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Note: Reflections on the First Decade of the International Flann O'Brien Society

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2021 marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of both the International Flann O'Brien Society and its peer-reviewed journal *The Parish Review*. The work that has been undertaken by the society and its members in this decade has significantly expanded the scope and profile of Flann O'Brien studies, but also changed how we understand the author Brian O'Nolan and his works in their historical, social, political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts, as well as their legacy to contemporary letters and theory. This note uses the occasion of this anniversary to take stock of these changes and to consider what avenues lie open to the future of the field.

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How well the crowd in this town would never think of forming a Myles na gCopaleen Society! It'd be such a ... a fine tribute to an old man! And with a statue in College Green, my back turned to Trinity! (I still may have the figure to wear a stone beard and stone frock coat).¹

2021 marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of both the International Flann O'Brien Society and its peer-reviewed journal *The Parish Review*. The work that has been undertaken by the society and its members in this decade has significantly expanded the scope and profile of Flann O'Brien studies, but also changed how we understand the author Brian O'Nolan and his works in their historical, social, political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts, as well as their legacy to contemporary letters and theory. In this note, I want to use the occasion of this anniversary to take stock of these changes and to consider what avenues lie open to the future of the field.

Where We Stood

The International Flann O'Brien Society was formed in July 2011, at *100 Myles*, the Vienna Centre for Irish Studies's Flann O'Brien Centenary Conference. In his opening keynote address, Keith Hopper took stock of the three waves that O'Brien studies had witnessed to that point:

1. the testimonial, biographical, and anecdotal wave of criticism commenced by O'Nolan's colleagues, collaborators, publishers, contemporaries, family members, and close friends in the 1970s, which takes stock, in the aftermath of the author's death, of his complicated legacy as a comic critic and documenter of mid-century Irish culture²;
2. a formalist strand of criticism, emerging in the 1980s and taking root in the 1990s, that draws attention to O'Nolan's metafictional experiments with literary form and his status as an influential proto-postmodernist in his deconstructions of metanarratives and carnivalesque pastiches of novelistic genres³;

¹ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (28 December 1944): 3.

² See, for instance, *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe Ltd, 1973); Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *Óige an dearthár .i. Myles na gCopaleen* (Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teoranta, 1973); John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975); Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails: Bohemian Dublin in the Fifties and Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

³ See, non-exhaustively, Rüdiger Imhof, 'Chinese Box: Flann O'Brien in the Metafiction of Alasdair Gray, John Fowles, and Robert Coover,' *Éire-Ireland* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 64–79; Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Kelly Anspaugh, 'Flann O'Brien: Postmodern Judas,' *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 4 (1992): 11–16; Thomas F. Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992); Kim McMullen, 'Culture as Colloquy: Flann O'Brien's Postmodern Dialogue with Irish Tradition,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 62–84; M.

3. a historicising turn, following the rise of Irish studies and postcolonialism in the 1990s and in line with the interventions of cultural studies and the new modernist studies in the 21st century, which returns both the fiction and the newspaper columns to the social and historical contexts that informed them.⁴

In her conference report for *100 Myles*, published in the inaugural issue of *The Parish Review*, Erika Mihálycsa notes Hopper's implication that O'Nolan's centenary marked the beginning of a new wave, in which he foresaw

three possible directions for O'Nolan studies: a focus on the author's contingencies with, and influences on, local and international metafictionists, counter-realists, and pataphysicians; a turn to his bilingual work and his creation of 'Gaelic postmodernism,' including a call to arms to re-translate *An Béal Bocht*; a 'TransFlann' project to encompass the gains of translations and adaptations of O'Nolan's work.⁵

The field has in many ways followed the broad trajectories set out in Hopper's remarks; in particular, in its acknowledgement of an expanded network of O'Nolan's local and international literary and intellectual debts beyond James Joyce as well as in its greater engagement with his bilingual writing. However, some of these avenues are yet to be rigorously pursued – Anglophone critics are still working with Patrick Power's 1973 translation of *The Poor Mouth* and, despite notable isolated exceptions, translations and adaptations of the work have not been rigorously explored.⁶ Most remarkable, perhaps, are the directions the field has taken which are not anticipated in Hopper's delivered remarks or Mihálycsa's report, as O'Nolan and his writing have become central both to 21st-century critical and theoretical debates – from gender studies to continental theory, from biopolitics to posthumanism – and to new critical conceptualisations and narratives of (Irish) modernism.

Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995).

⁴ See, non-exhaustively, Keith Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist: A Study of Flann O'Brien* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2002); Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005); Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008); 'Is it about a bicycle?' *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).

⁵ Erika Mihálycsa, 'Report: 100 Myles: The International Flann O'Brien Centenary Conference (Vienna 2011),' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 23–28, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3338>.

⁶ See, for instance, Jack Fennell, 'Lost in Flannslation: Reading and Translating the Early Work of Brian Ó Nualláin,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 43–50, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.2912>; Erika Mihálycsa, 'Four-Handed Chirping of Birds or, The Adventure of Two Hungarian Translators with Flann O'Brien's Book-Web,' *Estudios Irlandeses* 8 (2013): 65–78; Álvaro Marín García, 'The Strange Case of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen: A Master of English Language Translated from Gaelic into Spanish,' *The Translator* 24, no. 3 (2018): 209–219, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2018.1476798>.

What became evident from the Vienna centenary conference, as well from the successes of centenary symposia and events in Dublin, Singapore, and Sydney, was that there was an emergent, but dispersed, community of O’Nolan enthusiasts, critics, scholars, and cultural practitioners who lacked the necessary networks for further encounters, but also the platforms required for centralising and exchanging information and research about the author. As well as the society, a significant outcome of the Vienna conference was the foundation of *The Parish Review* (TPR) which was intended to facilitate these needs. In the early days, with Ruben Borg and myself as the series editors, the journal’s ambitions were modest: a PDF circulated among society members of news, opinions, reports, reviews, letters, and questions society members posed about the many gaps in our knowledge about O’Nolan’s life and works. However, already from the second issue it became clear that the journal was destined to become much more than this. The Winter 2013 number was a fully peer-reviewed special issue guest-edited by Jennika Baines dedicated to the theme of ‘Flann O’Brien and the Archive.’⁷ It was our good fortune that Jennika accepted the invitation to become one of the general editors. TPR quickly transformed into a fully peer-reviewed journal, boasting scholarship which reconsiders the oeuvre through a broad range of historical, aesthetic, and theoretical lenses, and addressing themes ranging from O’Nolan’s archives and libraries to his intersections of form and identity.

Indeed, it became increasingly apparent that the format of a PDF circulated internally among members was a disservice to the high standard of scholarship being undertaken by the contributors – this was work that deserved to be read and cited by a much wider academic community – and we started the search for a press that would give a home to the journal. Joseph Brooker suggested the *Open Library of Humanities* (OLH), and we were immediately struck by the ways in which their open-access model aligned with the society’s ethos of removing barriers to participation (from its inception, IFOBS has never charged for membership or for copies of TPR). The first fully open-access issue was published by the OLH in 2020, and all back issues were archived to the platform under the expert guidance and support of the OLH’s technical team and Rose Harris-Birtill, and later Eleanor Careless.⁸ This transition also marked the departure of Jennika, who had been so pivotal to TPR’s growth over these years and in the journal’s transition to the OLH, with leading O’Nolan scholar Maebh Long replacing her as a general editor.

⁷ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2013), available at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/issue/284/info/>.

⁸ Find all back issues of *The Parish Review* at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/issues/>.

Since the inaugural event in Vienna, society conferences have been hosted by Università Roma Tre in 2013, on the theme of Flann O'Brien's 'problems with authority'; by Charles University Prague in 2015, on the theme of metamorphosis in his writing; by Salzburg University in 2017 on his diverse modes of masked performance; and by University College Dublin in 2019, on the theme of palimpsests in his work. These conferences have resulted in a series of edited volumes from Cork University Press which have drawn rigorous scholarly and critical attention to specific aspects, motifs, and themes in O'Nolan's writing: *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* (2014) interrogates critical commonplaces about O'Nolan's work and draws new attention to the wider corpus; *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority* (2017) explores the anti-authoritarian temperament integral to O'Nolan's satirical style; *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour* (2020) examines encounters between the body and the law, death and the comic spirit, in O'Nolan's art. These collections have facilitated an unprecedented level of focussed inquiry into specific dimensions of O'Nolan's writing and demonstrated the viability and vitality of his work to contemporary critical and theoretical debates. At the same time, they have proven how these analytical frameworks can contribute to new understandings of and insights into his work.

