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A Matter of Influence

Intersections of Identity & Form

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Guest Editor's Note

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‘One must write outside oneself’
— Flann O’Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*

Introductory Note

Flann O’Brien Studies is one of the few literary fields which comfortably refer to their subject of study by the author’s first name.¹ Even the title used to identify those invested in the field, namely Flanneurs or Mylesians, sounds casual compared to the more formal designations in other areas of literary and cultural studies (Joyceans, Yeatsians, or Beckettians).² Admittedly, na gCopaleenians or O’Brienians make for awkward constructions, especially when compared with the more clever and stylish terms currently in use.³ The problematic nature of authorial identity regarding Brian O’Nolan and his various personas continually threatens the stability of the field which currently operates under the name of ‘Flann O’Brien Studies’. At the same time, resistance to authorial categorisation is intrinsic to the biographical individual named – for the most part – Brian O’Nolan. Paul Fagan asserts that ‘O’Nolan’s project of representing and exploring a series of selves [...] is bound up with his resistance to the authority and ethicality of the reader’s impossible epistemological vantage point in the literary event.’⁴ Consequently, the establishment of a coherent category for all of O’Nolan’s pseudonyms may indeed be overly reductive for a writer so blatantly intent

¹ Someone inquiring into one identity and getting confused when faced with another is naturally conceivable. Novice Mylesian (NM): ‘Myles na gCopaleen is great. Did he write anything else?’ Full-time Flanneur (FF): ‘At *Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O’Brien.’ NM: ‘Flann O’Brien?’ FF: ‘Yeah, Flann O’Brien. You know... Brian O’Nolan.’ NM: ‘Flann?..., oh Brian O’Nolan? If you don’t know who I’m talking about then perhaps you should’ve just said so.’ FF: [Stares blankly, eyes blinking twice]. This invented exchange is somewhat indebted to Brendan Behan’s 1960 review of *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

Q. Who is Flann O’Brien?

A. Brian Nolan.

Q. Who is Brian Nolan?

A. Myles na Gopaleen.

Q. What did these three men do?

A. They wrote three books called ‘At Swim-Two-Birds’.

Brendan Behan, ‘Secret Scripture’, *The Irish Times* (30 July 1960), 6.

² [Rodney Sharkey: the late great Marius Bunning proposed at ‘Beckett in the 90s’ in The Hague that, in keeping with Beckett’s absurdist leanings, invested scholars might be more properly called ‘Becketteers.’ I, for one, am happy to so identify in his honour. ‘Flanneur,’ Scott, by the same token, is a momentary brush with genius.] [Scott Hamilton: Agreed. This is a witty bunch for sure. Flannatic also seems appropriate in certain situations related to this group, occasionally, but do not divulge that to anyone please.]

³ The constructs of Mylesians and Flanneurs are obvious puns on the ancient Gael ‘Milesians’ and the modernist figure of the ‘flaneur.’ ‘Flanneur’ was first suggested by Jennika Baines in her ‘Introduction’ to *Is it about a bicycle? Flann O’Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 11.

⁴ Paul Fagan, “‘I’ve got you under my skin’: ‘John Duffy’s Brother,’ ‘Two in One,’ and the Confessions of Narcissus,” in *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 61.

on destabilising notions of a singular authorial identity. The task, then, is to explore if and how O’Nolan’s different pseudonyms and literary styles may influence each other, on the one hand, and potentially destabilise each other, on the other hand. The intent of this special forum is to facilitate a thorough investigation of matters of influence across the personas of Brian O’Nolan as a necessary endeavour for the current moment in ‘Flann O’Brien’ Studies.

Matters of Reference

A noticeable inconstancy exists in how the pseudonyms are referred to or compiled in different phases of O’Brien Studies. Early on, the absence of a shared convention or a clear standard of reference gave rise to an implicit debate; a contested field with certain titles appearing to favour heteronymy and others tending towards editorial decisions that limit or contain the proliferation of multiple identities.⁵ *The Best of Myles* and other *Cruiskeen Lawn* anthologies, for example, were published under the name Flann O’Brien and not Myles na gCopaleen. Such practices are, however, changing to a degree. Over the last decade the International Flann O’Brien Society (IFOBS) has coordinated an effort to address such inconsistencies as a means of assembling the legacies from each persona. In the same vein., *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, which adopts the Flann O’Brien meta-authorial name as a clear selling point, encompasses short prose published under Myles na gCopaleen and other pseudonyms; nonetheless, the blanket attribution to ‘Flann O’Brien’ of the volume still subsumes a complex and heterogeneous collection of authorial identities under one of its numerous parts.⁶

