

STAGING MYLES: PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN BRIAN O'NOLAN

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Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs, eds. *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2022. 450 pp. ISBN 9781782055358.

Flann O'Brien: Acting Out opens new vistas for future research, creating a rich repository of knowledge about an area of the author's writing that has hitherto received little critical attention, while at the same time looking backwards to reassess, complicate, and sometimes correct previous assumptions about the author and his work. The volume covers Brian O'Nolan's writing in both Irish and international contexts, his work for theatre as well as other media and the intermedial interplay in his writing, and finally examines the image of Myles na gCopaleen as a living persona. The editors, Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs, persuasively make the case that performance is key to O'Nolan's work. This is evident in the impressive number of excellent essays which illuminate different aspects of O'Nolan's writing for various media. Equally importantly the review of O'Nolan scripts in production and adaptations of his work in performance-based media which closes the collection is a useful resource for scholars wishing to delve deeper into O'Nolan's work in performance.

An important insight arising out of the volume is the extent to which performance and the conventions of the performing arts permeate all of O'Nolan's work, blurring the distinction between language and action. Two essays by Joseph Brooker and Noam Schiff deal directly with texts that use language to elicit drinking, unveiling "the capacity of spoken language to embody scenes and experiences that are not present, producing bodily effects (such as actual thirst) from thin air" (145), for the characters on stage and also, presumably for the audience, blurring the line between spectatorship and participation. Schiff's analysis of the short story "The Martyr's Crown" shows a similar production of the text as an extended speech act, intended, in this case, to solicit a free beer. Kerry Higgins Wendt suggests that O'Nolan's implication of the audience in the performance can be understood as inspired by a Brechtian aesthetic which O'Nolan reworks on his own terms through the theories of the student-narrator in *At Swim Two Birds*. Like Brecht, O'Nolan attempts to direct the attention of his readers and spectators to the constructedness of the work of art by lifting the "fourth wall" and exposing the manipulative ways in which language is used by characters and author alike to generate desired effects. Thus, O'Nolan's challenge

to literary and artistic norms is shown to be both applied to, and inspired by, the theatrical experience.

Alana Gillespie's study of O'Nolan's attitude towards theatrical audiences bears out the suggestion that he was concerned with spectators' response to his plays, wishing to challenge their received notions while at the same time seeing them as the final arbitrator of dramatic success. The delegation of artistic criteria of success from author to audience already points beyond the modernist view of art as a unique individual expression which should be judged according to its own internal criteria. Several essays in the volume compare O'Nolan's theatrical approach and practice with modernist figures including the aforementioned Brecht, alongside Pirandello (Neil Murphy), and Lady Gregory (Eglantina Rempert), in each case highlighting O'Nolan's original approach which treats with playfulness or even hilarity the basic paradoxes that have given rise to modernist anxieties.

The suggestion by Paul Fagan that a posthumanist approach would be better suited to understanding the porosity and heterogeneity of the subject in O'Nolan's writing makes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion on the writer's modernist affiliations. Fagan shows how disembodied voices in a range of texts draw on the cinematic convention of the voiceover or off-scene voice as the voice of authority, subjecting them to ironising treatment and fantastical embodiments in the early work, and mechanising effects later on. The sundering of the voice from the body enabled by modernist technology is thus not treated as an anxiety-inducing effect to be overcome by recentering the individual talent as in modernist art, but rather embraced to further a "dislocation of a dispersed subjectivity" (229).

Another critical insight arising out of this volume is the extent to which the dispersion of the subject extends to the writer's persona, challenging our basic understanding of what authorship is as we try to define a single entity that will carry all of the pseudonyms, styles, and texts that are associated with the author Brian O'Nolan / Flan O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen and a host of other known and perhaps unknown pseudonyms.

The opening essay by Maebh Long traces the complex relations of collaboration and mutual borrowing, not to mention blatant plagiarism, between Brian O'Nolan, Niall Sheridan, and Niall Montgomery in the development of the Myles persona of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns in the *Irish Times*. She shows how all three writers, possibly alongside some others, contributed to the wild, irreverent humour of the columns which is closely identified with O'Nolan, to the extent that it is impossible to distinguish the different contributions by each of the collaborators. The playful accusations of Laurence Sterne and Charles Dickens of plagiarism in the columns are carried over into friendly, and later not so friendly, arguments

over authorship with Niall Montgomery. The point is reinforced by Joseph LaBine's essay on the collaborative relationship with American writer William Saroyan that extended to the trading of plot ideas and even titles.

Long's conclusion that "*Cruiskeen Lawn* is not the work of Brian O'Nolan alone, and Niall Montgomery was an instrumental part of O'Nolan's *Irish Times* writings" (24) disturbs abstract concepts of authorship and originality, which would hardly come as new to Flann enthusiasts. John Greaney suggests that "the problem of the mask as it is posed by this corpus is unique and rich and demands continued consideration rather than hasty classification" under a biographical figure (320). It also poses a methodological problem for scholars who try to discern cross-textual links between columns whose authorship is uncertain, and other texts by O'Nolan. Thus, the question of authorship opened by the decision of Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper to include in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* the story "Naval Control" which may or may not have been written by O'Nolan under the pseudonym John Shamus O'Donnell, re-emerges at the heart of the oeuvre.

Alongside the many other excellent articles collected in the volume, for readers of this review Matthew Sweney's highly informative study of the adaptation of *Ze života hmyzu* by the Brothers Čapek into *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* may be of particular interest, as it serves as a timely correction to the English-centric scholarship on the play. Sweney argues that O'Nolan was more familiar with the Czech original than is usually acknowledged, and in some respects his version is closer to the original spirit of the play than the English translation by Paul Selver.

In conclusion, this collection of essays represents an important intervention in the study of Brian O'Nolan's work, Irish literature of the mid-twentieth century, modernist networks, and literary theory. It poses new questions about the relationship between identity, style, and performativity that deserve our attention while providing a rich body of knowledge and insight to inform such a search.

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