

**Book Review – *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*, edited by Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan.**

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Brian O’Nolan, more commonly known by his pseudonym, Flann O’Brien is one of the most prominent Irish literary figures of twentieth century literature. He is not an easy read for one not clued into modern Irish history, and analysing O’Brien’s work through the complex lens of gallows humour could therefore be an extremely challenging task. In Cork University Press’s *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*, Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan take up this mantle with the goal of mapping O’Brien’s acutely perplexing sense of humour, thereby making it more accessible to a wider audience.

The ‘Editors’ Introduction’ sets the tone for this study on gallows humour within O’Brien’s writings. The editors discuss five themes in their introduction chapter: ‘Death and Laughter’, ‘Impolite Bodies’, ‘Body Politics’, ‘Falling Bodies’, and ‘Bodies of Writing’ that offer adequate clues to the primary subjects covered in the book. However, the essays are divided into the following three sections: ‘Part I. Body Politics’, ‘Part II: Falling Bodies’ and ‘Part III: Bodies of Writing’. This could be slightly confusing for readers who might expect the book to be divided into the five aforementioned subthemes however, this is only a minor hitch.

Part I of the book, titled ‘Body Politics’, offers the readers five essays on O’Brien’s major works, most prominently the oft-celebrated newspaper column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, written under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen, and his debut novel *At-Swim-Two-Birds*. This section of the book begins with Catherine Flynn’s critical review of the presence of the political and the breakdown of language in O’Brien’s writings, especially in the *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Flynn’s review renegotiates Benedict Anderson’s idea of the nation and nationality with reference to O’Brien’s insistence on resistance through language. Also discussed in this article is his conspicuous use of visual puns to address contemporary geo-political realities as well as a twentieth century obsession with eugenics. This essay is followed by Katherine Ebury’s detailed take on O’Brien’s use of humour surrounding death and the death penalty. Ebury brings forth striking examples from the O’Brien universe that make a joke of death. Conor

Dowling's essay that follows is about the Bakhtinian carnival and the idea of the free state in relation to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The fourth essay in Part I, 'Spare-Time Physical Activities: Cruiskeen Lawn, the GAA and the Irish modernist body', written by Richard T. Murphy has a thought-provoking section titled 'Refereeing Irishness' that throws ample light on na gCopaleen's take on "Irish-language tokenism" (2020, p. 68), the GAA and "nationalist masculinity" (2020, p. 70). Alana Gillespie's essay, 'Soft Misogyny of Good Intentions: The Mother and the Child Scheme, *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Hard Life*' is a feminist take on O'Brien's work which focuses on the lack of women's opinions and an overall lack of women's presence in O'Brien's work and how this is reflected in his construction of humour.

'Part II : Falling Bodies' contains five essays encompassing O'Brien's major works, including *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *At-Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. While each essay adds to the theme of gallows humour and offers fresh insights into O'Brien's intertwined world of body and politics, Yaeli Greenblatt's "the tattered cloak of his perished skin': The body as costume in 'Two in One', *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*' stands out for being one of the most accessible essays in the collection. Greenblatt's success lies in the establishment of a clear relation between the body and the uncanny. The said essay dwells upon and draws from Tim Armstrong's concept of "prosthetic modernism" (2020, p. 141) to further the idea of a rupture between the sense of self and derived identity. Another interesting piece from Part II that is worth a mention here is Catherine O. Ahearn's detailed stocktaking of the 'enforced' disappearances of Myles na gCopaleen. Where she chronicles O'Brien/na gCopaleen's fractured relationship with *The Irish Times*. The essay also gives details of O'Brien's deteriorating health conditions from 1947 to 1966 and how O'Brien uses gallows humour to describe illness. Noam Schiff's essay deals with the idea of metamorphoses and how it manifests in O'Brien's literary world to emphasize "chaotic irregularity and spatiotemporal reconstitution" (2020, p. 123). The last two essays of Part II, presented by Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston and Maebh Long respectively, focus on health and immunology, apt topics for discussion and deliberation in the current scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The last part of the book, 'Part III: Bodies of Writing' comprises six essays. Siobhán Purcell's essay titled 'Reading the Regional Body: Disability, prosthetics and Irish literary tradition in *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*' begins this last section of the book. Of special interest in this essay is Purcell's discussion of a variety of Irish literary tropes such as inter-generational fights and misunderstandings, illness and disability and troublesome representations of race and eugenics. This concrete comparison between O'Brien and Beckett proffers the opportunity to analyse these two giants of twentieth century Ireland. The second

essay of this section is by Michael McAteer who contrasts Samuel Ferguson's *Congal* and W.B. Yeats's *The Herne's Egg* with O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, referencing law, the Irish civil war, the Irish nationalist movement and other pertinent zones of conflict. Also of interest here are McAteer's keen observations on the preposterous trivialization of rape in *The Herne's Egg* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Chapter 14, Daniel Curran's essay on the absurd and the authentic as a backdrop to death is a particularly notable addition to Part III. This piece discusses O'Brien's exaggerations within the text, especially regarding his circulatory 'endings' in generous detail. Curran achieves this by keenly recording O'Brien's obsession with names and naming and the subtle manner in which O'Brien negates the authority of religion and so-called normative life practices. Einat Adar's essay on *The Third Policeman*, the penultimate piece of the book focuses on O'Brien's swinging relationship with contemporary science and how it impacts the thematic pole of *The Third Policeman*. Adar observes the influence of Einstein as well as the lesser known MacCruiskeen. The other two essays in this section are "sprakin sea Djoytsch?" Brian Ó Nualláin's *Bhark i bPrágrais* by Tobias Harris and Elliott Mills's 'Origin, Iterability and Violence in *The Third Policeman*'.

Almost all the essays in this collection offer new knowledge. Typos and other structural aspects are tightly edited with no noticeable errors. However, a piece on how O'Brien deals with memory and loss of memory would potentially have added to this otherwise well-knit book.

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