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## Review of *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, edited by Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan. Cork: Cork University Press (2020), 358 pp. Hardback, €39.00.

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*Gallows Humour* is the first study to offer a sustained focus on biopolitical themes in the work of Brian O'Nolan. With this collection, editors Borg and Fagan show how wider vistas are now clearly open for research into the post-Revival politics of the Irish writer, but also how a more refined lens on the historical and political environment that nurtured (or, indeed, stoked the ire of) O'Nolan's wit can provide tantalising new avenues for investigation. It is in this dual movement—of expanding scope and concentrated focus—that the critical merit of *Gallows Humour* lies, as it affords future scholars a wealth of novel methodologies and a multitude of exciting critical directions.

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It might seem superfluous to talk about a ‘boom’ in Flann O’Brien scholarship of late. The past ten years have witnessed an impressive output of dedicated monographs and edited volumes representing a variety of critical approaches and reflecting a rich and multi-faceted field of research. Regular gatherings of Flanneurs continue apace with a series of international symposia and workshops, from Vienna 2011 to Boston 2022, that managed to brave even the restrictions of the global pandemic (the 2020 ‘Bureaucratic Poetics’ workshop and the ‘110 Myles’ online conference of 2021 attest to the remarkable resilience of this scholarly community).

The publication of *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*<sup>1</sup> marks a watershed moment in Flann O’Brien studies. Editors Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan have assembled a collection of essays that show how the appeal of Flann studies transcends the intellectual balkanisation of the restrictive label ‘Irish Studies.’ Indeed, the wealth of scholarship in *Gallows Humour* reflects the diversity and dynamism of the field, which convincingly puts into question the too-easy applicability to O’Nolan of generic slogans like ‘postcolonial’ or ‘postmodernist.’

In the opening essay of the collection, ‘Everybody Here is under Arrest: Translation and Politics in *Cruiskeen Lawn*,’ Catherine Flynn speaks cogently to the multi-faceted nature of contemporary Flanneurism. As she writes: ‘In contrast to monumental and, often, self-monumentalising modernists, O’Nolan is a dispersed phenomenon’ (19). The ‘dispersal’ of O’Nolan’s oeuvre is significant – its distribution across different media, genre, and personae: from novels to dramas, from allegory to comedy and with a voice that ranges from that of a broadsheet hack to a prose *avant-gardiste*. Much like ‘omnium,’ the occult substance of *The Third Policeman* – an infectious and ubiquitous substance that proliferates and destabilises Irish parochial life – the protean O’Nolan destabilises familiar co-ordinates of Irishness, revealing transnational affinities. Flynn writes: ‘As the Irish literary heritage is restaged in antic form, the column reveals and asserts Ireland’s relations with distant countries which are also struggling to assert their identity and secure their survival within shifting geopolitical forces’ (20).

As any casual reader of *At Swim-Two-Birds* will realise, O’Nolan was a writer with medievalist inclinations, who was immersed in the history of the Irish language. His tales of ancient psalters and roving *púcas* reflected a penchant for archaism and mythological embellishment. O’Nolan’s excavation of the Irish language tradition always looked towards a contemporary horizon, however, and in his essay “‘Sprakin sea Djoytsch?’”: Brian Ó Nualláin’s *Bhark i bPrágrais*,’ Tobias Harris explores how pastiches of archaic Irish such as ‘Pisa Bec oc Parnabus’ gesture towards an avant-garde future

<sup>1</sup> *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020).

that might sit alongside works of linguistic pluralism like *Finnegans Wake*. The result of such innovation is a clear vision of Deleuzian 'minority literature': a cosmopolitan Gaelic modernity, unfettered from the nativist trappings of outmoded notions of *gaelachas*. With Harris's essay, *Gallows Humour* extends our insight into these facets of O'Nolan's oeuvre, as it shows how his investment in questions of Irish romanticism was matched by the sober-sided astuteness of the contemporary political observer, the intellectual daring of a post-Enlightenment scientist, and the linguistic innovativeness of a postmodern experimentalist.

