

Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, John McCourt (eds), *Flann O'Brien Problems with Authority*

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REFERENCES

Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, John McCourt (eds), *Flann O'Brien Problems with Authority*, Cork University Press, 2017, xv+330 p. ISBN 9781782052302

- 1 This book is dedicated to the late Professor Werner Huber whose contribution to Irish studies in Austria, in the rest of Europe and beyond, is therefore celebrated and duly acknowledged. A large number of the essays to be found in this collection find their origins in the papers delivered at *Problems with Authority: The 2nd International Flann O'Brien Conference*, which was held at the University of Roma Tre in June 2013. The themes of subversion, transgression, and irreverence prove particularly apt to tackle O'Brien's work, whose satirical and experimental talent looms large in his three prominent novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), *An Béal Bocht* (1941) and his posthumous *The Third Policeman* (1967) as well as in *An Cruiskeen Lawn*, the humorous column he wrote under the penname of Myles na gCopaleen for *the Irish Times* from 1940 to 1966 the year of his death.
- 2 This collection falls into three parts. The first part deals with miscellaneous contemporary issues ranging from popular culture, alcoholic stereotyping of the Irish, English/Gaelic bilingualism to the parody of scientific discourse and mocking Imperial Japan in the 2nd world war. The second part tackles O'Brien's relationship with his "peers", that is, fellow writers in general: from poets John Keats and James Stephens to writers like Beckett and Joyce. The third part explores O'Brien's relationship with 'canonical' texts, be they biblical or Early Irish. While the reader may legitimately be entitled to note the rather contrived nature of this structure or thematic division, in

other words the artificial organization of essays, all of these prove to be enlightening as regards the caustic –not to say corrosive– nature of O'Brien's multifarious prose. A few contributions though, actually stand out from the rest of this scholarly work, which will doubtless prove useful to every aspiring *Flanneur*. Maebh Long's identification of stereotypes and the way they are processed and recycled demonstrating "a performance of the anxiety of identity in the face of deep-rooted yet protean clichés" (53), proves particularly convincing. So does Catherine Flynn's original contribution on *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Japan and WWII. Flynn manages to encapsulate the whole paradoxical and contradictory nature of Myles' social, aesthetic and stylistic stance in his column, describing it as "both conservative and experimental, as it displays the polyvalent power of the traditional Irish language while undermining any identity associated with it" (86), revealing O'Brien for what he is more often than not, that is a deeply contrarian literary and public figure. In part II, Ian Ó Caoimh's piece on Ciarán Ó'Nualláin's, that is Flann O'Brien's own brother's ability to wield irony as a stylistic weapon that takes the whole genre of biography to a "meta-level" also turns out to be enlightening.

- 3 Finally, part III is probably the most coherent part in the whole book since it deals mostly with satire whose diverse manifestations are thoroughly investigated by Dieter Fuchs, through its Menippean, Lucianic, Varronian variations. Let us note in passing the exceptional brilliance of Ruben Borg's reflection on the central trope of conversion throughout O'Brien's work and also Alana Gillespie's very cogent reading of O'Nolan's "treatment of time and insistence on the mutability of (interpreting) narratives [as] a radical critique not only of historical authority itself, but also of a non-critical attitude to history" (205). The previous volume derived from the 1st International Flann O'Brien Conference held in Vienna in 2011, entitled *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* was listed in the *Irish Times* top ten non-fiction books of 2014 and has since become a classic in *O'Brienology*. After this new convincing installment, the academic reader can only look forward to yet another volume of criticism drawn from the conference recently held in Salzburg in July 2017, whose theme was "Acting Out", insisting on performance and theatricality. No doubt, this new collection of essays –like the previous ones– will definitely further enrich and bolster the academic understanding of the work of an author who declared with tongue-in-cheek, in his first full-fledged novel that was *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), that "[a] good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings" (9).