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‘What did scholars from across the globe do? They gathered at U.C.D.’

A Report on *Palimpsests: V International Flann O’Brien Conference*, 16–19 July 2019

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After ten minutes or so wondering about the least clichéd way to open a conference report, I felt it might be better simply to formulate the problem, as Myles na gCopaleen might have done, catechistically:

> In what way must a problem be confronted?
> Head on.

In a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column on 27 March 1942, Myles offered the first of what he claimed would be ‘356 tri-weekly parts’ of ‘The Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliché […]. A unique compendium of all that is nauseating in contemporary writing.’[1] The form was simple and formulaic: a list of related clichés would be reformed into a catechistic call and response. A ‘second,’ ‘third,’ ‘fourth,’ and ‘fifth’ part followed over the next few months and a series of unnumbered catechisms with titles like ‘Dead English’ followed over the next year.[2] Despite admitting to being ‘worn out’ by the ‘hard difficulty’ of spending ‘innumerable brain-hours every week trying to remember and record clichés,’ he refused to relent.[3] Indeed, he poked fun at the form and persistence of his obsession in an early January column the following year: ‘in relation to giving up my clichés I would perform that negative traumatic act—not dream.’[4]

Talk of cliché at the opening of a conference report might not bode well, so let me state clearly and at the start that the remarkably original, engaged, and intelligent papers that came together to make up the fifth international conference of Flann O’Brien studies were not clichéd in any of the senses that drew Myles’s scorn.

Yet we might find in the origins of the word 'cliché' – literally a 'stereotype,' a plate from which a page could, for efficiency and convenience, be reprinted over and over again – something more readily emulated and less openly derogatory. For, if *Palimpsests* was evidence of anything, it's that Flann O'Brien scholars now have an increasingly common language, a pool of critical shorthands, common agreements, and shared knowledge that, far from reducing our ability to speak meaningfully to each other, maximises the efficiency of our communications. This is all the more important now that we seem to be meeting with increasing frequency. The last five years have seen the publication of genuinely discipline-forming works. Taken together, Maebh Long's *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* (2018) and her *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (2014), Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt's *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority* (2017) and Borg, Fagan, and Werner Huber's *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* (2014) have provided us with archival materials and an overarching conception of how they fit together (these are already saving individual scholars tens, even hundreds, of hours of work and travel) *and* a new set of organising critical and theoretical accounts of O'Nolan's writing practices. It was both telling and just that the *Collected Letters* and *Problems with Authority* were both recognised in the Society's prestigious Father Kurt Fahrt, S. J. Memorial Prizes (announced on the last night of the conference): Long's *Letters* received the Big Fahrt (for best book-length publication, 2017–18) while Ronan Crowley's 'Phwat's in a nam?: Brian O'Nolan as a Late Revivalist' (from *Problems*) received the Little Fahrt (for best article-length publication in the same period). Any illusions that O'Nolan was an author of secondary importance and sporadic capacity had already been shaken by Borg, Fagan, and Huber in *Contesting Legacies* and by the publication of O'Nolan's *Plays and Teleplays* and *Short Fiction* just previously, but *Palimpsests* confirmed and extended that legacy.

Scholars, in short, now have something to group around, a shared critical and archival language with which to communicate, argue, and (re)construct. Though a ranking system is hardly necessary, Long deserves special mention in this regard; it was a notable feature of the conference that hardly a paper (not a single one that I saw, but if a name falls in a parallel panel and I'm not there to hear it...) went by without reference of one kind or another to some element of her recent work. This focus on one scholar does not indicate a lack of depth in the field. Instead, it strikes me that the bloating that has occurred in certain other author-centric fields (naming no names, Jamesing no Jameses) has robbed them of this kind of focus and clarity, making one's path through recent scholarship in these areas feel a little random and disconnected. So little, comparatively, is shared between scholars in the same subfield that one starts to wonder whether one occupies the same field at all. Ask yourself: how recently have you been to a conference where you could say with some certainty that almost every delegate will have read or interacted with a particular piece of critical or archival

work? *Palimpsests* was just such a conference, and the capacity for fruitful conversation both within and without the panel format – over coffee or on the bus into the centre of Dublin – was accelerated and enabled by this sense of a shared language.

Contemporary Flann O'Brien studies as a communal endeavour – though it of course has its own longer history and one that Fagan and others are always keen to acknowledge – was initiated in earnest by the International Flann O'Brien Society only a decade or so ago. And it strikes me that, though the recent boom in studies might soon change this, we are at a peculiar and rewarding phase of its development. Scholars can still gather together under the belief, however misguided, that we all, like Thomas Young before us, 'know everything.' Or, at least, that contemporary Flann O'Brien studies has set the entry level for 'competence,' as Derrida might put it, at a refreshingly reasonable level. It still feels like every relevant book and article might, in principle, be read and absorbed. This also makes it an exceptionally exciting field in which to work, since the feeling that one's work might not only be read by the majority of its target audience but that it might actually contribute to some kind of shared understanding… well, that's one that has long been undermined in many other fields and subfields.