The call for papers for the VI International Flann O'Brien Society conference at Boston College (6–10 April 2022) has been announced, which marks another milestone for the society, as its first conference held outside of Europe.⁹ Originally planned for April 2021, to mark the society's decennial, the Boston conference was delayed by a year, owing to the known circumstances. So that we would have an opportunity to meet and for members to share their work during the pandemic, the society held the online symposium *110 Myles*, in July of 2021, to discuss 'distance' in O'Nolan's works. As the week's talks and discussions showed, the theme is apt not only for our current Zoom-plagued lives, but also for this juncture in O'Nolan studies, as we pause to assess the field by gazing at the horizons behind and before us.

Since the establishment of IFOBS and *The Parish Review* in 2011, then, O'Nolan studies has seen a series of shifts in the reception of the author's writing, as critics have assiduously engaged and built upon the findings of pioneering critics, ranging from Anne Clissmann, Rüdiger Imhof, and Anthony Cronin, to Sue Asbee, Thomas F. Shea, M. Keith Booker, Keith Hopper, Joseph Brooker, and Carol Taaffe, as well as many others. This work has resulted in not only a renaissance but also a revolution in O'Nolan studies. The subtle ways in which we now see O'Nolan and his work in new lights are many and varied, but I would like to take note of a couple of particularly striking ones here.

⁹ For more details on the conference and its call for papers see: <https://sites.bc.edu/flannobriensix/>.

boundaries of the O’Nolan canon, opening new paths to research and offering a greater understanding of the contexts and complexities of his fuller body of work.

The distance of the present view from the field’s origins can be measured by comparing it against contemporary reviews of Anne Clissmann’s *Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (1975), the first critical monograph written on O’Nolan (the second would not come until Breandán Ó Conaire’s *Myles na Gaeilge* in 1986). In a 1977 review, Rüdiger Imhof critiques the attention Clissmann gives to the works in O’Nolan’s canon which, ‘because of their ephemeral and parochial nature, do not warrant extensive interpretation,’²² while Vincent Mahon, a year later and in the same spirit, chastises the space Clissmann gives to the study of the newspaper column, ‘for if Flann O’Brien is to be judged an important writer it must be on the strength of his novels.’²³ While admitting, of course, that the achievements of the first two novels remain central testing grounds for contemporary discussions and theorisations of O’Nolan’s writing, Imhof and Mahon’s insistence that the critic’s task is to advocate for the author’s ‘prominent place among [...] novelists’ in the modernist and ‘comical experimental’ traditions by sidelining the vast majority of what he actually wrote, rings hollow today.²⁴ This is especially so, given the extent to which contemporary criticism has come to conceive of *Cruiskeen Lawn* as O’Nolan’s magnum opus and now acknowledges the column’s breadth of intertextual allusions, subtlety of nuanced cultural critiques, and innovation of formal and compositional strategies.

A lack of awareness of, or a critical bias against, O’Nolan’s wider corpus goes a long way to explaining Hugh Kenner’s evaluation, in 1983, that by the end of the author’s life, ‘a great future lay behind him’: ‘Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the column? For ruin is the word. So much promise has seldom accomplished so little.’²⁵ One of the consequences of the 20th-century critical paradigm in which O’Nolan was categorised under labels such as ‘unfulfilled potential’ or even ‘wasted talent,’ was a permanently tangential relation to ‘modernism’ and that rubric’s critical capital. A certain mid-century understanding of modernism as an internationalist rejection of the local and the parochial is evident in Kenner’s influential estimation that, in contrast to

Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies 3, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 35–52, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3209>; Thomas Jackson Rice, ‘Inversion and Complementarity in “Two in One”’, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 53–64, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3216>.