The thoroughly modern and post-romantic dimension (one might call it a disenchanted one) to Flanneurism is something that *Gallows Humour* enthusiastically reminds us of. Taken as a whole, the collection adds coherence to the image that is emerging of an author with hypermodern concerns – one whose fables were a deep dive into the vertiginous depths of politics, science, and the law – a uniquely 20<sup>th</sup> century outlook that can rival that of Kafka or Borges. Much as hinge-figures like Kafka and Borges occupy a ponderous position (suspended as they are between the broad periodisations of modernism and postmodernity), O'Nolan has a similarly category-averse status. In her essay, "'The essential inherent interior essence": *The Third Policeman* and early modern ontologies,' Einat Adar draws our attention to O'Nolan's uncategorisability, specifically to the heterodox nature of O'Nolan's engagement with early modern and Enlightenment metaphysics. Here, Adar offers a convincing argument for viewing O'Nolan as an ultramodern intellectual who tends towards arch-scepticism and epistemological relativism. Crucially, Adar reminds us of the error that is continually repeated by critiques of the supposed hyper-rationalism of post-Cartesian and Enlightenment thinkers. Adar reads O'Nolan through the lens of Thomas Kuhn, and sees a body of writing inspired by the spiritualistic metaphysics of Bishop Berkeley and the ontology of Leibniz. Adar's fresh reading is a challenge to the kind of binarism that has persisted when it comes to reconciling O'Nolan's interest in the new physics (as documented by critics like Katherine Ebury)<sup>2</sup> with his supposed catholicity. This allows 'a more nuanced view of the diversity of Enlightenment thought' to emerge from our readings of the Irish writer (252).

In "'The tattered cloak of his perished skin": The Body as Costume in "Two in One," *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and *The Third Policeman*,' Yaeli Greenblatt interrogates O'Nolan's critical attitude vis-à-vis the legacy of Cartesian epistemology. Beginning with a discussion of the 'uncanny' tendency of O'Nolan to populate his fiction with dolls,

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<sup>2</sup> See Katherine Ebury, 'Physical Comedy and the Comedy of Physics in *The Third Policeman*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 87–102.

puppets, automatons and other mechanical bodies, Greenblatt proposes a reading of stories like 'Two in One' (in which a character wears the skin of a deceased person) as 'an engagement with theatricality in which one wears and inhabits the body' (132). Detecting a more-than-human turn within O'Nolan's modernism, Greenblatt describes the subversion of Cartesian mind-body dualism in O'Nolan's fiction, quoting the critics Eysteinnsson and Liska, who see modernism as 'attending to the invisible and slippery border between the inner and outer self' (132). The result of Greenblatt's analysis is a 'turn towards the body's experience,' one that 'necessitates grasping the subject not despite, but from *within*, the body' (133). Drawing on the work of Paul Fagan,<sup>3</sup> the essay offers scholars a unique appreciation of the experience of bodily 'abjection' that is central to O'Nolan's staging of the breakdown between interiority and exteriority—a state of ambiguous performativity in which, to quote Fagan, 'one is neither oneself nor one self' (134).

Much like Descartes' obsession with mind-body interaction, the fraught relationship between the mind, the body, and their political determinations, is central to the essays selected for inclusion in *Gallows Humour*. Indeed, the book is divided into three main categories of essay: 'Body Politics,' 'Failing Bodies,' and 'Bodies of Writing'—a tripartite division that lends both coherence and impact to the editorial choices that have been made. Methodologies of analysis range from biopolitics to medical humanities (Lloyd [Meadhbh] Houston, Maebh Long), and from studies of the role of violence and death in O'Nolan (Michael McAteer, Daniela Curran, Elliott Mills) to research that draws on a disability studies framework (Siobhán Purcell).

As Borg and Fagan remind us in their introduction, a key component of O'Nolan's satire is the fact that in texts like *An Béal Bocht*, the abject condition of the Irish colonial body is inherently performative: 'the misery it portrays is both *lived* and *staged*' (1). Katherine Ebury gives a fine-grained historical contextualisation of the staging of the body's immiseration in O'Nolan, as she writes of the complex postcolonial politics surrounding the death penalty in his writing. Perhaps the most salutary achievement of Ebury's essay is the attention that she gives to 'the principle of sovereignty' underlying the death penalty in works like *The Third Policeman*. Here, O'Nolan's political leanings come into sharper relief, as the novel is squared with the sentiments expressed in *Cruiskeen Lawn* around issues of capital punishment. Ebury notes the role of the hangman in the Free State, and she draws upon a biopolitical lexicon of ideas around the law and exceptional power to suggest O'Nolan's preoccupation with the 'extrajudicial

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<sup>3</sup> See Paul Fagan, "'I've got you under my skin': "John Duffy's Brother," "Two in One," and the Confessions of Narcissus,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 60–75.

nature of justice' (45). Justice and extra-judicial acts of violence are concerns in the essays of Michael McAteer and Elliott Mills. While McAteer compares *At Swim-Two-Birds* with Yeats' *The Hearne's Egg* through the prism of Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence,' Mills reads Derrida's 'Force of Law' alongside *The Third Policeman* to tease out a manner of 'illogical logic' that continues the fascination with states of exception and biopolitical paradox that is to be found throughout the collection.

