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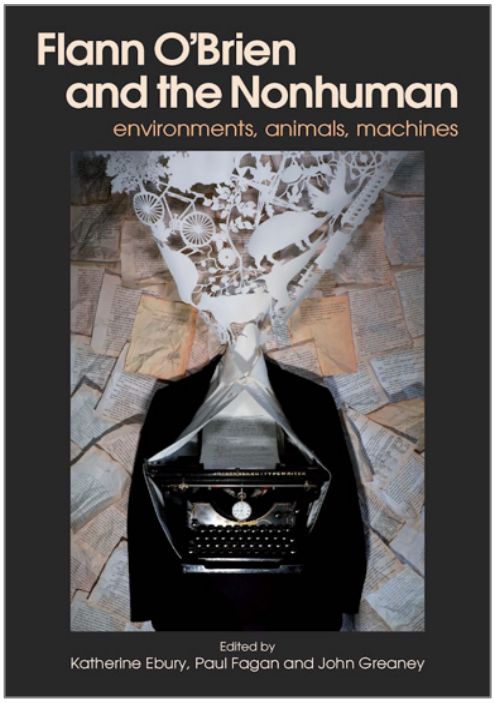
BOOKS

Katherine Ebury et al., *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman,* Cork: Cork University Press, 2024, 336 p.



Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman was published in 2024 and represents a valuable foray into Flann O'Brien' s work and connection with fields such as animal studies, climate studies and all matters pertaining to the nonhuman. The collection consists of fourteen essays split into three sections, each dedicated to a theme: environments, animals and machines. The contributors are reputable scholars and with the supervision of editors such as Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan and John Greaney, all established in the field of Flann O'Brien studies and Irish Modernism, the collection promises to offer interested readers a valuable experience.

Said editors begin the collection with an introduction that establishes a primary reason for its existence: that O'Brien has been largely left out of discussions on the non-human in twentieth-century Irish modernist writing.

Nicholas Allen begins the section on environments with an essay focused on the use of water. He introduces the term "blue humanities" (25) which refers to studies of water, the sea and the coast. Allen identifies watery structures in the way O'Brien writes characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. An example of this is Finn Mac Cool, whose speech emphasizes watery imagery. This also plays into how O'Brien uses Irish mythological creatures that are associated with water and therefore invoke the idea of

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transformation. This is the effect that the Irish writer achieves, a sort of 'liquid' writing that becomes disorienting for the reader but which embodies Irishness. Water represents an unstable world, but it also encompasses the idea of "determining national temperament" (37) in Myles na gCopaleen's column, used to serve the author in his commentary regarding public health and infrastructure. Allen describes O'Brien's writing as "liquid modernism"(40), due to his "water-powered prose" (40).

In *Writing with Air in The Third Policeman*, Julie Bates notes the numerous appearances that air, a commonly dismissed aspect of our environment, makes in the novel. Starting from the idea of affective atmospheres, she examines the episode of the Narrator's death, and how it is portrayed by describing the changes in the air. There is also Old Mathers' lecture on the colored winds, which references ancient Celtic beliefs about sky colors (46). Additionally, Bates explains that *The Third Policeman* was written in a period when the people of Europe were living under the threat of air strikes, with air becoming a source of anxiety. This is reflected in the novel, but air also becomes a source of ridicule due to de Selby's air experiments which the author claims parallel Duchamp's readymade of air in a vial. O'Brien creates a variety of uses for air in his writing, enveloping it in mystique and making the reader see this common element in a new light.

Elliot Mills continues this section with an essay on paper environments, focused on *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The novel draws from the contentious status of paper, as a weapon to be burned by fascists and a resource to be exploited. With the production of conservative-aligned writings in post-revolutionary Ireland, O'Brien constructs a complex entity within paper: the characters experience paper as a prison, before it becomes a realm of possibilities and finally, a medium that is too fragile to sustain hopes and plans. The Irish writer integrates into his perspective matters of how a constitution is written through the student narrator and Dermot Trellis' projects. He also contests the idea of an all-powerful authorial figure, something that Mills credits to O'Brien's experience as a civil servant and journalist. The treatment of paper is ambiguous, representing it as an instrument of power but also very fragile.

Next, Jonathan Foster discusses the Anthropocene in *The Third Policeman*. He notes that O'Brien's significance has not been duly tackled in eco-criticism, and explains that just as Joyce, the author was against idealization of the Irish countryside. As such, he uses Brooker's concept of the "counter-pastoral" (75). Descriptions of the environment in the novel are highly stylized, and the critic emphasizes that O'Brien is more concerned with nature writing, rather than nature itself. Interestingly, he uses the author's MA thesis in his argument, showing his tendency to criticize nature poetry that is anthropocentric. In *The Third Policeman*, the officers are read as engineers, manipulating the Parish into an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar roads. Marks of progress become marks of destruction, posing the question of what is happening to nature way before climate change consciousness.

Christin Mulligan closes this section with a paper on *An Béal Bocht* and famished environments. The author starts from Deleuze and Guattari and their concept of becoming-animal, which establishes states of being as no longer being impenetrable and stable. O'Brien uses animality not as a way to demean and degrade, but as "a mythic resituating of the conditions of possibility in order to re-contextualise the abhumanity of the Irish."

