Report

100 Myles: The International Flann O'Brien Centenary Conference
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Having occupied my seat in a shady room of the Centre for Irish Studies at the University of Vienna, among a throng of high-spirited Flanneurs on the morning of 25 July 2011, I reflected on the subject of our common full-time paraliterary activities. One beginning and one ending for a literary conference was a thing I could not agree with. A Flann O'Brien conference worth its salt may have three openings entirely dissimilar and, for that matter, a hundred times as many endings.

Example of an opening, first: Werner Huber (*University of Vienna*), host and co-organiser introduced us to the DeSelbian (dis)connections between the city of Vienna and a smallish man called Brian O'Nolan, whom the world reveres under the twin names Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen. He guided us around the premises – which appropriately included the nearby *Narrenturm*, continental Europe's oldest building for the accommodation of mental patients – through very reverend figures of Irish history, such as the Field Marshal O'Donnell, who saved the life of the emperor Franz Josef; Oliver St John Gogarty (*aka* Buck Mulligan), a medical student who in 1907 learned the subtleties of surgical savagery on this very campus; and a cockshy young man by the name of Samuel Beckett, who pined after a cousin of the female sex being initiated in the art of dancing at the nearby Schloss Hellerau-Laxenburg (where group activities included naked sun-bathing, to the major delight of god-fearing Austrian Bürgers).

Example of an opening, second: In an adjacent room Dublin artist Kevin Atherton curated the exhibition *Myles Away from Illustration*. Atherton brought his *Monitor Minder*, a post-McLuhan version of Myles's 'Buchhandlung' book-reading service. Two TV sets eyeing each other: on one, a Bela Lugosi-esque countenance of the artist as a younger man, said to stare unflinchingly at *any* TV program; on the facing screen, an endlessly looped two-minute TV commercial for the *Monitor Minder*, opening up infinite conceptual regresses *re* the condition of art and media that only a theoretical de Selby could fathom. De Selby himself was the protagonist of Andrew Folan's digitally processed prints-cum-montages, one of which successfully hid from our eyes

the creeping black air conducive to the widely spread phenomenon of night. Another work, based on the DeSelbian theory of tunnels of reflection,[1] exhibited time mangled into space in the shape of the Viennese Ringstrasse, transformed into a continuous loop of time.

Example of an opening, the third: Paul Fagan (*University of Vienna*), conference co-organiser together with Werner Huber and Ruben Borg (*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*), related how he nearly missed the event due to his being summoned to attend on that very day the trial of the man who stole a bicycle, formerly his property and containing, at a modest estimation, at least 60% of his humanity and selfhood. And, since no self-respecting O'Brien conference could possibly have opened *in medias res*, the pre-opening Sunday evening Flanneries paid homage to our man on the screen and stage. Young Berlin-based filmmaker David O'Kane's superb polyglottal *ouvroir*, *Babble*, brought a grumpy O'Nolan together with the perfectly polished and genteel Kafka and Borges, in a hilariously multi-decker *bricolage* – the three authors breaking into unsolicited explanations of the accessibility of their respective fictions, in their three different, un-subtitled, languages. These explanations were duly washed down by pints at a nearby licensed premises to a splendid recreation of 'The Brother' by Gerry Smyth and David Llewellyn (*Liverpool John Moores University*).

Armed with a mixture of wisdom and intoxicating beverages, the brave host of Mylesians were ready to plunge into the academic proceedings on the Monday morning when the doyen of O'Nolan studies, Keith Hopper (*Oxford University*) proposed the experiment of re-reading O'Nolan in triads. He appropriately started with an ending (ultimate) and the poor suicidal German who might provide another missing link to Vienna and her 'oxymorose' son Karl Kraus. Hopper proceeded by sketching three possible directions for O'Nolan studies: a focus on the author's contingencies with, and influences on, local and international metafictionists, counter-realists, and pataphysicians; a turn to his bilingual work and his creation of 'Gaelic postmodernism,' including a call to arms to re-translate *An Béal Bocht*; a 'TransFlann' project to encompass the gains of translations and adaptations of O'Nolan's work. Hopper's triadic reading fastened O'Nolan into an emphatically hyphenated post-modernist (-realist/Joycean/colonial) seat, pointing out his disinclination to reach out for some counterpoint to chaos. The mushrooming questions of the 'influence of anxiety' yielded the admission that O'Nolan's favourite reading may, after all, have been medieval Irish poetry.