To be sure, utilising Flann O’Brien as the overarching figure for the personas affirms a hierarchal ordering of authorial personas. The problem, if so desired, is to rebrand an already established field with the longstanding name of Flann O’Brien Studies into something more representative of the complex intersection of identities and influences. Because the biographical figure has for decades been somewhat inconsequential, renaming the field would be in-line with the impulse of disrupting established norms. Recent years have witnessed something of a biographical-historicist turn, further advanced by the publication of O’Nolan’s correspondence, with the title *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*. Increasingly, there has been a dramatic critical tendency

⁵ A striking example of the editorial complexities associated with this moment is found in the index of Anthony Cronin’s biography *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien*, which lists Flann O’Brien under ‘O’ for O’Brien and yet Myles na gCopaleen is listed under ‘M’ for Myles. Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (New York: Fromm International, 1998), 258.

⁶ Flann O’Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

towards referring to the author under his biographical name. However, as O’Nolan did not overtly associate himself with his literary work, as a result, in part, of the anonymity required by his employment as a civil servant, should the field of study honour that choice and not subsume all the pseudonyms under the moniker Brian O’Nolan?

Maebh Long argues that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, ‘O’Brien’s fragments more radically point to the permanent absence of any form of meaningful identity or totality.’⁷ The ‘permanent absence’ Long posits as an aspect of the fragments reverberates with Michel Foucault’s reflections, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, on the correspondences between an author’s identity and the unity of a body of work: ‘The *oeuvre* can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor a certain unity, nor as a homogeneous unity.’⁸ No origin truly exists for any identity whether authorial, biographical, or fictional. The *oeuvre*’s point of origin ‘is merely its own void; and from that point all beginnings can never be more than recommendations or occultation.’⁹ Taking this paradox to its extreme conclusion, the turn from ‘Flann O’Brien’ as the writer’s first public persona to the recent critical convention of foregrounding ‘Brian O’Nolan’ suggests the biographical individual is as much a by-product of the authorial figure as the authorial figure is created by the biographical individual.

In terms of primary sources, the 2013 publication of *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien* has generated a more widespread engagement with the short texts of O’Nolan. Many of these pieces were scarce and could only be consulted by diligent researchers with access to the original publications, often only available in Ireland or select special collections or archives. More readily available to the contemporary reader, these resources are contributing significantly to cohesion amongst the network of scholars dedicated to such an enigmatic individual(s).¹⁰ Increased referential accuracy affords a more nuanced examination of O’Nolan and his pseudonyms, as well as other authors who may share commonalities, which indicates that identities are impacted by communal and historical contexts. And the output of those commonalities can reverberate across genres, mediums, and authors.

The examination of these cross-genre elements would undoubtedly expose the historical and stylistic functions of O’Nolan’s personas. For instance, recent scholarship has, without a doubt, been instrumental in further disseminating a selection of the output of na gCopaleen to scholars and the general public. However, one resource is currently missing: a critical edition of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. One benefit

⁷ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 10.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ Murphy and Hopper, *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, vii.

of such an edition, for example, could be the identification of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns written by others, notably Niall Montgomery, when O’Nolan was unable to do so for health reasons; a situation which may or may not further complicate Myles na gCopaleen being reinvented into Myles na Gopaleen. The biographical figure never writes as themselves but adopts, or reinvents, versions of themselves for specific purposes and through specific styles. The column that O’Nolan wrote for *The Nationalist and Leinster Times* under the pseudonym George Knowall, *Bones of Contention*, as indicated in the title, displays a more contentious, and sometimes overtly political, tone than *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Consequently, Knowall should not be conflated with na gCopaleen, and *The Nationalist and Leinster Times* is by no means a similar newspaper to *The Irish Times*. To equate starkly different personas and newspapers would compromise the individual contribution *Bones of Contention* provides to the *oeuvre*; hence the need to be able to refer to each individual persona both in their own right and as a part of a network of actors with an influential relationship with the biographical individual.¹¹