²² Rüdiger Imhof, rev. of Anne Clissmann, *Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings*, *Études irlandaises* 2 (1977): 266.

²³ Vincent Mahon, rev. of Anne Clissmann, *Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings*, *The Modern Language Review* 73, no. 2 (April 1978): 420.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 255.

his self-exiled compatriots Joyce and Beckett (the international Irish modernists *par excellence*), Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen were 'not bottled for export.'²⁶ Indeed, much of the scholarship that did appear on O'Nolan in the second half of the 20th century evidenced an overly narrow focus on his conceived Bloomian 'anxiety of influence' vis-à-vis Joyce, which steadily reduced O'Nolan's responses to Joyce 'as the foot-stamping of a frustrated apprentice unable to better his literary master.'²⁷

Informed by Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell's edited collection *Flann O'Brien and Modernism* (2014), critics have come to see O'Nolan's relationship to modernism in a completely new light. Scholarship over the last decade has expanded the constellation of avant-garde movements and writers with whom O'Nolan engaged and thus demonstrated the untapped potential of his mercurial, multi-genre writing for the future of new modernist inquiry. Increasingly, we see O'Nolan's innovations as resonating with modernist manifestoes,²⁸ avant-garde print cultures,²⁹ and continental aesthetic and intellectual movements from Alfred Jarry's pataphysics³⁰ to the Frankfurt School.³¹ A key aid in this task is Adam Winstanley and Catherine Ahearn's publication of a full inventory of O'Nolan's library at Boston College in the Fall 2013 issue of *The Parish Review*,³² and their special issue of the journal in Fall 2014 dedicated to exploring new avenues of inquiry opened up by some of the oddities it contains, such as Roger Burlingame's *Henry Ford* (1957) and Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) and *The Future of Man* (1964).³³ At the same time, in line with the new modernist dismantling of high/low literary binaries, O'Nolan's writing is

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁷ Joshua Esty, 'Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the Post-Post Debate,' *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26 (October 1995): 37. For the original discussion of the 'anxiety of influence,' see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

²⁸ Julian Hanna, 'Flann O'Brien's Anti-Manifestos,' *e-Rea: Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 15, no. 2 (2018), available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.6263>.

²⁹ Tobias Harris, 'Blather, Razzle and Dada: Contextualising Brian O'Nolan's Early Journalism,' *Modernist Cultures* 14, no. 2 (2019): 151–171, available at: <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/mod.2019.0248>.

³⁰ Anthony Adams, 'Butter-Spades, Footnotes, and Omnium: *The Third Policeman* as 'Pataphysical Fiction,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 106–109; Ondřej Pilný, "'Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?": Brian O'Nolan and Pataphysics,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), *Contesting Legacies*, 156–165.

³¹ 'Flann O'Brien and the Culture Industry,' ed. Jack Fennell, special issue, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2016).

³² Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, 'An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 46–64, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3289>.

³³ Andrew V. McFeaters, 'Reassembling Ford: Time is Money in Brian O'Nolan's Brave New Ireland,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 42–55, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3119>; Robert Kiely, 'The Dalkey Archive and Pierre Teilhard de Selby,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 56–63, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3127>.

read more and more through its debts to, and conversations with, 20th-century genre fiction: Fennell has explored ‘the frequent appearances of science fiction tropes and plots’ across O’Nolan’s novels, short fiction, and columns,³⁴ while Katherine Ebury has demonstrated his debts to science popularisations and Golden Age crime fiction such as Agatha Christie.³⁵ Indeed, we need not be surprised when we read Noam Schiff, in the present issue of TPR, note that Andrew Gaedtke’s monograph *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness: Psychosis, Technology, and Narrative Worlds* (2017), ‘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.’³⁶ The past decade has brought O’Nolan and O’Nolan studies out from under the shadow of Joyce to see the fullness of the author’s debts to and engagements with a range of authors, texts, and aesthetic movements from antiquity to the 20th century.

