BREAKING THE LIMITS: FLANN O'BRIEN'S AVANT-GARDE AESTHETICS

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2025.69.12

Tobias W. Harris, *Flann O'Brien and the European Avant-Garde, 1934-1945: Dublin's Dadaist*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. 248 pp. ISBN 9781350415898.

Tobias Harris's *Flann O'Brien and the European Avant-Garde* is a major contribution to the study of the author variously known as Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan, or Myles na Gopaleen, as well as to our understanding of a generation of Irish writers who made their first steps in literature during the 1930s. This is the first sustained, book-length study of O'Nolan's connections with the historical avant-garde and its lasting influence on his work. Harris deftly combines meticulous historical and biographical research with a perceptive analysis of aesthetic positions, presenting a coherent argument that illuminates one of the least understood aspects of O'Nolan's artistic projects.

Harris brings much needed clarity to the question of O'Nolan's position with regards to modernism by engaging with theories of how it relates to the avant-garde. For some theorists, such as Astradur Eysteinsson and Richard Murphy, the avant-garde is the ever-changing edge of the modernist movement, dismantling ossified forms and creating new ones which will become established practices in their turn, resulting in an open cycle of renewal. Peter Bürger, however, argues for the specificity of a historical avant-garde which challenged the enclosure of art within elite institutions and sought to break down the barriers between high art and popular production. This kind of avant-garde is more preoccupied with the social role of art than particular styles. The book draws on all three conceptions to highlight how O'Nolan and his collaborators approached modernist works as an already canonical convention that they attacked as inadequate to the historical moment. Through the book, Harris traces O'Nolan's constant renewal of genres and forms, always on the lookout for new means of challenging the boundaries and distinctions placed around artistic work.

The first two chapters of the book closely scrutinise the central role European avant-garde played for O'Nolan and his milieu. A detailed historical study reveals the extent to which ideas deriving from German Dadaists and other continental groups were shared by O'Nolan and his circle. In addition to the Dadaist challenge to the institution of high art, these also included the techniques of collage and montage which carried out its programme of mixing popular and high-brow culture. The second chapter deals with the short-lived comic magazine *Blather* produced by O'Nolan and his close associates Niall Sheridan and Niall

Montgomery and their attempt to establish a commercially viable venture that employed experimental techniques to entertain a general audience. This artistic, but also political, agenda sheds new light on O'Nolan's preoccupation with the commercial value of his work and his interest in reaching a wide public, extending to the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns and the later work for theatre, radio, and television. Harris thus highlights the continuities within O'Nolan's writing career, rather than dismissing his late work as an economic necessity that sapped his creative energy. This perspective presents a more nuanced and coherent assessment of the complete oeuvre, a view that is sure to have an influence on future research.

The comparative studies presented in the next three chapters highlight specific avant-garde techniques O'Nolan turns to in his own writing. Whether stemming from a direct influence, as is the case with Franz Kafka and Bertolt Brecht, or a strategy developed independently under comparable circumstances as is the case of Jorge Luis Borges, these comparisons illuminate important aspects of O'Nolan's artistic practice. Far than being the 'odd one out' in an Irish tradition that goes from Yeats to Joyce and Beckett, the figure that emerges from these chapters is of an artist attuned to global historical events who responds to them in similar ways to his contemporaries around the world. Chapter Three describes how O'Nolan, like Borges, develops a montage of invented texts with realistic elements in the novels *At Swim Two Birds* and *The Third Policeman* in reaction to nationalist demands for a 'true' representation of their respective emerging nations. Chapter Four traces the evolution of the montage technique in the latter novel, as well as *An Béal Bocht* which was written shortly after. It charts a transition from an overt juxtaposition of incongruent fragments to a subtler montage of literary and historical intertexts, creating an alternative reality governed by a dream-like logic. Recursion and paradox, which play a ludic role in the earlier novel, turn into a sinister manifestation of an inexorable fate in both O'Nolan's and Kafka's work, leaving their protagonists no room to escape from the hostile bureaucracies they are entangled in.

While Chapters Three and Four offer new readings of O'Nolan's most successful works, Chapter Five turns to the dramatic work which has often been denigrated by critics as pandering to popular taste and of an inferior artistic quality. Drawing parallels with Dadaist performances, Harris provides a different framework through which to examine *Thirst*, *Faustus Kelly* and *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* as instances of a "highbrow cabaret-style variety show" (154), responding to the dislocation of fine art in the barbaric times of the Second World War. O'Nolan has adopted Bertolt Brecht's "epic theatre" approach according to which plays should challenge rather than charm their audience. Such theatre foregrounds its artificiality and fictionality, encouraging viewers to engage with the performance

in a critical way which can afterwards be applied to other types of narrative and spectacle. Although the effectiveness of this method is debatable, the chapter makes a convincing case for O'Nolan's anti-fascist aesthetics and resistance to the status-quo.

The theme of resistance to conventional forms carries over into the final chapter of the book which concentrates on O'Nolan's years-long project – the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. The columns employ procedures like bricolage and pastiche to imbue ephemeral snippets of journalistic and public discourse with ironic and unexpected meanings. A fascinating study of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* response to the two "Irish Exhibition of Living Art" events which took place in Dublin in 1943 and 1944 serves to illustrate the distinction between modernism and avant-garde which anchors the conceptual frame of the book. The subjective and closed-off modernist style of painters such as Louis le Brocquy, Mainie Jellett and Norah McGuinness may have been incompatible with the academic style of painting favoured by the Royal Hibernian Academy but in a more global context, they were employing styles that were already well-established and institutionalised by the 1940s. They were thus modernist in style but not avant-garde in impulse and O'Nolan mocks them in his column for their failure to take into account the historical events unfolding on the continent.

One of the remarkable achievements of this volume is Harris's ability to treat his material, which ranges from the rise of Fascism to Theodor Adorno's dense philosophy, not only with great depth and theoretical insight but also with a fluent style and sense of humour. While fully adhering to academic conventions and norms, the book incorporates the occasional anecdote or apposite quotation, in a gentle version of the Dadaist collage, montage, and bricolage techniques that it describes. This work thus makes for an enjoyable reading, while presenting an essential intervention in O'Nolan studies.

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