'In what do they indulge? Flights of oratory.'[5]

Long's plenary was an unsurprisingly masterful and enlightening production. A fluent account of O'Nolan's relationship with his typewriter – on display in Boston College – it playfully posited both an atomic theory of transference between writer and implement (Long suggested, plausibly enough, that the thousands of hours that O'Nolan spent hammering away at his typewriter might have served as a more immediate inspiration to him than his bicycle) and offered a tantalising account of the processes by which O'Nolan not only tolerated but embraced its foibles. Typewriters were unreliable and infuriatingly tactile objects, which could, whether by user error, the jamming of keys, or some other technical failure, produce results quite different to those intended by their user. But, Long suggests, O'Nolan was particularly attached to his typewriter, repeatedly going out of his way to have it repaired rather than replaced. And some genetic attention to what he produced with his beloved Underwood reveals that, in an appropriately Flannian inversion, the typewriter was an uncanny collaborator in, rather than mere instrument of, the production of these texts. Long provided several examples – some certain, others speculative – of O'Nolan's accidental punning. On multiple occasions in his columns, ideas that appear to be decidedly and typically Mylesian in form were only possible because a slip of the fingers or the jamming of keys suggested some new combination of letters, words, and concepts. Our sense of O'Nolan as variably both in and out of control – as being in control of how out of control

his writing is – has to take this embrace of accident into account. In a clear example of Long's position as an academic influencer, by the time I gave my own paper the next day, I'd amended it to acknowledge that an example of this auto-generation might be in my own presentation: in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column of 1950, Myles claimed to have done 'as much as the next man to make Ireland serf-supporting,' a pun so slight as to seem accidental.[6]

Long was but one of four plenaries in what was by any standards a full and exciting schedule. Katherine Ebury (*Sheffield University*) opened proceedings with a compelling account of the connections between O'Brien, golden age crime fiction, the death penalty, and the psychoanalyst Theodore Reik. The structures of crime fiction undergird almost all of O'Nolan's writing, Ebury argued, and his ambivalent depictions of criminal testimony and the death penalty (particularly in *The Third Policeman*) suggest a Reikian insistence on the paradoxical impossibility of legitimate confession. Confession, for Reik, is always pathological, manifesting primarily a deep-seated need for punishment over and above its sanctifying capacity in the Catholic tradition. In *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien converts the pathologies of the confessing subject (who cannot, in fact, state his own guilt openly and without dissimulation) into a distorted and distorting world, a world of hauntings and magical thinking in which the subject is constantly assaulted by gothic manifestations of his own unacknowledged guilt.

Erika Mihálycsa's third day plenary – playfully titled 'I made a right haimes of it' – intricately traced the joys and frustrations of translating O'Nolan's self-evidently tricky (in every sense) prose. The issue of O'Nolan and translation (both O'Nolan as translator and as translated) was in turn picked up by Louis de Paor in the final plenary: '*Níos gaelaí ná an ghaeilge féin*: More Irish than Irish.' O'Nolan's Irish, de Paor argued, was far from being the example of perfection that O'Nolan, with all his finicky critiques of other's Irish, would have us believe. In fact, though technically sound, his Irish was a unique construction, a family Gaelic spoken only within the walls of the O'Nolan house in Strabane and later in correspondence with the brothers who alone had inherited it. In this sense, O'Nolan's linguistic upbringing was certainly unusual, even if an inevitable outcome of Gaelic League activity across the decades preceding his birth. He was, essentially, the product of a Gaelic micro-community without reference to English, but one surrounded on all sides by it. His Irish was built on the foundation of textbooks but not learnt through them: O'Nolan's father was a Gaelic Leaguer who insisted on teaching his children Gaelic and Gaelic alone, but he was not himself raised with the language. Neither Brian nor his father had any real experiences of a broader Gaeltacht community, of a living, breathing, shared language that transcended and extended the family. That O'Nolan would later mock a metropolitan interest in these communities – most prominently in *An Béal Bocht* – does not invalidate his sense of himself as an Irish speaker. Irish was not only his first language but, de Paor argued,

the one that most powerfully structured his thoughts and sensibilities. This clarion call for a new sensitivity to the multi-form 'Irishness' of O'Nolan's writings was salutary and convincing. And, if the broader attention to the Irish language at the conference is anything to go by, it is a challenge that has already been taken up by a new body of scholars working in and across multiple languages.