This anxiety of the author was examined by Neil Murphy (*Nanyang Technological University*) through *The Hard Life*, in which O'Nolan nearly erases the self-standing experimentation of his previous work, while Jack Fennell (*University of Limerick*) pointed out the sci-fi in O'Nolan's early Gaelic short stories 'Teacht agus

Imtheacht Sheain Bhuidhe' and 'Dioghaltas Ar Ghallaibh 'Sa Bhliadhain 2032!,' published under the name Brian O Nuallain in *The Irish Press* in 1932. On a bleaker note, Robert Baines (*Le Moyne College, Syracuse*) anatomised the aging civil servant's retirement from fiction through *The Dalkey Archive*, in which the depiction of Joyce speaks more of O'Nolan's quarrel with his own limitations than his antagonism with the master of silence, exile, and punning. *The Dalkey Archive*, Baines argued, seems to be the kind of novel its independent and scheming heroine Mary criticises – since it ends with Mary having her way with the two protagonists, O'Nolan's final novel performs the retirement of the author into weak-kneed respectability. Yet even if, as the afternoon wore on, we were oft made to remember that last end, Adrian Oţoiu's (*North University of Baia Mare*) delightfully snowballing oratory brought us back to the *jouissance* of the text. This eloquent member of the author class, and Romanian translator of *At Swim-Two-Birds,* explored the discourse of persuasion in the novel's catalogues, eminently unstructured and random, that *snowball* out of an opportunistic chain of linguistic and imagistic association, counteracted by controlled and goal-oriented linguistic *reverse engineering*.

The first day culminated in the discussion with Harry Rowohlt – cultic German author-performer, translator of the O'Nolan *œuvre* into German, and impersonator of Finn Mac Cool – and Kurt Palm – novelist and filmmaker, director of the one film adaptation of *At Swim-Two-Birds* to date, *In Schwimmen-zwei-Vögel* (1997), transposed into Austrian dialect. Rowohlt, who among his dozens of literary epaulettes is also honorary ambassador of Irish whiskey since 1966, admitted to having translated *At Swim-Two-Birds* out of daredevilry and outrage at the more than 1200 translation mistakes of the previous (1964) German version. His thundering German rendition of the Jem Casey pomes made even the most reluctant vow to learn the language on whose polysyllabic potential and suspenseful syntax Rowohlt modestly blamed his translational triumph. And if his translator's labours made us agree that *Ein Gottes Glück ist der Arbeitsmann*, we can say no less about Kurt Palm, author of a *James Joyce Alphabet* and a crash-course in Cooking with Joy(ce), who framed the student-narrator, Trellis, and company together with half of Celtic mythology (including Rowohlt as Finn and the Good Fairy), in a low-budget film set in Lower Austria which managed to kick the various unruly fictional levels into existence in a manner that outdoes even the novel.[2] The Monday evening revelries continued with a 'Fringe Flann' reading event in Charlie P's Irish Pub. The guest authors present were Berlin-based Irish author Julian Gough, a true ludic fabulist who read a very rollicking tale of *The Orphan and the Mob*, Roger Boylan, who delighted us with excerpts from his heavily Flann-influenced *Killoyle Trilogy*, and soft-spoken poet and Beckett scholar David Wheatley, who shared with us some *Further Misadventures of Keats and Chapman*.

Tuesday morning opened with *Irish Times* columnist Frank McNally's exploration of Myles's journalism, by which the *Times* brands itself. He catalogued the butts of Myles's jokes (increasingly rehashed in the later years), chronicling also his pathetic deliberate attempts to get *The Hard Life* banned. Thierry Robin (*Université de Brest*) applied theories of metafiction and historical scepticism to the tall tales in O'Nolan's lesser-known story 'The Martyr's Crown,' and playlet *Thirst*, showing how they function through a principle of indeterminacy. Through the superlatively unreliable narrators of 'John Duffy's Brother' (who leaves the reader in the dark about the telling of a story that can never be told), 'Two in One,' and 'For Ireland Home and Beauty,' Marion Quirici (*University at Buffalo*) examined O'Nolan's frame devices and metafictional tendencies in the short fiction as indicating the breakdown of tropes of mastery.

The Plain People of Ireland were the protagonists of the next panel: Carol Taaffe (*Trinity College Dublin*), author of the 2008 O'Nolan study *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate*, addressed the popular sensibilities of the Irish masses – who, as we know from Beckett, never gave a fart in their corduroys about the state of the arts whatsoever – and their timid occasional denigration in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Seasoned Joycean and 'virgin Flanneur' Thomas Jackson Rice (*University of South Carolina*) anatomised the enactment of homoerotic anxiety in *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, presenting us the symptomatology of mid-20th century Catholic Ireland, with its claustrophobic self-contempt and misogyny. David Wheatley (*University of Hull*) drew our attention to the fact that there is more to the bomb beneath the *Third Policeman* floorboards than meets the Lacanian eye, laying bare the hidden subtexts of Irish modernism in the 1930s–40s through the exotic blossoms of the Irish far right, such as 'The Architects of Resurrection.' Wheatley showed to what extent the antiquarian agenda of associations for the cultivation of Gaelic, as satirised in *An Béal Bocht* and *Cruiskeen Lawn*, derived from classic extreme right-wing portfolios, and how the Irish intellectual élites endorsed them.

