
The Review of Contemporary Literature is a literary magazine founded by the editor John O’Brien with John Byrne and Lowell Dunlap. It emphasises contemporary literary fiction and aesthetics: postmodern, experimental, avant-garde, metafictional, subversive. This particular special edition focuses on the Irish writer Flann O’Brien on the occasion of his 100th birthday in 2011. It comprises 16 essays, each a reflection on an aspect of his creative or critical work, with a useful introduction and followed by the contributors’ biographies – a cosmopolitan bunch – plus 28 heterogeneous, quirky and inventive book reviews on both fiction and nonfiction and sundry promotions of the Dalkey Archive listings.

O’Brien’s best-known novel, The Third Policeman (1940), features the figurative presence of a bicycle. The front cover of this Review depicts a bicycle motif in abstraction, the wheels outstanding in high modernist style and colour, while also presenting an impression of the mechanical arc and angle configuration of a sextant. The image connotes a fusion; scientific discovery and technology are grafted onto the arcane foundational wisdoms of the cosmos, in order to determine the positioning of the subject on a grid of the modern world. The reflective doubling of the hardware, coupled with the supposition of an existential quest, contributes to the sense of a postmodern envoy which typifies the imaginative extremes of O’Brien’s fiction and which persistently ventures beyond mundane analysis into the domain of wild and crackpot metaphysical speculation.

Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper – guest editors and experts on both O’Brien and postmodernism (236) – suggest that The Third Policeman might in retrospect be considered one of the finest examples of a [pre]postmodern novel: ‘funnier than Joyce and bleaker than Beckett’ (9) but the manuscript was rejected by publishers for being too fantastic and only published posthumously in 1967. O’Brien’s first novel At Swim-Two-Birds (1939) while acclaimed by the writer Graham Greene ‘sold only 244 copies before Longman’s London warehouse was destroyed during the Blitz’ (10). However, his alter-ego the columnist and critic Myles na gCopaleen quips: ‘the book survived the war while Hitler did not’ (19 n6). O’Brien’s work is more popular now than in his lifetime, assisted by the good intentions of the Dalkey Archive.

Creative writers dream of finding a supportive publisher, of cultivating a clued-up readership, that responds with an open mind but critically to new and experimental work, that appreciates the humour, the irony, the pathos and the seriousness of satire, in both a literary and a cultural context. The Dalkey Scholarly Press was founded in Chicago in 1984 as an adjunct press to The Review and named in honour of O’Brien’s fifth and final novel The Dalkey Archive (1964), which was published two years before his death. Its select object was to reprint featured authors taken up in the Review but in time the Press branched out to cover other authors and original unpublished works with an emphasis on modernist and postmodernist literary fiction. Modeled on Grove Press and New Directions the raison d’être of the Press is given as the desire to promote cross-cultural mediation and translation in the interests of better cultural and literary understanding, and to recover and keep minority works continuously in print and accessible to scholars interested in transnational exchange. Projects aimed firstly to facilitate critical work that would not normally reach publication in the United States because of the small demand for its like;
secondly, the endeavour had the goal of breaking down the barriers of accessibility between cultures, both within the home borders and in relation to multicultural offerings from abroad. In 2006 the venture was relocated to the University of Illinois, where a centre was established with an interest in gathering all of O’Nolan’s oeuvre and critical responses under one rubric.

The editors of the *Centenary Essays* suggest that O’Brien’s increasing relevance to literary studies is well-argued by both established scholars and the up-and-coming generation of new critics who have expanded the discourses on the subject in recent years. On one hand these essays go beyond comparison with O’Brien’s direct contemporaries James Joyce and Samuel Beckett to situate the author in the context of other traditional Irish writers of minority literature such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain and the Irish Gothic enthusiast Sheridan Le Fanu. And on the other hand Brian Ó Conchubhair points out in his essay ‘Writing on the Margin – Gaelic Glosses or Postmodern Marginalia?’ that O’Brien’s Gaelic novel, *The Poor Mouth*, is not simply a naturalistic project but an exercise in minority literature that transforms native satire and parody in a configuration that richly anticipates a universal postmodern aesthetics. Other essayists in the text make comparisons between O’Brien’s work and various late-modernist and transnational authors – Dante, Alfred Jarry, Graham Greene, Nabokov and Calvino – evoking a multi-layered cognitive field with valuable pickings for both literary archivist and creative artist to feast upon. The author’s work is exposed as compulsively imaginative, generously open-ended and progressive, but uncannily prescient about Irish-ness in response to some universal conundrums of human existence.

On the whole, the *Centenary Essays* are a tour de force of concentrated critical investigation that presents more clues to the postmodern fall from grace than most dedicated texts on the subject. The embedded nature of the Catholic Church to the weave of the author’s writing is deemed significant. Carlos Villar Flor explores the gap between O’Brien as a postmodern writer and a Catholic writer, making a distinction between ‘the implied writer’ and ‘the implied censor’. Jennika Baines, Maciej Ruczaj and others insist that O’Brien confronts the faith, the mysteries and the revelations of religious life, not as an apostate but in the role of a shaman, seeking out the source of spiritual malaise and earthly corruption. His protagonists transgress only in specular realms, as they drift between ontological worlds and narrative levels only to uncover the infernal irony and inevitability of divine retribution. However, it is O’Brien’s alter-ego, Myles na gCopaleen, who wields the public clout, a columnist bent on the deconstruction of cultural humbug, not only in the Catholic Church but in society’s doings at large.

