



Études irlandaises

34.2 | 2009
Figures de l'intellectuel en Irlande

Flann O'Brien

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/1695>
ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 September 2009
ISBN: 978-2-7535-0982-5
ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Flore Coulouma, « *Flann O'Brien* », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 34.2 | 2009, Online since 30 June 2011, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/1695>

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

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REFERENCES

Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, Second edition, Cork, Cork University Press, 2009, 290 p., ISBN 978-1-85918-447-9

- 1 The second edition of this thorough study of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* essentially updates the 1995 edition with additions rather than changes to Keith Hopper's initial argument. *The Third Policeman*, Hopper argues, is O'Brien's masterpiece, and its status as a meta-fiction defines O'Brien as a post-modernist author.
- 2 Hopper starts with a contextual reminder of O'Brien's difficult position as a writer, in between Yeats's Celtic Twilight and the subsequent Irish naturalist tradition, on the one hand, and the inhibiting shadow of Joyce on the other hand. The third and fourth chapters of the book deal with character building and frame-breaking strategies as devices in the post-modern metafictional novels of O'Brien. Hopper uses the concept of metalepsis throughout his book to refer to the multiple shifts operated at all levels in O'Brien's writing: embedded narratives, displaced characters, self-conscious narrators and meta-fictional comments, and finally at the level of language itself.
- 3 Hopper concentrates on *The Third Policeman* as a menippean satire of Cartesian rationalism, arguing that the use of mock paratext (the so-called footnotes) and the chaotic background of the narrative (distorted space-time continuum, posthumous narration, etc.) "pursue the poetics of nonsense as a means to a satirical end". For Hopper, the target here is Cartesian rationalism and O'Brien's satirical deconstruction of rationalist thought partakes of early post-modernism.
- 4 There is added material in Hopper's discussion of gender and machism in O'Brien's work, where he points out what he calls O'Brien's "homosocial" references (women do not feature in his stories and parodic focus is placed on male camaraderie between characters). However, this discussion is inconclusive: was O'Brien criticizing the Irish

censorship and conservatism of his time or was he part of it too? This debate seems slightly irrelevant to Hopper's purpose, but it sheds light on O'Brien's ambiguity as a satirist.

- 5 Although Hopper offers an overview of O'Brien's other novels, and mentions his plays and *Irish Times* chronicles, his book is mostly dedicated to *The Third Policeman*. It offers an exhaustive reading of the criticism as well as a thorough and convincing interpretation of the novel itself, which had not been done in published form before. However, by focusing exclusively on *The Third Policeman*, Hopper completely leaves out O'Brien's chronicles, which he only mentions as biographical or historical documents, thus disregarding their intrinsic literary value. He barely alludes to O'Brien's bilingualism and thus underplays the importance of *An Béal Bocht* as a tribute to Gaeltacht autobiographies such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *The Islandman*. Including O'Brien's Irish writings would have benefited the study in not reducing Flann O'Brien to his two most famous novels.