With Adam Lively's (*University of London*) comparative approach to Menippean satire from Denis Diderot through O'Nolan to Roberto Bolaño, we returned to more luminous and pleasure-oriented facets of the text. John McCourt (*University of Roma Tre*) drew a portrait of O'Nolan as a Joycean scholar. The author of the most comprehensive study of Joyce's Triestine period to date guided us along the stages of O'Nolan's program of overcoming Joyce, warning us that the Joyce-bashing Myles persona was a joint creation of Brian O'Nolan and Niall Montgomery – an ardent foe of the American Joyce academic industry. O'Nolan – who, in 1962, wrote under a pen-name that Joyce's body ought to be brought 'back home' – shared with the middle-

class, church-going Irish *literati* an irritation at Joyce's voluntary exile, frustration with the increasing difficulty of his texts, and, above all, a resentment against the army of American Joyceans. To round up the panel, author Julian Gough traced the posthumous fortunes of O'Nolan among the contemporary authors of his native Ireland, articulating the common experience of O'Nolan's transitional generation 'without a mother-tongue' and the linguistic dissonance of today's generation of Irish writers, 'in exile in their own kitchen' as their native English is also the language of a globalised and televised culture. O'Nolan's interest, he argued, was not in the liveliness but in the *deadness* of English, his working tool. Arguing that the denial encapsulated in 'heritage' Irish literature is on the wane – the lyrical realist mode of an Edna O'Brien or John McGahern having become rather 'retro-kitsch' – Gough ended on a potential (re)beginning: with Hiberno-English destabilising again, and presenting young Irish authors with new challenges.

Joseph Brooker (*University of London*) also concentrated on the fortunes of ludic fiction, from O'Nolan through to Vladimir Nabokov. The two writers, who never read each other, belong to the same literary continent: both were supposedly Joycean (although Nabokov was not bothered by the resentment of the co-national), both wrote across languages – at the same time at home in and detached from English. Their most salient difference, Brooker argued, may be in their attitude *vis-à-vis* writing – whereas O'Nolan remained incredulous of aesthetics, Nabokov held aesthetic enchantment to be the supreme goal of art. Dieter Fuchs (*University of Koszalin*) threw an icy psychoanalytical eye at the camouflaged Oedipal complexes in returning fathers dispossessing their sons in *The Third Policeman* and Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, showing how the protagonists' paternal estrangement spells out the predicament of the young Irish Free State – a free but disoriented country. Tom Walker (*Trinity College Dublin*) presented a treatise on bicycles male, female, but mostly Republican, applying Sergeant Fottrell's 'mollycule theory' to the political imaginary, and showing, through intertexts with *The Third Policeman*, the prominent role of these means of locomotion in the nationalist agenda and Republican 'life writing.' Jennika Baines (*University College Dublin*), editor of the 2011 collection *Is It About a Bicycle?: Flann O'Brien in the 21st Century*, looked at the murders and casualties of O'Nolan's first three novels, cataloguing the symbolic and literal deaths of authority, enacted in, and by, fictional entourages of impostors and plagiarists. She showed that the pattern of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* is reverted in *An Béal Bocht*, which offers, as the comic narrative's sole response to historical catastrophe, an abrupt end. But endings, just as openings, tended to be not at all abrupt at *100 Myles*. Midway through Wednesday afternoon we had a videoconference with legendary Irish actor Eamon

Morrissey, the first onstage impersonator of The Brother's brother. From New York he delighted us with an *ad hoc* rendering of his favourite Mylesian passages.

Example of an ending, ultimate. Shortly after this revelry came an uncanny counterpoint, as author, critic, biographer, and one-time friend of Myles's Anthony Cronin drove home – by his striking presence, talk, and Pinteresque pauses – that the career of the one who scrupulously rehearsed his jokes in his haunts before putting them down in *Cruiskeen Lawn* the next day was indeed 'no laughing matter.' He articulated and exemplified with eloquence how the young Dublin university wit soured, metamorphosed into Myles (as Cronin reminded us, nobody knew him as Flann in Dublin from the '40s), and ultimately turned into the self-loathing man intent on burying Flann O'Brien.

Example of an ending, post-ultimate. Saddened though we may be by such a disheartening turn of fate and by the fact that Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles never adorned Vienna, city of his 'shadowy Kraus,' with his presence, if we add up the years all the assembled Flanneurs spent freely exchanging their omnium with that of five curiously-titled Irish novels, they will considerably outnumber the worldly life-span of the author. We may also note that the chaotically whirling omnium of his spirit by now easily surpasses half of the humanity and selfhood of any mid-seasoned member of the aforementioned assembly, now caught in the act of reading out the immortal pomes of Jem Casey, Poet of the Pick, in the multiplicity of their languages. *Conclusion of the foregoing*.

Notes & references

[1] 'If a man stands before a mirror and sees in it his reflection, what he sees is not a true reproduction of himself but a picture of himself when he was a younger man.' Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London; Flamingo, 1993), 66.

[2] Compounding the unruly metafictional effects, the author of the present report experienced no common surprise on the Tuesday morning of the conference when, upon taking the violet subway line under the Ring, she bumped into a young man displaying the features of the Viennese student-narrator. All in the ken will take this as irrefutable evidence of the filmic world's getting out of hand, since it is utterly impossible to find two male persons sharing the self-same unprepossessing cast of countenance in a city numbering barely two million.