What is in a name? Aiden Higgens suggests in the first chapter of the *Centenary Essays*, ‘The Hidden Narrator’, that the artist disappears into ego-fantasies of his own creation – a classic postmodern schizoid subject, he manifests multiple personae: ‘few knew him by sight’ (29). Flann O’Brien is the pen name used by the writer Brian Nolan (O’Nolan or Ó Nualláin) for his fictional works. Nolan wrote under other disguises – Brother Barnabas, George Knowall, and more – which makes it difficult to track and gather all his works together under one moniker. Higgens suggests that he took this path for two reasons. Firstly, he wanted to protect his job with the Irish civil service. (Personal political opinions were not allowed to be expressed in public and he had an extended family of unemployed siblings to support). Secondly, Nolan used aliases to ‘write back’ to his own opinion pieces, provoking public dialogue in newspapers and magazines by mischievously planting and then deconstructing his own letters and articles. However,
Flore Couluma in ‘Tall Tales and Short Stories: Cruiskeen Lawn and the Dialogic Imagination’ argues convincingly that the author’s dominant persona, the critic and long-term columnist for the *Irish Times*, na gCopaleen (or naGopaleen) – who held the position for twenty-six years until his death in 1966 – provides the key to a ‘satirical genius’ and the understanding of his writing as a whole. She argues that ‘The Cruiskeen Lawn’ (the name of his column) is the minor genre which defines the dialogical core at the heart of Nolan’s literary imagination and ultimate creative method.

Val Nolan suggests in ‘Flann, Fantasy, and Science Fiction: O’Brien’s Surprising Synthesis’ that increasingly the author’s work bridges the locus of collision between cultural ignorance and modern education, between Ireland’s rich fantasy traditions sustained by nineteenth century imaginative capacities and the structural logics of twentieth century science and technology. O’Brien’s protagonists are miraculously suspended between physical existence and the hereafter, known and unknown, in that moment of transition between superstition and scientific understanding that admits the fantastic. The reader is poised to fall either way, as the fantastic is not necessarily usurped by surface rationality and rhetoric nor is logic the master of deep-seated lunacy. We recognise the existence of irrationality at large in our world. Val Nolan writes that O’Nolan fears that for the first time in history a man-made Armageddon could fulfil the dire prophesies of the scriptures. He argues that O’Brien’s dystopias were created out of a perceived dehumanisation caused by the forces of mass-industrialisation, World War and Cold War politics and the human capacity to perpetrate nuclear destruction. Nolan suggests that O’Brien’s protagonist de Selby has an oracular function in the community: the ‘role of the shaman is to cross into the other world and bring back vital information for the benefit of the tribe’ (184), the knowledge of how to survive.

No one disputes O’Brien’s misogyny. Amy Nejezchleb claims that the author’s last and unfinished novel *Slattery’s Sago Saga* was intended as an assault on the ‘new woman’ and American-style feminism. However, this novel contains O’Nolan’s first and last female character of any depth, a rich Scottish-American woman called Crawford who concocts a plan to rid Ireland of the potato and so save America from the bane of Irish immigration. Gloriously and inadvertently O’Brien creates an assertive female who talks back to society from outside the usual stereotypes and mores of the masculine gaze. The author knew that he needed a financial success to keep afloat and attempted to temper his satirical commentary with a marketable comic realism. He aimed to attack the corruption of American politics from the top down and issued the destitute Irish with an anti-American warning about false promises/dreams of wealth and power to be had for the taking if only they would set sail for America. Nonetheless it is the irony of the Irish-American bond which drives the parody and satire of the creative work. O’Nolan longed for the bizarre humour of *Slattery’s Sago Saga* to catch on and bring him American success. He worked with enthusiasm, making copious notes on the development and promotion of the work; unfortunately, he missed the boat, dying of the demon drink before his feverish planning could come to fruition. Post-mortem, however, the *Sago Saga* has been converted to a successful script and the black comedy played out to some acclaim.

This foray into O’Brien’s work reminds us that the figural and the fantastic exist to question the received narratives of society. O’Brien cleaves to the narrative instability and mocking awareness of postmodernism and experiments (after Bakhtin) with a dialogical imagination. Full of wicked subversive intent, he pits the vernacular or the foreign against the official languages of establishment. This collection of essays, in line with the

commissioning intent of the Dalkey Archive Press, promotes plurality in literature, self-conscious play with language/textuality and the value of doubt, rather than the reinforcement of closed identities, unity of form and the repressive strictures of cultural authority. And although O’Brien’s work is proven to be indissoluble in its ‘Irish-ness’ his oeuvre is hereby positioned as a vital cog in the universal pantheon of a transnational literary canon and of value to the quest for transcultural understanding. Flann O’Brien is represented as the spirit of an Irish free radical caught on the cusp of an ominous and overarching atomic age.

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