Closer to home, Joseph Brooker has called for cultural contextual analyses that ‘pursue a more intensive, historically informed understanding of O’Nolan’ in ‘juxtaposition with his peers’ such as Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Niall Sheridan, and Niall Montgomery.³⁷ Brooker’s own work on O’Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh has led the way, and recent years have seen new intertextual and comparative readings of O’Nolan with Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Seán Ó Ríordáin, James Stephens, Brendan Behan, and Anthony Cronin, among others.³⁸ New light has been shed, too, on O’Nolan’s position

³⁴ Jack Fennell, ‘Myles In Space: Science Fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien studies* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 64.

³⁵ Katherine Ebury, ‘Physical Comedy and the Comedy of Physics in *The Third Policeman*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,’ in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 87–102; Katherine Ebury, ‘New Contexts for Confession: Brian O’Nolan, Golden Age Crime Fiction, and Theodor Reik,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 1–22, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3351>.

³⁶ Noam Schiff, ‘Review of Andrew Gaedtke, *Modernism and the Machinery of Madness: Psychosis, Technology, and Narrative Worlds*,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 1–6, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.6395>.

³⁷ Joseph Brooker, ‘Ploughmen Without Land: Flann O’Brien and Patrick Kavanagh,’ in Murphet, McDonald, and Morrell (eds.), *Flann O’Brien and Modernism*, 93–106.

³⁸ Louis de Paor, ‘Lethal in Two Languages: Narrative Form and Cultural Politics in the Fiction of Flann O’Brien and Máirtín Ó Cadhain,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction*, ed. Liam Harte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 187–203; Ian Ó Caoimh, ‘Brian Ó Nualláin agus Seán Ó Ríordáin: An Bhuneisint, an Córas Comparáide agus Bagairt na Buile,’ in *Ar an Imeach i Lár an Domhain: An Trasnú Tairseacha Staire, Teanga, Litríochts agus Cultúir*, eds. Radvan Markus, Máirín Nic Eoin, Deirdre Nic Mhathúna, Éadaoin Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Brian Ó Conchubhair, and Pádraig Ó Liatháin (Leabhar Breac, 2021); R. W. Maslen, ‘Fantastic Economies: Flann O’Brien and James Stephens,’ in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 136–151; Paul Fagan, ‘Secret Scriptures: Brendan Behan in the *Cruiskeen Lawn*,’ *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), 163–184; Rodney Sharkey, ‘A Tale of Two Tales: Irony, Identity, and the Fictions of Anthony Cronin and Brian O’Nolan,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 1–17, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3296>.

as specifically mid-century writer (the post-Emergency and pre-Lemass years having long constituted something of a critical gap in the metanarrative of Irish studies). Works such as Anna Teekell's *Emergency Writing: Irish Literature, Neutrality, and the Second World War* (2018) and Caleb Wood Richardson's *Smyllie's Ireland: Protestants, Independence, and the Man Who Ran the Irish Times* (2019) demonstrate the value and potential of reading the author less as the lonely pioneer of postmodern forms, than as a part of a particular, historically situated network of artists and institutions.³⁹ Closer to home still, a notable development in this area is the resituation of O'Nolan within his own family of writers, with Ian Ó Caoimh, for instance, casting much-needed light on O'Nolan's writerly relation with his brothers Ciarán and Caoimhín, and Fionntán de Brún and Antain Mag Shamhráin's 2019 collection on the life and work of the broader Ó Nualláin clan exploring the question of a family style.⁴⁰

This refined local perspective has gone hand-in-hand with increased critical attention to O'Nolan's Irish-language writing, including a special issue of *The Parish Review* dedicated to the 75th anniversary of *An Béal Bocht*, guest-edited by Daniel Curran and Eimear Thornton.⁴¹ Adrian Naughton and Louis de Paor have returned to the young O'Nolan's master's thesis for a greater understanding of intersections of medieval Irish nature poetry and modernist thought in his aesthetic project⁴² – a avenue which has been further explored in Tobias Harris's analysis of *Bhark i bPrágrais*, O'Nolan's seldom discussed 1938 Irish-language parody of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.⁴³ Rather than marking his work as a purely parochial concern, these inquiries show O'Nolan to be central to the view, expressed by Barry McCrea, that the increasingly precarious position of minority languages in the early 20th century means that the choice to

³⁹ Anna Teekell, *Emergency Writing: Irish Literature, Neutrality, and the Second World War* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Caleb Wood Richardson, *Smyllie's Ireland: Protestants, Independence, and the Man Who Ran the Irish Times* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2019).