'What is certain? One thing at least.'[7]

While I was reticent to open this report with a well-worn cliché, that reflects more on my vanity than on the fitness of that cliché to the situation being described. Scholars from all across the globe really did gather together in Dublin… I didn't carry out a rigorous census, admittedly, but in glancing around during a coffee break, I saw representatives from the US, New Zealand, Singapore, Israel, and the Czech Republic all huddled together in friendly conversation. There were even representatives from some of the most backwater, disconnected dives in Europe – yes, *England* sent a delegation. Not bad for what is as yet only the fifth symposium of a still relatively young academic community. And the conference felt like a coming of age of sorts. Paul Fagan said as much in his Presidential address, where, putting the victory in v(aled)ictory, he addressed the many naysayers who had, over a decade ago, politely dismissed his optimistic attempts to establish a meaningful community of scholars focused on the work of Flann O'Brien. Five major conferences later, a growing membership, the *Parish Review* not only thriving but moving to a new home, and an explosion of monographs and edited collections published and in the pipeline and you can understand why Fagan felt compelled to declare: 'I was right.' He was and he is.

If nothing else, the pull and growing significance of Brian O'Nolan – thanks in no small part to the Society's work – is evidenced by the calibre of authors happy to align themselves with brand O'Nolan (jumping on the Flannwagon?). *Palimpsests* featured readings by a Booker Prize winner (Anne Enright), a multiple Booker-nominee (Patrick McCabe), and Bailey's and Royal Society of Literature award winner Lisa McInerney. Alongside these international stars appeared two representatives of Ireland's Tramp Press: Joanna Walsh and Jack Fennell. Though less garlanded (Walsh, it should be noted, is a widely admired author, reviewer and artist), these two writers certainly held their own, offering some of the most engaging contributions of the whole conference. Walsh's readings of some of her taut, haunting stories of domestic yet liminal spaces, sent me off immediately in search of more of her work. Fennell read from his endlessly entertaining collection of Irish science fiction, *A Brilliant Void*, which is full of the kinds of distortions that any O'Nolan reader would recognise. Not least a host of De Selby-like mad scientists whose experiments with time lead to headache-inducing loops of paradoxical circularity (see, for example, Tarlach Ó hUid's 'The Chronotope'). All of

these authors variably and in their own ways are inheritors of a multitudinous O'Nolan legacy. Pat McCabe's bravura contribution, which I had the pleasure to chair, could not in any reasonable sense be described as a reading, incorporating as it did not only an energetic performance style more suited to a one-man-show but a curated soundtrack of musical cues. A wide-ranging interview with artist, podcaster and author Blindboy Boatclub – alongside *Flanntasmagoria!* an exhibition in Boston College and the work of artists David, Edward, and Joanna O'Kane – suggested the ongoing potential for O'Nolan's work to interact with and shape artistic production in Ireland well into the future.

'How does one proceed to add? Hasten.'[8]

Away from the big names, the conference brought together a capacious yet tightly focused body of scholarship. In an event that included 20 panels over 4 days, it would be a fool's errand to attempt to pick out too many individual papers for praise or commentary, but certain themes did emerge across the conference as a whole. The theme of 'palimpsests' naturally put an emphasis on elements of archival and compositional practice, something that has been made easier recently with the publication of the *Collected Letters*. But while several papers made good use of attentive comparisons between textual variants – notably, Daniel Syrovy's (*University of Vienna*) discussion of *Cruiskeen Lawn* and Alana Gillespie's (*Utrecht University*) account of variances in text and performance in *The Insect Play* and *Thirst* – the conference as a whole took a far more capacious view of palimpsestuous behaviours. For an author who could barely keep his multiple identities in check, all composition is in a sense palimpsestuous composition. While O'Nolan was 'the man of many masks,' these identities fed on each other, each writing persona drawing (explicitly and implicitly) on material, ideas, and perspectives already voiced elsewhere. Almost uniform across the many papers presented was a willingness – sometimes an insistence – to read O'Nolan's many texts together while also establishing the grounds by which each persona might be granted its own identity and characteristics.

One of these identity problematics remains in the form of Flann's/Myles's variable styles and degrees of Irishness, and the issue of translation to and from Gaelic and to and from O'Nolan in these writings was a prominent feature of the conference as a whole. Connectedly, the concept of layering allowed several contributors to consider the extent to which Irishness helps and hinders us in pursuit of a working concept of O'Nolan's politics. A self-identified small 'c' conservative, Vatican II figure in his own life, O'Nolan's writing is so relentlessly disintegrative, so unwilling to establish final grounds for itself, that the radically disruptive politics of the work tend to transcend the more staid politics of the author. But through the prompt to think in terms of multiple

