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**Andrew Gaedtke, *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness: Psychosis, Technology, and Narrative Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 254 pp., ISBN: 9781108418003. \$105 (hardcover)**

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Andrew Gaedtke's recent volume sets out to explore the complex interconnection between three subject matters of crucial interest to Flann O'Brien studies: modernism, machinery, and madness. By breaking down each of the triad's items into their constituent elements and exploring different points of contact between them, Gaedtke achieves a nuanced understanding of the shifting and sometime multiple relations between literary modernism, mental illness, and techno/scientific innovations of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Gaedtke's work resists the temptation to force a unilateral connection between modernism and science, or between science and paranoia, or to construct a neat structure that accounts for the connection between all three.

Instead of making such structural claims, the volume aims to 'trace the form and logic of a technological paranoia that becomes especially articulate in late-modernist culture' (2). This project is pursued through an impressive range of late-modernist authors, which situates Flann O'Brien not only alongside familiar coordinates such as Samuel Beckett but also in the more novel company of Wyndham Lewis, Mina Loy, Eveline Waugh, Muriel Spark, and Anna Kavan. To my mind, the book's most exciting contribution to the study of late-modernism is that it considers 'technological paranoia' not simply to be born out of the ungraspability of modern science, nor to stem solely from the depersonalisation-angst that coincides with widespread mechanisation. Rather, Gaedtke points to the formalist tendencies of early psychoanalysis and the scientific structuralism of biological psychiatry, positing that early psychological theory written prior to these works constitutes, in and of itself, a form of scientific investigation that feeds into modernist paranoia regarding the mechanisation of the mind.

Psychoanalytic theory is rightly represented by this study as a source of narrative-production that enables the ontological and artistic experimentation which characterises the writing of the period. Gaedtke convincingly asserts that psychoanalytic ideas such as the unconscious, the uncanny, and even psychological conditions like paranoia or psychosis, serve a double role in the works of the authors examined in this volume: he claims, for example, that psychosis offers narrative possibilities that enrich post-modern philosophical experimentation and radical scepticism. At the same time, psychosis betokens the cognitive split that denotes the incoherence and estrangement of the modernist setting. Paranoia is given a similar treatment in this study: the 'influencing-machine delusion' common to many of the narratives explored, is 'conceptualised as both symptom and theory: an instance of technologically encoded paranoia that attempts to explain its own working parts' (7). In this way, Gaedtke's study avoids the trap of idealising mental illness as a narrative generating device, while giving due attention to the clinical, scientific, hermeneutic, and post-structural implications of psychosis that emerge from these modern narratives.

It becomes evident that the three terms around which this volume centres do not stay entirely distinct but bleed into one another. Just as paranoia is viewed as both a psychological condition and a modernist literary tool, psychoanalysis more broadly is seen as an external paradigm that influences literature. At the same time, psychoanalysis is both an agent of narrative production and variation and a form of scientific advancement that promotes human mechanisation. Mechanisation likewise is a scientific, an industrial, and a literary-psychological mode. This effect constitutes the volume's strength and weakness. On the one hand, it allows Gaedtke to use the three themes (literary, psychological, and scientific) with a creative interchangeability that allows for new and exciting critical insights. On the other hand, because this tendency to merge the volume's central nodes is not stated explicitly (at least, not until the very last pages), the book's critical argument can at times feel unfocused or convoluted.

The first chapter of this study centres on Wyndham Lewis's uncanny purgatorial novel *The Childermass* (1928), which Gaedtke dubs 'a satirical *reductio ad absurdum* of the doctrines of behaviorism [and] psychoanalysis' (37). According to Gaedtke, Lewis's novel offers a satire of these fields, thereby performing a rejection of the posthumanist cultural development of his day. In *The Childermass*, psychological theory, even more so than industrialisation or natural-science innovation, reduces the modern subject to the state of an automaton. The second chapter concerns the works of Mina Loy and Eveline Waugh. Loy's *Insel* stages a history of psychoanalysis which, Gaedtke argues, gestures towards a preference for the plurality of interpretive psychoanalytic possibilities. This position is substantiated by Loy's reference to psychoanalytic theories of intersubjectivity that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theories which negate much of the formalistic rigidity of early psychoanalysis. The author foregrounds the resemblance between science and psychoanalytic theory in this work, turning to Waugh's handling of psychotic and fictional realms which serve as representations of mental illness.

This drawing together of the psychotic and the fictional continues into Chapter Three, which discusses narratives written by Muriel Spark and Anna Kavan that are constructed as memoirs of mental illness. Spark's *The Comforters* features the ultimate amalgamation of fiction, machinery, and psychosis: it depicts a protagonist who hallucinates the sounds of a typing machine that narrates and thereby controls her actions. *Asylum Piece*, by Kavan, is composed of semiautonomous vignettes which render the experience of persecution-delusions. Gaedtke describes the ways in which these technological delusions reflect the particular modernity of the narrator's madness. Chapter Four, on which I will focus shortly, centres on Flann O'Brien's work, while the final chapter in the volume ties Beckett's well documented fascination

with mental illness into the book's overarching claim. Gaedtke posits that Beckett's 'representations of psychic deterioration and cognitive disorder often manifest as uncanny mechanisations of the body and mind' (154), adding further that Beckett's 'experimentation with electronic media such as the radio' paves his 'way forward in his career long exploration of [...] mental illness' (154). Gaedtke brings forth an interesting parallel between the first and final authors of the volume: if Lewis sought to escape the mechanised depersonalisation of biological psychiatry, Beckett instead, in his famous antics of superior failure, delves head-first into the 'dark zones' of psychiatric mental-mechanisation and depersonalisation, finding there his own rich definition of mental illness and intellectual disability.