⁴⁰ Ian Ó Caoimh, 'An Tríú Leathchúpla: Caoimhín Ó Nualláin, Colúnaí,' *American Journal of Irish Studies* 13 (2016): 115–130; Ian Ó Caoimh, 'The Ideal and the Ironic: Incongruous Irelands in *An Béal Bocht*, *No Laughing Matter*, and Ciarán Ó Nualláin's *Óige an Dearthár*,' in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 152–168; *Ón nGruagach Gréagach go Myles na gCopaleen: Saol agus Saothar Mhuintir Nualláin*, eds. Fionntán de Brún and Antain Mag Shamhráin (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 2019).

⁴¹ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), available at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/issue/288/info/>.

⁴² Adrian Naughton, "'More of your fancy kiss-my-hand": A Further Note on Brian O'Nolan's *Nádúir-fhíliocht na Gaedhilge*,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 11–23, available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.2910>; Louis de Paor, "'a scholar manqué'? Further Notes on Brian Ó Nualláin's Engagement with Early Irish Literature,' in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 189–203.

⁴³ Tobias Harris, "'sprakin sea Djoytsch?'" Brian Ó Nualláin's *Bhark i bPrágrais*, *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 217–235.

O’Nolan to reflect on ‘the uncertainty of late Irish modernism,’⁵⁵ and Erika Mihálycsa considering the author vis-à-vis ‘the disenchantments of late modernism.’⁵⁶ However, increasingly O’Nolan has become central to reevaluations of the critical narrative of modernism itself, in both Irish and international contexts, not despite but exactly because he is an ‘ironic modernist’ or ‘reluctant modernist,’ in Stephen’s Abblitt’s terms,⁵⁷ or ‘an anti-modernist modernist writer,’ in Borg’s turn of phrase.⁵⁸ In 2021, Flynn contributed essays on O’Nolan to two major edited monographs on the theme of Irish modernism: for the *Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism*, she returns *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s ironic stancelessness to its political and aesthetic contexts⁵⁹; in Bloomsbury’s *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*, she shows how O’Nolan’s experimental newspaper column establishes new dimensions to Irish modernism, as he redirects modernist strategies to a non-literary sphere of representation.⁶⁰ Such interventions highlight the importance of O’Nolan’s full oeuvre to an understanding of 20th-century Irish and modernist writing which ‘has grown more capacious, turning its attention to previously neglected forms.’⁶¹ Simultaneously, this work demonstrates how his writing, in turn, discloses a modernism that ‘itself is shot through with contradictory associations.’⁶² Here we think, for instance, of Ronan Crowley’s resituation of O’Nolan not in contrast to, but as part of a modernist movement that emerged from the aesthetic and cultural frameworks of the revival. Such a move, perhaps unthinkable to earlier waves of O’Nolan studies, fruitfully complicates critical narratives which see a clear-cut division between the revival and modernism, and thus makes room for more nuanced takes on O’Nolan’s body

⁵⁵ Andrew Kalaidjianin, ‘The Uncertainty of Late Irish Modernism: Flann O’Brien and Erwin Schrödinger in Dublin,’ *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism*, eds. Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 248–263.

⁵⁶ Erika Mihálycsa, ‘“Evidently of the second-hand denomination”: Flann O’Brien’s Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, and the Disenchantments of Late Modernism,’ *Joyce Studies Annual* (2020): 196–221.

⁵⁷ Stephen Abblitt, ‘The Ghost of “Poor Jimmy Joyce”: A Portrait of the Artist as a Reluctant Modernist,’ in Murphet, McDonald, and Morrell (eds.), *Flann O’Brien and Modernism*, 55, 65.

