



Book Review – Subverting Authority with Authority

***Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority*, edited by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt.**

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The concept of authority is inseparable from reading strategies: in addition to political and ideological power, authority has aesthetic value. Postmodern aesthetics complicates this interaction with authority by questioning and subverting the relevance of authoritative guidance. *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority*, a collection of essays edited by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt, illuminates the hazy boundaries of the concept of authority by engaging with multivalent readings of Brian O’Nolan’s fluid oeuvre that invites the overlapping and collaboration of diverse genres and contesting philosophies and ideologies.

Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority responds to the critical tradition that views O’Nolan as a postmodern literary figure situated in opposition to modernism. Without rejecting O’Nolan’s uneasy relationship with modernism, the collection offers a broader range for considering the writer’s experiments with writing and reading, which provide opportunities for defining various discourses of authority. Taking this all-inclusive perspective, the collection further advances the conversation not only about the literary legacy of O’Nolan, but also about the tensions that modernism and its successor – postmodernism – stimulate. While theorising the subversion of authority, this collection presents O’Nolan’s writing in light of constant change and shifting centres, revealing fluid artistic masks that signal the writer’s attempt to navigate language and literature as a network to establish the self as a negotiator.

In their introduction, the editors stress that *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority* “highlights O’Nolan’s clowning with bureaucratic, religious and scientific powers in the sites of the popular, the modern and the traditional in both national and international contexts” (p. 8). This embracing formulation reflects the writer’s multifacetedness and lays the basis for the volume’s ambition to engage with the subversion of authority at different levels.

Consisting of three parts, the collection investigates O’Nolan’s relationship with authority from the standpoint of language, culture and literary/textual traditions.

The first section, “‘neither popular nor profitable’: O’Nolan vs. The Plain People”, nuances how O’Nolan’s negotiations with ideas of the popular inform multiple tensions in his work. With her essay, Carol Taffe reintroduces the notion of the popular as complicating the textual levels of O’Nolan’s writing, refining the understanding of how the popular facilitates the subversion of authoritative discourses. This conceptual framework creates space for the consideration of popular phenomena highlighted by Maebh Long, who brings attention to O’Nolan’s negotiations with stereotypes of the Irish. Catherine Flynn analyses how O’Nolan’s responses to international politics revolve around rhetoric and language manipulation. Although the popular is primarily represented by cultural interactions and permeations, Maria Kager presents a compelling investigation of O’Nolan’s bilingualism, which to some extent attests to and informs the fluidity of the writer’s oeuvre. Katherine Ebury offers another route that is worth considering: the collaboration of literature and physics, entailing the subversion of the authority of science. In addition to outlining a conceptual framework, this section is an opportunity to establish various ways in which the authority of dominant discourses is traced and undermined.

The second section, “Mixed links: O’Nolan vs. his peers”, situates O’Nolan’s writing in the shifting continuum of various literary dialogues shaped by contemporary events. Dirk Van Hulle reads Flann O’Brien alongside Joyce and Beckett, revisiting the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. In this regard, the collection effectively recasts O’Nolan’s reputation as a postmodern writer. This section outlines O’Nolan’s in-between status that marks the writer’s engagement, accompanied either by frustration or aspiration, with both modernist and postmodernist proliferations. In his essay, R. W. Maslen traces the echoes of James Stephens’s *The Crock of Gold* in O’Nolan’s *The Third Policeman*; Ian Ó Caoimh re-evaluates the authority of biography and autobiography in Ó Nualláin studies. Ronan Crowley highlights O’Nolan’s wrangling with traditions, on the one hand, and his inherent connection with the past, on the other. According to Ronan Crowley, O’Nolan’s employment of pseudonyms aligns with elements of the Irish Literary Revival. Crowley argues that this action “should be recognized as part of a dialectic internal to the broader Revival” (pp. 134–35), which is understood as a platform “to question and problematise notions of originality and authority, authorship and community” (p. 135). The second section not only diversifies the routes for the investigation of O’Nolan’s relationship with authority, but also serves as a forum for subverting critical authority. The contributors convincingly

reveal the haziness of authority as a key element for reading, writing and critiquing, thus opening up critical space for revisions and for textual replenishments of O’Nolan’s writing.

The third section, “Gross impieties: O’Nolan vs. the sacred texts”, discusses O’Nolan’s creative and subversive interaction with sacred texts, which advances the contributors’ ambition to reveal the writer’s multiple masks and his aspiration to liberate writing from authoritative control, be it through traditions or stylistic patterns. Louis De Paor investigates how O’Nolan undermines the authority of Early Irish literature, turning it into material for recycling. While pointing out elements that gesture towards O’Nolan’s grounding in versatile traditions of the past, Ruben Borg, argues for the consideration of modernist engagements as part of the writer’s elusive style. Alana Gillespie brings attention to the aesthetics of gaps revealed through O’Nolan’s texts that establish not only disruption with traditions via defiance and subversions, but also continuity which is reflected in numerous attempts to revisit and question authoritative stories and histories. The essay by Dieter Fuchs nuances the traditions of Menippean satire that O’Nolan exploits in order to examine the potential of traditional genres to engage with contemporary events. The closing essay by Tamara Radak represents O’Nolan’s writing from the standpoint of incessant acts of reading and interpretation, underscoring writing as a fluid and mutating entity. In addition to highlighting O’Nolan’s ambivalent relationship with the authorities of texts, traditions, criticism and institutions, the third section shapes the critical narrative in ways that keep the subverted authorities open to further interrogations.

Highlighting diverse aspects of O’Nolan’s writing, which includes various genres and which activates numerous, at times contesting, ideologies, this volume deconstructs the critical vision that presents the writer exclusively in light of postmodernism. O’Nolan may seem to engage sarcastically with modernist aspirations; at the same time, his subversion of modernist authority is inseparable from the integration of elements which are inherently connected with modernism. O’Nolan often treats modernism playfully but his ambivalent self-positioning signals his desire not only to rebel and subvert, but also to be open and fluid. The contributors’ efforts to present O’Nolan as a lively and fluid writer deserve special mention: O’Nolan’s multiple pseudonyms re-emerge throughout the sections and subsections. Known for his playful attitude towards his own name, O’Nolan makes an extra effort to escape any sort of authority, even if it is his name. The collection turns this escapism into an eloquent statement.

Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority offers new ways to rediscover O’Nolan’s oeuvre. Although the collection is organised around the theme of authority, at times it produces some sense of dispersion: the topic invites further explorations, whose targets

remain blurry. The variety of topics covered in the collection, on the one hand, reflects the complexity and multilayeredness of O’Nolan’s writing – the aspect that the contributors aspired to reiterate. On the other hand, this variety of themes may be misleading: although ambiguous and controversial, O’Nolan was persistent in his efforts to negotiate the relationship between the individual and authority. For O’Nolan, this contest reveals not only the controversies that this confrontation potentially involves, but the individual’s aspirations to celebrate imaginative freedom. *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority* is an excellent study of O’Nolan’s literary output and it is a valuable addition to the current efforts to revisit the relationships between modernism and postmodernism. This collection will be helpful for scholars interested in Irish literature, cross-cultural interconnections, cross-literary ties and Irish-British cultural interactions. It is also a valuable source for graduate students who aspire to train themselves in contemporary literary criticism.

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