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Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork University Press, 2017), 346 pp., ISBN: 9781782052302. €39.00 (hardback)

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Review of *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, edited by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork University Press, 2017).

Traditionally, one of the problems with authority that beset criticism of 'Flann O'Brien' is quite where it should position itself or indeed whether it had earned the right to be regarded as a separate field of endeavour within Irish and modernist studies. O'Brien's work has always attracted scholars and readers, but, historically, critical investigations often seemed to be lone efforts or the result of devotees who ploughed a lonely furrow. The foundation of the International Flann O'Brien Society and of *The Parish Review* and the organisation of biennial conferences have given a new legitimacy to the field and galvanised it in ways that could not have been predicted. From being an outlier amongst Irish modernists, Brian O'Nolan has now become a pivotal figure whose multifaceted work not only generates rigorous scrutiny and inventive exegeses, but also acts as a lens for a wide array of parochial, transnational, and global issues.

The creation of a forum eliciting new critical accounts of O'Nolan's multifarious texts has fostered genuine dialogue amongst an ever-widening circle of scholars. Strikingly, the contributors to this volume centring on problems with authority regularly cite the essays in the preceding 2014 collection, *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*.[1] It is rare to encounter a field in which there is such an immediate and palpable sense of ongoing dialogue and exchange and of scholarship that coheres and interlocks. This is a group of critics and readers genuinely listening to, learning from, and building on each other. The successive volumes of essays on Flann O'Brien published by Cork University Press are not just incrementally adding to the field but shaping and changing it and pushing it forward.

As the editors of this scrupulously edited and engrossing collection, Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt, point out in their introduction, O'Nolan himself was ambivalently placed with regard to authority and often mocked institutions and conventions with which he himself was uncomfortably all too intimate, whether the views of Gaeilgeoirí, self-righteous intellectuals, or of The Plain People of Ireland. Moreover, they argue that, although attempts in O'Nolan's fiction to liberate characters and readers from the tyranny of authors seem initially promising, they often result in calamitous outcomes as borne out by the immolation of the anarchic figures created by Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Anthony Cronin pointed out that, at his death, O'Nolan's reputation was so attenuated he was known for his *Irish Times* column and a sole novel. By contrast, an engagement with the full span of his work, republished and restored posthumously, is a particular feature of this collection. These investigations reveal that scrutiny of the lesser known texts by O'Nolan forces us to question many presuppositions about

[1] *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014).

him as a writer. Carol Taaffe in examining *Blather,* the short-lived journal that O'Nolan co-edited with his brother, for example, completely reverses the view that the author lacked readers in his lifetime or that he opposed popular culture. She argues very persuasively that O'Nolan did not set himself apart from The Plain People of Ireland, but rather that he was actively read by them. Maebh Long's nuanced essay examining the teleplays offers a slightly different picture in contending that O'Nolan is often guilty of lazily cashing in on urban and rural stereotypes. But she points out that his later work conspicuously shifts ground and voices critique of essentialist categories of Irishness. Long makes a case for Myles na Gopaleen's now forgotten television series, *O'Dea's Your Man* and *Th' Oul Lad of Kilsalaher*, and contends that they actively question notions of Irish authenticity. Ian Ó Caoimh also casts his net wide and reads *An Béal Bocht* in conjunction with Ciarán O Nuallain's 1973 *Óige an Dearthair*. In drawing out the collaborative and 'conspiratorial' dynamic that typified the Ó Nualláins, he charts how this Gaeltacht memoir may be read as a metatext in active dialogue with *An Beál Bocht,* its carefully orchestrated ironies having, though, by and large eluded critics.

Louis de Paor also concerns himself with Irish sources and influences and illuminatingly shows how O'Nolan's revised MA thesis on nature in Early Irish texts is the seed bed for his later work. De Paor makes the persuasive claim that in this thesis, O'Nolan was already assuming a radical stance, in that he was inventing a critical discourse in Irish which had not existed up to that point. Catherine Flynn's concern is with O'Nolan in a transnational dimension. She closely examines and contextualises references to Japan and its shifting place in international relations during the Second World War in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns and observantly draws out O'Nolan's interest in world affairs and the ways in which he weaves contemporary political debate into his idiosyncratic and satirical journalism. She makes the compelling point that, to comprehend his writing project overall, we should not only to read the full run of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, but also the other political articles in *The Irish Times* with which they are in dialogue.

