot,' as Updike has it).⁷ Less a recuperation of the novel for any putative literary merit, Nejezchleb points to the 'divided sensibility' of O'Nolan who was unsure of whether to write 'in

the mode of Flann O'Brien or Myles na gCopaleen – that is, as a novelist experimenting with formal devices or as a satirical commentator on national events' (205).

Murphy and Hopper frame their editors' introduction with Brian Nolan's own editorial venture, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' for the 1951 *Envoy* special issue on Joyce. 'A(nother) Bash in the Tunnel' conjures a vision of O'Nolan suspicious of what he perceives as 'Joyce's elitism and inaccessibility' (10) and the editors wittily rewrite his metaphor of Joyce criticism as cultivation to suit their subject: 'O'Nolan's works are a garden in which *all* of us may play' (13; my emphasis). The invitation is a generous one. But Joyce, no selfish giant he, has had to come out of his tunnel in recent years – has had to get out of that garden, as it were. Joe Brooker remarks at the close of his *Flann O'Brien* (2005), 'Joyce himself now compels attention for the ways he found himself in the *Irish Homestead* or the *Sporting Times*, for the use he made of that grubby, daily world rather than for his ability to rise above it.'⁸ But O'Nolan, as Brooker continues, was already there and may well be the poster child for criticism in step with such an age. If the pages of *The Irish Times*, for instance, contain O'Nolan at his most madcap inventive, that extravagance was often a virtuoso riff on Emergency-era print culture. In its range of contributions, then, *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays* is poised at the entranceway to a new set of critical priorities and emphases. In its own philosophical leanings, however, it has already begun the work of moderating between new materialism and the fundamentally estranging textures of O'Nolan's art.

Notes & references

¹ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (13 June 1944): 3. Reprinted in *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 158.

² *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

³ Aidan Higgins, 'Discords of Good Humour,' *Darkling Plain: Texts for the Air*, ed. Daniel Jernigan (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010), 113.

⁴ These titles were claimed by Myles in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (30 May 1947): 4. In this review I have made an effort to cleave to authors' choices of O'Nolan's name.

⁵ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles Na GCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork University Press, 2008).

⁶ Interestingly, Ó Nualláin's most conspicuous borrowing from *An tOileánach*, the closing apocalypticism that peppers Ó Cúnasa's narrative '*mar ná beidh ár leithéidí arís ann,*' goes unremarked in the Burns Library copy.

⁷ John Updike, 'Books, Flann Again,' *New Yorker* (21 June 1976): 116. Reprinted in John Updike, *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 384.

⁸ Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), 108.