⁵⁸ Ruben Borg, ‘Reading Flann with Paul: Modernism and the Trope of Conversion,’ in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 219–229.

⁵⁹ Catherine Flynn, ‘“Put ‘Molotoff bread-basket’ into Irish, please”: *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Dada, and the Blitz,’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Irish Modernism*, eds. Maud Ellmann, Sian White, and Vicki Mahaffey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 268–283.

⁶⁰ Catherine Flynn, ‘The Full Little Jug: Flann O’Brien and the Irish Public Sphere,’ in *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*, eds. Paul Fagan, John Greaney, and Tamara Radak (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 223–236.

⁶¹ Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet, ‘Introduction,’ in Murphet, McDonald, and Morrell (eds.), *Flann O’Brien and Modernism*, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 5.

of work as uniquely testing the old lines between stay-at-home conservatism and international experimentalism.⁶³

Increasingly, we find that those very qualities which had previously marginalised O’Nolan’s broader output in a novel-centric field – its parochialism, its ephemerality, its place as part of grubby, everyday print and media culture – now push him to the fore of these debates. This critical reappraisal has found in the writer’s very marginality, liminality, and slipperiness a fruitful site in which to explore afresh questions of authorship, the ideologies of taste, mid-20th century Irish cultural politics, critical commonplaces about modernism, and 21st-century theoretical debates about the literary body.

Where We Are Going

O’Nolan’s riotous UCD campus novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* presents the formation of dubious societies as the backbone of academic life:

The people who attended the College had banded themselves into many private associations [...]. The cultural societies were diverse in their character and aims and measured their vitality by the number of hooligans and unprincipled persons they attracted to their deliberations.⁶⁴

However, I am pleased to say, in my experience, IFOBS’s vitality has been measured by the association of an altogether different calibre of character. We are extremely proud of the society’s achievements through its events and publications, which we feel have provided badly needed networks, platforms, and forums for a vibrant community – yet, what each of these milestones have in common is that they have been made possible and immeasurably enriched by the tireless work of all the people who make the field such an exciting one in which to work and collaborate. Having collaborated closely with so many of the society’s members over the last decade on conferences, book collections, journal editions, launches, screenings, performances, and a million little everyday details in the running of the society, I have been constantly amazed by their ingenuity, generosity, and good will. Whatever gains IFOBS has made in Irish and modernist studies, it has been in most part by creating platforms for encounter and exchange and getting out of these brilliant researchers’ way.

⁶³ Ronan Crowley, ‘Phwat’s in a nam? Brian O’Nolan as a Late Revivalist,’ in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Problems with Authority*, 119–135. See also Michael McAteer, ‘Law and Violence in Ferguson’s *Congal*, Yeats’s *The Herne’s Egg*, and O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*,’ in Borg and Fagan (eds.), *Gallows Humour*, 197–216.

⁶⁴ Flann O’Brien, *The Complete Novels: At Swim-Two-Birds, The Third Policeman, The Poor Mouth, The Hard Life, The Dalkey Archive*, introd. Keith Donohue (London: Everyman, 2007), 44.

It is evident to me that the high standards of research, scholarship, and critical debate set over the past decade will continue to be raised. To my knowledge, at least three volumes of essays are currently in production, on O’Nolan’s writing for performance, on his palimpsestic translations and intertexts, and on his representations of nonhuman animals, environments, and machines. A special issue of *The Parish Review* on O’Nolan and the civil service is forthcoming in the spring and submissions continue to be accepted on a rolling basis.⁶⁵ Beyond these collections and special issues, a wealth of exciting work lies before us: columns, short stories, and diverse non-fiction pieces remain to be identified, collected, annotated, and translated; initial acts of exposure remain to be supplemented with close study; O’Nolan’s work remains to be tested against the coordinates of new theoretical frameworks; many corners of the archive remain to be explored. Here’s to the next ten years.

⁶⁵ Submissions to *The Parish Review* can be made at the following link: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/submit/start/>.

Competing Interests

The author is the co-founder of the International Flann O'Brien Society and co-founding editor of *The Parish Review*, as well as the co-editor of a number of collections under discussion (*Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*).