layers, several papers sought to reproduce the processes by which O'Nolan dismantled and dissected and in doing so to discern the political assumptions included within those processes. While the work remains thrillingly unsolvable, *Palimpsests* suggests a future for scholarship that remains rooted in the particular political, cultural, and personal circumstances that prompted it. An insistence on rooting O'Nolan within his time and place was perhaps the most consistent feature of the conference. Alongside material contexts, including Flann and technology – trains (James Bacon, a train driver working in London Paddington) and bicycles (Dieter Fuchs, *University of Vienna*, and me) – the broader cultural contexts of Flann's work came repeatedly to the fore. While Luke Gibbons (*Maynooth University*) attempted to place O'Nolan within an ongoing Irish domestic modernism within the arts, others sought to establish his relationship with a longer literary tradition, notably: Richard Barlow (*Nanyang Technological University*) on O'Nolan and Dion Boucicault, Einat Adar (*University of South Bohemia*) on James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold*, and Eric Swartz (*Trinity College Dublin*) on *Tristram Shandy*.

For all this, one of the great attractions of O'Nolan's work for scholars is its amenability to a range of theoretical and technical approaches, and it is still in these areas that much of the best work is being done. *Palimpsests* saw notable examples of this in the form of panels on 'Animals,' including Yaeli Greenblatt's (*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*) account of a graphic adaptation of *An Béal Bocht*, and 'The Body,' including Paul Fagan's (*Salzburg University*) extremely suggestive account of the nature of the 'disembodied voice' in O'Nolan's writing. O'Nolan criticism continues to move easily and fruitfully between theoretical, historicist, biographical, and textual approaches to his work.

'What is comment? Superfluous.'[9]

A word for the role of social media at the conference. While many delegates likely had no idea what was going on, a small band of committed tweeters managed an almost unbroken, mostly live, commentary on the various events that went to make up *Palimpsests*. While complete coverage was thwarted by the natural anarchy of the medium (sometimes all the relevant people wander into the same panel), the result is a lasting, even if ultimately 'superfluous' record of the conference. Indeed, and I've intentionally left mention of this until the latter stages of this conference report, you could do worse than setting this aside, opening up Twitter, and searching '#Flann2019.' What you'll find there, in the form of tweets from, among others, Andrew Ferguson (@epiktistes), Tobias Harris (@tobiasharrisbbk), and myself (@fuyerescaper), is a less polished but perhaps truer reflection of the events of the fifth International Flann O'Brien Conference.

'THERE IS NO END TO THIS.'[10]

Rather than a commentary on this conference report (there is an end and it's coming soon for all of us), the above – the title of another of Myles's catechism columns – encapsulates the only critique I could muster of the conference as a whole. While O'Nolan studies is hardly alone in this, the . . . enthusiasm of some speakers resulted in papers that did not so much go over time as refuse to acknowledge time as an operative concept. I know that some people like to pack for a weekend with a week's worth of clothing, but the sight of the words 'slide 3 of 45' 10 minutes into a paper are enough to give anyone pause. I don't claim to be perfect here, but that's precisely why I feel that a strong steer from the organisers is necessary to eradicate this tiresome (in every sense) problem and to empower panel chairs – themselves sometimes too junior to feel comfortable taking control – to step in where necessary. This was all the more problematic here, because the programme for *Palimpsests* was nothing short of packed. Packed with enlightenment, amusement, friendship, and light, certainly, but packed nevertheless. As well as all the 'panels,' 'plenaries,' 'readings,' and 'conversations,' there were also 'launches,' 'events,' a 'cabaret,' and a 'whiskey-tasting.' This abundance is a testament both to the organisers' efforts and the immense appeal of O'Nolan's works to contemporary artists and performers, but it required a reciprocal, if not quite equal, effort from some very tired attendees. In all fairness, I can't think of much I'd have happily cut from what was one of the most exciting, enlivening, and just plain fun conferences I've attended in years.

'In what can no man tell the future has for us? Store.'[11]

Perhaps that's true. But I look forward with some anticipation to the next decade of Flann O'Brien studies, safe in the knowledge that the field is in good hands.

Competing Interests

No competing interests to declare.

Notes & references

[1] Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 27 March 1942, 3. Hereafter *CL*.

[2] *CL*, 27 April 1942, 3; *CL*, 1 May 1942, 3; *CL*, 6 May 1942, 2; *CL*, 22 May 1942, 3.

[3] *CL*, 17 August 1942, 3.

[4] *CL*, 4 January 1943, 3.

[5] *CL*, 22 May 1942, 3.

[6] *CL*, 31 March 1950, 4.

[7] *CL*, 1 July 1942, 2.

[8] *CL*, 24 August 1942, 3.

[9] *CL*, 8 July 1942, 3.

[10] *CL*, 2 October 1942, 3.

[11] *CL*, 8 July 1942, 3.