The Free State and its legacy also loom large in this collection, and *Gallows Humour* is a timely intervention when it comes to triangulating the precise political history that informs O'Nolan's writing. Conor Dowling's essay on Bakhtin and the Free State extends Keith Hopper's landmark exploration of the carnivalesque in O'Nolan.<sup>4</sup> In Dowling's renewed critique, works like *At Swim-Two-Birds* reflect the divided class consciousness of O'Nolan, a writer 'suspended between the authority of the state and the anarchy of the "mob"' (49). Alana Gillespie makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the kind of gendered politics that infused the mid-century milieu of O'Nolan's writing, as she reads *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Hard Life* alongside controversies in Irish government such as the Mother and Child Scheme. Dr Noel Browne's contentious policy reforms in family healthcare were a flashpoint in the struggle between the dual forces of conservatism and progress in De Valera's Ireland, and Gillespie notes the emotive charge that such debacles had for a writer like O'Nolan, who satirised the conservative rhetoric that saw public health reform as 'one filthy leap away from all-out communism' (81).

Physical culture is an abiding concern of the authors in *Gallows Humour*, and their insights add much nuance to our appreciation of O'Nolan as a writer who was attuned to the minutiae of clinical discourses, public health, sports, and their effects on the wellbeing of civil society at large. As Borg and Fagan explain, 'the organising theme of "gallows humour" focuses these enquiries onto key encounters between the body and the authority of the state' (9), and they rightly acknowledge how 'this volume draw[s] unprecedented attention to the centrality of biopolitics to O'Nolan's modernist experimentation' (8). To this end, Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston's essay on sexual health and the literature of exhaustion in *The Hard Life* brings clarity to our portrait of O'Nolan as a chronicler of physical culture in the 1960s. In Houston's estimation, the cynical deployment of rhetorics of sexual contagion are a 'zombie rhetoric' (162)—a hangover from *Dubliners*-era Joyce and the tales of Irish squalor peddled by O'Connor and O'Faolain. From physical culture to cults of the physique, Richard Murphy's essay on the GAA and the modernist body deals with the policing of 'proper' Irishness that

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<sup>4</sup> See Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995).

O’Nolan/Myles na Gopaleen sees beneath the parochial virtues of Gaelic athletics. Here, O’Nolan’s satirical commentaries on the hibernicising physical culture of Free State cultural nationalists ‘estrangle the Irish masculine body from either nativist or liberal ideological frames and render it unfit for service as a national allegory’ (76). Continuing this historically meticulous line of enquiry, Maebh Long also expands upon the idea of *The Hard Life* as being (in O’Nolan’s own words) a ‘treatise on piss and vomit,’ as she delves into the discourses of hygiene and bodily abjection that frame his fiction (163). Here, Long’s focus on immunology chimes with contemporary theorists of biopolitics like Roberto Esposito, whose *communitas/immunitas* distinction paves the way for a radical reconceptualisation of global nationhood.

While some of these preoccupations are foreshadowed in earlier scholarship,<sup>5</sup> *Gallows Humour* is the first study to offer a sustained focus on biopolitical themes in O’Nolan. With these essays, Borg and Fagan show how wider vistas are now clearly open for research into the post-Revival politics of the Irish writer, but also how a more refined lens on the historical and political environment that nurtured (or, indeed, stoked the ire of) O’Nolan’s wit can provide tantalising new avenues for investigation. It is in this dual movement—of expanding scope and concentrated focus—that the critical merit of *Gallows Humour* lies, as it affords future scholars a wealth of novel methodologies and a multitude of exciting critical directions.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ruben Borg, ‘Reading Flann with Paul: Modernism and the Trope of Conversion,’ in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority*, 219–29; and Joseph Brooker, ‘Estopped by Grand Playsaunce: Flann O’Brien’s Postcolonial Lore,’ *Journal of Law and Society* 31, no. 1 (2004): 15–37. Borg’s essay on the trope of Pauline conversion is a concise explication of the kinds of paradox and aporia usually associated with biopolitical theories of the law, while Brooker addresses the problematic relationship between the law and sovereignty in O’Nolan’s work.

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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