The cognitive and the neural are of concern in two further provocative essays by Maria Kager and Dirk van Hulle. Kager draws on new research that has established that the brains of those who are bilingual function differently and are more plastic than those of monolingual speakers; bilingual speakers literally think doubly (intuiting or overlaying two languages at once). She uses these findings to analyse the many columns in which Myles na gCopaleen mocks and plays with linguistic interference, for example the varying sounds of English when spoken by Irish and English speakers and the confusion this often prompts. Van Hulle takes issue with views that later phases of modernism are derivative or worn out. Instead, he challengingly argues that the inward

turn of modernists such as James Joyce gives way to the extended mind and thought experiments of works exemplified by *The Third Policeman*. Reconceived in this fashion, O'Nolan is vital as a precursor for Samuel Beckett who plays with echoing silences that further break down divisions between outer and inner. Contesting periodicities and watertight epochal accounts of modernity, van Hulle proposes that we conceive of modernism, late modernism, and postmodernism as a continuum and not as breakaway movements from each other. Moreover, he rescues O'Nolan from postmodernism and lays down a gauntlet in pronouncing O'Nolan a late modernist. Nicely clashing with van Hulle's relocation of O'Nolan in literary historical terms, Ronan Crowley positions him differently as retroactively picking up on a phenomenon that he dubs pseudonymity. Drawing on a deep-seated knowledge of early twentieth-century Irish writing, Crowley excavates a lengthy list of authors using pseudonyms in the Revival period and concludes that O'Nolan, even if he mocks aspects of writing from this era, is nonetheless cleaving to and continuing a long-established practice.

Several other essays use the theme of intertextuality to reframe aspects of O'Nolan's writing and to widen the contexts in which it can be understood. Katherine Ebury brilliantly shows how O'Nolan derives his understanding of physics from popular works in the period and outlines the manner in which he mocks their heavy-handed use of analogies and tendency to raid literary texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* to explicate their central points. John McCourt glosses anew the excursion to Rome in *The Hard Life*, reflecting in the process on O'Nolan's sources for the geography of Rome (some of them possibly oral) and on the possible links with Alberto Moravia's *Racconti romani* and Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*. Collopy's trip to Rome emerges as a multi-faceted and playful fictional construct through the lens of McCourt's knowledgeable reading. But he also rightly stresses that this excursus is dominated primarily by the themes of failure, death, and the *felix culpa*.

The editors' introduction raises provocative questions about the limits of O'Nolan's attacks on authority and observes that he is as prone to abusing and condemning his readers as to freeing them to do their own thing. However, in this area too, productive frictions and tensions abound between the findings of the essays gathered together here. Several that centre on O'Nolan's use of narrative foreground his radicalism and experimentalism. R. W. Maslen, for example, identifies James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold* as a prominent intertext in *The Third Policeman* with Flann O'Brien's novel inverting aspects of Stephens's work and refuting its idealism and pastoralism. Alana Gillespie locates O'Nolan's radicalism in other aspects of his creative endeavours and contrarian philosophy, primarily his treatment of time and of notions of history. O'Nolan's jettisoning of any form of linearity in his novels, for her, evidences his design

to question the authoritative pretensions of history and indeed of literary texts overall. Books for O'Nolan are, as Gillespie states, 'gap-worded' stories (208).[2] Ruben Borg puts the cat among the pigeons in quite a different way in claiming that O'Nolan writes as part of what Borg calls an 'anti-modernist modernism' (220). He brilliantly shows how the tropes of Pauline conversion and the two-in-one story (a self in another's skin) may be used to theorise and explicate aspects of O'Nolan's narrative dynamics and aesthetics. Dieter Fuchs proposes an alternative set of optics for O'Nolan's narrative methods; he adduces that Menippean satire with its liking for orderly catalogues and for the simple life underlies the forms of his works. However, the net effect of satirical play in O'Nolan is not moral wisdom but the realisation that all we can know is that we know nothing. Tamara Radak locates the philosophical and radical underpinnings of O'Nolan's oeuvre elsewhere again. In her suggestive and original account of closure in the author's texts, she contends, drawing on theories of the hypertext, that radical incompleteness is a defining facet of his work, especially of *The Third Policeman*.

Individually, each essay in this collection is a valuable and considered intervention in and of itself. Collectively, though, the volume is even more than the sum of its not inconsiderable parts. The interventions speak to and mesh with each other in numerous ways and can be read as a cohesive but diverse and politely quarrelsome set of approaches to O'Nolan's works in their now expanded and ever-extending form. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt are to be commended for their work in instigating and shaping the collection and the 2013 Rome conference out of which it grew. The dynamism and collaborative energy of Flann O'Brien Studies are evident at once in the lively and rewarding essays in this rich collection and in the seamless and densely suggestive introductory essay that frames the volume and spars with its contents. The intellectual vigour of this relatively new field is growing apace. It has actively reshaped Brian O'Nolan as an author and literary phenomenon and in the process shed compelling light on numerous aspects of mid-twentieth century Irish and European social and cultural history.

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[2] The allusion is to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, Keith Donohue (introd.) (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 15.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.