



The Parish Review
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Mina M. Đurić, 'Theoretical Perspectives on the Theme of Distance: Report on 110 Myles: Flann O'Brien at a Distance, An Online Symposium, 26–28 July 2021,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 1–7.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.6567>



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Theoretical Perspectives on the Theme of Distance: Report on 110 Myles: Flann O'Brien at a Distance, An Online Symposium, 26–28 July 2021

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Report on the 110 Myles: Flann O'Brien at a Distance online Symposium, 26–28 July 2021.

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Excellent talks, brilliant keynote lectures, and enthusiastic discussions marked the online symposium *110 Myles: Flann O'Brien at a Distance*, held in July 2021 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of The International Flann O'Brien Society (IFOBS). Over the past decade, IFOBS members have enriched scholarship on Brian O'Nolan through ten issues of *The Parish Review* and in three edited collections from Cork University Press.¹ These publications gather, in part, the work presented at the society's five previous conferences, which were dedicated to the themes of legacy (Vienna, 2011), authority (Rome, 2013), metamorphosis (Prague, 2015), performance (Salzburg, 2017), and palimpsests (Dublin, 2019). This year's online gathering gave attendees the opportunity to explore the theme of distance in O'Nolan's writing through a range of theoretical perspectives.

Joseph Brooker opened the proceedings with a talk on 'Brian O'Nolan's Distance from John Millington Synge,' which drew on archival materials to re-investigate the author's relationship to Synge and the Irish revival and to explore O'Nolan's writing as a polemical space designed to create distance from cultural predecessors. Next in the opening panel, Jack Fennell shed new light on rarely investigated themes in O'Nolan's theatrical work – ranging from murder and misogyny to Irish fascist movements – by addressing the influence of the French Grand Guignol theatrical movement on Myles na gCopaleen's *An Scian* and *The Handsome Carvers*. The possibility of distance from influence, and whether every distance is always a mediation of influence, raised intriguing questions in the Q&A session that followed.

The issue of influence raises, in turn, the question of periodisation and area studies. How many modernisms can one discover in a single national tradition? Is there a clear and fixed modernist canon of world literature and how might we assess our own contemporary position in relation to distant modernist perspectives? These were some of the thought-provoking questions raised during the panel on Irish modernisms featuring talks by Catherine Flynn, John Greaney, and Tamara Radak. Flynn encouraged us to rethink O'Nolan's modernist attitudes to public discourse through his engagements with popular culture and the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. Drawing on Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova's approaches to the study of world literature, Greaney placed *At Swim-Two-Birds* within the context of global modernism to reconsider the specifics of Flann O'Brien's modernist distance. Tamara Radak closed out the session by offering a tantalising introduction to the recently published Bloomsbury collection *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*.

¹ *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork University Press, 2014); *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork University Press, 2017), and *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg, and Paul Fagan (Cork University Press, 2020).

The modernist typology of the eschatological laugh was the main idea of Paul Fagan's rich and comprehensive talk on 'Flann O'Brien's Laughing Apocalypse,' which approached O'Nolan's narrative techniques from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's and Julia Kristeva's writing on the carnivalesque. On the same panel, Maebh Long's talk developed a compelling historicist reading of 'Influenza Epidemics and *The Dalkey Archive*.' Motivated by the critical medical humanities and a COVID-inspired view on pandemic representations in literature, Long's research connected themes of science and health to offer new possibilities for medical interpretations of literature.

The representation of nonhuman bodies was the subject of several papers delivered on the second day of the symposium. Two talks addressed the theme specifically through *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, O'Nolan's stage adaptation of Karel and Josef Čapek's *The Insect Play*. In 'Entomological Modernism, Automata, and the Nonhuman in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*,' Lisa Fitzgerald situated the play's anthropomorphised insect characters within the context of mechanised European wartime theatre and reflected on how to play an insect on the stage. In 'Parasites: Signal and Noise in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*,' Tobias W. Harris combined knowledge of biology, information technology, philosophy, and sociology to develop a parallel between the noise of a parasite according to Michel Serres's work and the sounds of O'Nolan's *Insect Play*.

Elsewhere, Einat Adar's research on the literary characteristics of otherness and becoming-other was predicated on the intriguing relation between man-train and man-seal transformations in 'John Duffy's Brother' and *An Béal Bocht*. John Conlan explored the tensions between post-pastoral and postcolonial methodologies through the image of air in *The Third Policeman*. Conlan's paper brought together the philosophical concept of vitalism and the sociological theory of endocolonisation, which strengthened the idea of circulation in readings of O'Brien's novel. Christin M. Mulligan discussed abhuman transgression within the ecosystem of language and the socioeconomic matter of folklore narratives in *An Béal Bocht*. Taken together, these investigations into the intersections between environmental, nonhuman, and technological spheres revealed promising new perspectives for understanding the translatability of different phenomena in O'Nolan's writing.

Continuing the theme of technology, several panels offered dynamic discussions on intermedia connections in and between O'Nolan's works. Joseph LaBine situated O'Nolan within a multimedia network of Irish literature, literary debates, and reviews in radio programmes. Dealing with the gaps between academic and commercial approaches to O'Brien studies, Tobias W. Harris revealed his plans for a Flann O'Brien podcast, which he hopes will appeal to different types of audiences and present varied research. As the speakers in this panel made abundantly clear, O'Nolan's oeuvre invites

us to reflect on the changing of poetic paradigms between 20th-century modernism and 21st-century digital modernism.