Despite the recent tendency towards standardised practice aided by increased scholarly dialogue and abetted by the activities of IFOBS,¹² a fractured approach to referring to O’Nolan’s personas persists. And even though the adoption of the O’Brien name may have seemed logical during the early stages of a developing field of study, unifying the field under this pseudonym is slightly problematic in that it could constrict all others under the fictional persona of Flann O’Brien. However, this is not likely as O’Nolan’s personas, and the work produced under their guises, are carnivalesque in their resistance to singular classification. In his 1964 article ‘De Me’, Myles na Gopaleen (the resurrected/revised version of Myles na gCopaleen) announces that ‘No author should write under his own name nor under one permanent pen name.’¹³ Perhaps to honour that effort to resist classification, scholars would do well to allow specific classification to remain a crucial element of Flann O’Brien studies, at least in part by referring to each persona in relation to their unique work when providing analysis of texts; an effort IFOBS has advanced for sure.

¹¹ The gesture here to Actor Network Theory (ANT) is intentional. However, the lack of space required to explore the potential viability prevents that exploration, most especially considering the absolute inclusion of references, both playful and serious, to *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green: The Insect Play* (by Myles na gCopaleen, the name attributed to O’Nolan’s dramatic works). If only Alana Gillespie were here to provide comment.

¹² The IFOBS bibliography-in-progress, <https://www.univie.ac.at/flannobrien2011/bibliography.html>, and *The Parish Review* style guide, <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/submissions/>, promote a more faithful procedure of reference.

¹³ Myles Na Gopaleen, ‘De Me’, *New Ireland: Magazine of the New Ireland Society of the Queen’s University of Belfast* 2 (March 1964): 41–2.

Intersections of Content, Form, and Identity

Consider the following detail pertaining to the Policeman MacCruiskeen character. The surname of MacCruiskeen suggests (perhaps quite absurdly) an interjection from Myles na gCopaleen into Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*. Firstly, 'Mac' as a surname prefix means 'son of', and secondly 'Cruiskeen' implies a genealogical relation to the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. MacCruiskeen's antics of stealing bicycles to ensure that those under his jurisdiction remain more human than machine is the same type of public service the *Cruiskeen Lawn* performs for the readership of *The Irish Times*. Just as the column occasionally equates individuals which lack critical thinking to zombies, MacCruiskeen seems intent on keeping the anonymous protagonist from becoming a mindless automaton.

Furthermore, as *The Third Policeman* was published posthumously, the layers of complexity regarding authorial context accumulate in a way similar to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. *The Third Policeman* was written near the genesis of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. The deceased MacCruiskeen is a distant, presumably, yet future relative of na gCopaleen and the columns but resides in the realm of the afterlife and is therefore dead previous to the possibility of his own existence, until being resurrected to some degree almost 30 years later in *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). John Furriskey, in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, may have been born fully formed, but MacCruiskeen had, seemingly, 'never been properly born' at all, to invoke Beckett.¹⁴ This stark anachronism reflects the fact of the biographical author Brian O'Nolan becoming relevant only after the author persona becomes significant. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, in the appropriately titled 'Introduction: The Invisible Author', from their *Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, accurately indicate that for 'O'Brien as much as Roland Barthes, the death of the author is the birth of reader.'¹⁵ Indeed, since the rise of the importance of archives and correspondence in literary studies, the birth of the reader is the resurrection of the biographical author, especially in the case of O'Nolan. With O'Nolan particularly, this resurrection is compromised by the ways in which the name Brian O'Nolan, as well as Brian Ó Nualláin, when ascribed to a published piece of fiction, becomes a pseudonym of Flann O'Brien.

As the above suggests, there are murky waters to tread, so to speak, when examining the intersections of influence or points of deviation between the personas of O'Nolan as they destabilise lines of genre, text, and authorial authority.¹⁶ Numerous other instances

¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, *All that Fall*, in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1990), 196.

¹⁵ Murphy and Hopper, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, viii.