The O'Brien Chapter of this study, touching first on *The Third Policeman* and then on *The Dalkey Archive*, opens with the assertion that 'if 20<sup>th</sup>-century science could sleep, it would dream [the] world' (127) of *The Parish*. This claim immediately hints at Gaedtke's approach to the relationship between cognition and science in the novel's purgatorial realm: it is science that haunts the subconscious of this novel, and scientific terror which the novel's psyche attempts to diffuse. While not altogether an original outlook on the techno-psychological connection in *The Third Policeman*,<sup>1</sup> this opening does lay a solid foundation for the chapter's many insightful contributions to the field. In contrast to the 'science of psychology' identified in Loy's work, which aims to conceptualise the progress and formation of psychological theory, *The Third Policeman* performs 'a psychology of science' (128) that interrogates the ways in which scientific innovations alter our psychology, generating 'the unarticulated fantasies and anxieties through which new accounts of matter, mind, and temporality are culturally absorbed' (128).<sup>2</sup> This insight sheds new light on the purgatorial workings of *The Parish*, which gather steam in the progressive assimilation of scientific theory into modern consciousness.

Several ideas developed in this section will not be novel to avid Flanneurs. One example is the claim that 'O'Brien's work often suggests that [a] series of identities is an infinite regression that does not end with a final, authentic, private person' (129). Another is the suggestion that O'Brien's work 'reserves no sense of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Keith Booker famously comments on the farcical and detrimental role of scientific inquiry in the novel, in his 'Science, Philosophy, and *The Third Policeman*: Flann O'Brien and the Epistemology of Futility,' *South Atlantic Review* 56, no. 4 (November 1991), 37–56. Jack Fennell further explores the anxieties and terrors which are associated with science in O'Brien's works, in 'Ireland's Enough and Time: Brian O'Nolan's Science Fiction,' in Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and Werner Huber (eds), *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 36–40.

<sup>2</sup> This purgatorial function is not to be confused with Latour's 'work of purification,' also mentioned in this chapter as a part of the modernist project which O'Brien satirises in his fiction. Gaedtke correctly asserts that in his purgatorial poetics, O'Brien sets out to assimilate rather than to purify.

authentic purity,' rendering threats of hybridity and contamination, and the paranoia that they provoke, as 'always already defused' (129). These well established ideas do, however, lead Gaedtke towards a deeper understanding of the desperate paranoid logic of O'Brien's work. Gaedtke intriguingly posits that O'Brien sees the mechanisation of mankind as a metaphor for the way in which scientific inquiry engages in the futile attempt to rid ontology from its agents of irrationality. He thereby convincingly argues that it is this 'purification' of the irrational – not the indecipherability of science – that O'Brien finally satirises through the human-mechanisation abundant in his works.

Gaedtke's claim regarding the psychological threat of the sexualised bicycle in *The Third Policeman* serves as an example of his creative understanding of the connection between mechanisation and psychology in the late-modernist novel. He argues that the anxiety regarding cultural shifts in women's rights together with the nascent destabilisation of gender roles occurring in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is projected onto the machine of the bicycle as a seemingly foreign source of societal contamination which really stands for an anxiety stemming from within the collective unconscious. This is an interesting point to consider as it sheds light on the reversible relationship between technology and psychology offered by Gaedtke's research: not only are psychological narratives needed in order to assimilate the fast-paced changing world brought about by science, but mechanisation itself is put to use in modernist narratives via psychological projection and assimilation which allow the modern subject to deal with internal and societal anxieties.

Gaedtke's research draws comfortably on O'Brien criticism from the 1970's and 1990's, and while it also references one or two works published in the last decades, the chapter would have benefitted from a wider conversation with recent O'Brien scholarship. An engagement with Keith Hopper's and Maebh Long's work would have contributed to the discussion, and it is particularly noticeable that the latter's *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, which includes a detailed analysis of both the role of women in O'Brien's Ireland and the sexualised bicycle discussed in the chapter, is not mentioned by Gaedtke.<sup>3</sup>

The volume's conclusion at last foregrounds the sometime lack of a clear distinction between scientific and cultural truths. Moreover, it echoes the book's attempts to sketch the different ways in which humanist, narratological, scientific, and psychological ideas 'transect and intertwine' (190) in the works of the modernist

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, revised 2nd edn, J. Hillis Miller (foreword) (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009); Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

acquired through a training in the humanities.’<sup>4</sup> Through his argument regarding the interrelation between the literary, the cultural, and the scientific, Gaedtke identifies not only that psychological modes enrich literary cultural production, but also that narrative competency and narrative theory have ‘much to contribute to ongoing debates over the understandability of nonnormative minds’ (191). This conclusion strikes me as a highly welcome one, as it emphasises the contribution of the humanities not only to cultural change but also to the collective assimilation of scientific and even technological ideas, foregrounding the importance of narrative competency at the heart of clinical, societal, and psychological progress.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton (trans.) (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Qtd. in Gaedtke, 293.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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