The aesthetics of distance and digital forms, as well as questions of censorship, were the focus of research presented by Ryan McHale, Elliott Mills, and Christopher Deliso. Reviewing connections between topographical narration and aesthetic theories, McHale considered the (post)modernist (dis)integration of the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The distance between the period of writing and the time of publishing, as well as the anachronic tendencies of scholarship on *The Third Policeman*, was the subject of Mills's talk, while Deliso drew on O'Nolan's *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns to ask how it is possible to react to censorship as well as what it means poetically to reconstruct the circumstance of censorship. The distance of aesthetics during 20th-century art history and the aesthetics of distance in our current pandemic period made for an intriguing symbiosis of theoretical phenomena in the presented talks.

Brian Ó Conchubhair, Thomas O'Grady, and Bruce Stewart examined the gaps in our knowledge of O'Nolan's biography as well as that of his family. While the riddle of O'Nolan's family heritage was discussed by Ó Conchubhair, O'Grady looked at Galloping Green in Dublin as a biographical and literary heterotopia and heterochronia. Cultural nostalgia, ethics, and the interference of different narrative procedures were investigated in Stewart's paper, which explored the function of the Royal Irish Constabulary in the imaginary of *The Third Policeman* as an index of O'Nolan's attitudes towards the state of which he was a civil servant. These approaches demonstrated the continued necessity of new biographical research on Flann O'Brien.

A roundtable on a special issue of *The Parish Review* dedicated to intersections of form and identity in O'Nolan's writing, chaired by Eleanor Careless of the Open Library of Humanities, presented an altogether different approach to the relationship between pseudonymity and biography in O'Nolan's work. In his role as guest editor, Scott Eric Hamilton explained the special issue's focus on the divergent and interrelated styles of O'Nolan's various pseudonyms and personae. Brian Doherty investigated the poetics of pseudonyms and explored the possibilities of psychoanalytical approaches to distance between O'Nolan's more controlled Myles persona and the uncontrolled texts of Flann O'Brien. The distinction between Myles na gCopaleen's and Flann O'Brien's approaches to intellectual narration and linguistic class signifiers were considered in Maggie Glass's paper. Rodney Sharkey interrogated the textual relations of late modernism through the themes of irony and identity in O'Nolan's work and Anthony Cronin's fiction. Vivid and open-minded comments in the ensuing discussion of pseudonyms and literary style confirmed the value of *The Parish Review* as a springboard for important critical conversations and debate in the field.

Two new books received special attention during this symposium. *Modern Literature and the Death Penalty, 1890–1950* by Katherine Ebury was introduced by Ruben Borg. The literary obsession with death and culturological, political, sociological, eschatological, and juridical approaches to the concept of the death penalty in literature was the focus of Borg's dialogue with Ebury. Alannah Hopkin read from *A Very Strange Man: A Memoir of Aidan Higgins*, before engaging in a conversation with Keith Hopper on biographical (non)distance from autofictional and autoreferential moments, which presented a deep engagement with representations of age and dementia.

Definitions of the rising field of Flann O'Brien studies and its future roles in critical and theoretical debates concerning comparative and world literature, the nonhuman studies, and production studies, were proposed by the three keynote lectures: 'Flann O'Brien at the Border: Readings, Forms and Futures' by Nicholas Allen, 'Writing with Air in *The Third Policeman*' by Julie Bates, and 'Myles na gCopaleen at the Gate: *The Insect Play*' by Ondřej Pilný. In his illuminating lecture based on some thrilling archival findings from the Gate Theatre, Pilný interpreted O'Nolan's adaptations and transgressions of the Čapeks' *Insect Play* from the angle of the politics of literature. Allen explored the (un)told narratives of the Irish northern border and posed significant questions for the ways in which Flann O'Brien studies has tended to treat the author as a Dublin insider, despite his origins in Strabane, Co. Tyrone. Challenging the ways in which we tend to think of migration as only occurring across national borders, and not within them, can profitably challenge old critical narratives about O'Nolan as the stay-at-home writer in contrast to the self-exiled Joyce and Beckett. In her lecture on the air in *The Third Policeman*, Bates performed a reading of the winds in the novel and provided insights into literary depictions of medicalised and weaponised air. Her conclusions on the politicisation of air, as well as methodologies of reading with an environmental mind and literary strategies of dealing with human fragility, were a highlight of the event.

The warm opening, moderating, and closing remarks of the organisers – Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Maebh Long, with event management by Eugenie Theuer – reminded attendees of the fruitful and successful decade enjoyed by the International Flann O'Brien Society. As the symposium drew to a close, the participants joyfully, if virtually, embraced the announcement of winners of the 2021 International Flann O'Brien Society Awards. Theuer announced that the Best Book-Length Publication 2019–20 Prize had been awarded to Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan's edited collection *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020) and that the recipient of the Best Essay-Length Publication 2019–20 award was Catherine Flynn, for her essay 'Everybody Here Is under Arrest: Translation and Politics in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.'

In the collegial and friendly atmosphere of debates on the translation, adaptation, and critical assessment of Flann O'Brien's works, the participants elaborated on some new and future theoretical approaches for reading O'Nolan's texts. The Flann O'Brien Symposium in Boston in April 2022, announced through a magnificent conference trailer by Liam Weir, Christian Dupont, and Joseph Nugent, will no doubt open up many fresh interpretative perspectives.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