¹⁶ A 'bibliographical minefield', as Murphy and Hopper state in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, vii. The genesis for this special forum is indebted to Murphy's and Hopper's introduction.

frustrate the generic compartmentalisation of any of O’Nolan’s identities; na gCopaleen having written drama and English-language prose and Flann O’Brien penning columns for various newspapers, for example, all suggest a substantial re-interrogation of how much influence genre has on O’Nolan/O’Brien studies.¹⁷ The resonances of identity between pseudonyms and personas still requires more in-depth excavation similar to what is presented in this issue of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies*.¹⁸

Contributing Essays

In the company of remarkable and distinguished individuals, Rodney Sharkey delivered his essay ‘A Tale of Two Tales: Irony, Identity, and the Fictions of Anthony Cronin and Brian O’Nolan’ by hand to the guest editor within the environs of McDaid’s Pub in Dublin. The setting of this exchange was appropriate on two levels, as O’Nolan often frequented McDaid’s and the location which once accommodated the office of *The Bell* loomed in the upper floors of the adjacent building. The article manuscript Sharkey delivered provides a reading of Anthony Cronin’s *A Life of Riley* and *Dead as Doornails* against the modernist coordinates of O’Nolan’s proliferating irony and Samuel Beckett’s mode of radical subtraction. Sharkey demonstrates that O’Nolan and his two counterparts, through clearly different styles, create a textual allowance for the dead to speak through the various narrative techniques.

Next, Maggie Glass, in ‘Big and Learned and Far from Simple: Intellectual Narration in “The Plain People of Ireland” and *The Third Policeman*’, examines the contention behind public intellectual and everyday citizen at play in O’Nolan’s (or Ó Nualláin’s) work. Glass explores the figure of the intellectual presented in its various iterations across the Ó Nualláin network.¹⁹ She offers insight into the ways the different voices of Ó Nualláin offer various versions of the figure of the public individual and explores the pursuit of knowledge in the Irish social and cultural sphere.

Finally, Brian Doherty, in ‘Violence and the Crisis of Identity in Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen’, analyses the representation of violence and repression in O’Nolan’s work. Utilising Freudian theory, Doherty examines the splitting of the ego

¹⁷ [Anon: examples with which to make this point – [...] “Flann O’Brien” wrote a number of newspaper columns for *The Irish Times* (such as ‘Standish Hayes O’Grady,’ *The Irish Times* (16 October, 1940): 3.), *The Bell*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, the *Manchester Guardian*, etc., and the ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ persona wrote English-language fiction (‘Donabate,’ ‘Two in One,’ etc.).] [Hamilton: My gratitude to Anon, who aptly was listed only as ‘Author’ in the track changes for this piece, for contributing such great examples. No publication is ever created in isolation but is always a collaboration.]

¹⁸ The name of this journal reflects the very issues being posed here, in that a review of the parish of identities surrounding the biographical Brian O’Nolan requires constant review; however, undoubtedly, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien/Myles na gCopaleen/George Knowall/Brian O’Nolan/Etc.* would be absurd, correct?

¹⁹ [Sharkey: Echoing Vladimir by taking a quiet breath and airing the view, ‘This is getting alarming.’]

as it occurs in O’Nolan and his various personas. Doherty argues that this splitting is generated by, and generates, anxiety which reflects the cultural context in which it occurred.

Conclusion (Disclaimer)

In the spirit of full disclosure, the exploration of how identity destabilises parameters of expectation here has resulted in an editorial phenomenon possibly not experienced, or at least recorded openly, before. While stored in the files of the guest editor, the essays began to interact, conspire, and collude with each other without said guest editor’s permission.²⁰ The insubordination of these authorial voices has generated a dialogue in the footnotes. Faced with the imposition of editorial authority the essays threatened all out revolt and mutiny.²¹ The potential delay, or even more detrimental cancellation, of the issue was sufficient for the previously said guest editor to acquiesce to this cross contamination.²² The minor accomplishment being the ability to regulate this cross fertilisation to footnotes only (with even a few infiltrations in the Guest Editor Note without prior authorisation from Scott Hamilton, the aforementioned unfortunate guest editor).²³

²⁰ The contributing authors have of course been cleared of all responsibility through the proper channels.

²¹ [Maggie Glass: ‘Oh dear...’].

²² [Brian Doherty: Wise move Dr. Hamilton, wise move.]

²³ [Glass: Oh, sorry did I jump too soon?] [Sharkey: ‘God Help Us’].

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