(94). There are becomings such as becoming-seal, which inscribes into the novel elements of Celtic mythology such as the selkies. On the other hand, human reproduction and children are likened to the reproduction of pigs. O'Brien identifies that national narrative needs the existence of villages such as Corca Dorcha to legitimize itself, but he removes it from the pendulum of humiliation and idealisation, embracing transmutation and transformation.

The second section begins with Einat Adar's essay on animal justice in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Control over such a large animal as the cow means power. The cow witness in the novel is allowed to express her grievances about being under someone's control. She poses the problem of stealing milk, transforming the image of happy children drinking milk into a violation of consent. Adar elaborates on this when discussing Anthony Lamont, a witness who holds Trellis responsible for the rape and death of his sister. As she cannot tell her story, it is reflected in the testimony of the cow (117). But this metaphor can be problematic, explains Adar, due to it being engineered by male writers inside and outside the text. In the end, the cow's experience is used as a conduit for the human's, showing an inability to reverse the hierarchy. Moreover, the characters offering her the chance to testify only do so for their own desires, leaving the cow in a subservient position.

Next, Tobias Harris writes about parasites and noise in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green.* Due to being a play, it allows for interesting imagery with the use of costumes, props and effects. Harris observes the importance O'Brien gives to sound in his commentary on plays, giving it the status of a character. Harris begins from Serres' conceptualisation of the parasite with a focus on exchange and the subject's position in relationship with others. This is how the critic reads O'Brien's work, also known as *The Insect Play*. For the bees, the loud buzzing constantly causes struggles in communication. What makes this more difficult is the interruptions from a Drone, the parasite and "third man" (135). This trend continues in Act II, which becomes even noisier and contains multiple creatures playing the role of parasite. This lack of communication plays into the blinding of workers and non-workers alike, which further fuels parasitic dynamics.

In the following essay, Yaeli Greenblatt adopts an interdisciplinary approach to analyse animality in *An Béal Bocht*, focusing on the graphic novel adaptation. The novel is all about hybridity. The text creates a situation of ambiguity for the entire nation, when one of the characters encounters a strange animal which seems to resemble the map of Ireland (147). Most interesting is McCloskey's style: living beings, be it animals or humans, do not stand out from the background and seem to blend in with whatever the elements of the environment are. Additionally, he treats humans and animals in the same way, portraying them as highly stylized and often grotesque and comical. Grief, which according to Derrida is forbidden to the animal, is portrayed in the scene of Ambrós' funeral. Not only is the ceremony itself dedicated to an animal, but most of the mourners are also animals, and the illustrator manages to avoid transforming them into a vessel for human grief.

Keelan Harkin ends this section with another essay on *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the matter of judiciary powers and nonhuman witnesses. For the trial of Dermot Trellis, the characters desire a fair trial against the tyrannical Trellis. However, they use the

nonhuman witnesses to legitimize their sovereignty and justify their usurpation and murder of Trellis. Harkin explains that this is a way for O'Brien to critique the British judiciary system and its implementation in Ireland. Emergency powers remained a way to serve certain agendas even after the formation of the Irish Free State and the author assesses the dangers of such methods.

James Fraser begins the section on machines with reading the bicycle in O'Brien's works. He sees it not just as an abstract concept, but in its historical and political context. Like most people at the time, the author was himself a cyclist. So popular was this manner of transportation that the country saw cycling-focused periodicals (186). Under Éamon de Valera, efforts were undertaken to reduce Ireland's reliance on imports. Fraser notes that making 'Irish' bicycles became a competition between manufacturers, and the object became a symbol of Irishness, which led to the idea that owning a foreign bicycle could make one less Irish. Even so, companies made products with imported parts.

Holly Connell Schaff explores internalized ableism in *The Third Policeman*. She recontextualizes the action taken by Pluck to monitor the victims of Atomic Theory as disability surveillance, meant to categorize people into groups based on how 'human' they are (200-201). The narrator's prosthetic leg is a source of shame, and Schaff observes how it is mentioned only when the character can distract the reader with other qualities that should make up for his insufficiency. The community of disabled men is dispersed, and the narrator is paired with Pluck's bicycle, a human-mechanical hybrid like him. Even so, says Schaff, he abandons her and remains a prisoner to his ableism. Any chance at community, with the one-legged men or with the she-bicycle, is forsaken.

Next, James Bacon explores the relationship between O'Brien and the Irish rail. In 1949, he travelled with the Maedhbh, Ireland's finest steam engine. His interest in the railway system grew and he began to criticize the way fuel was obtained. Bacon notes that O'Brien's criticism was not superficial, and he addressed genuine concerns in wartime Ireland. This led to a conflict with CIÉ as he mocked the tendency to use Irish as a mere badge for cultural marketing. What followed was a conflict with Conductor Bulleid, and Bacon speculates that there may be two parts to this: the fact that Bulleid was an Englishman and that he rivaled O'Brien's expertise. O'Brien proves that he is not speaking from a place of ignorance and does not shy away from criticizing institutions.

Yuta Imazeki follows with an essay on Flann O'Brien's use of noise and media. Imazeki describes *At Swim-Two-Birds* as garrulous, which means that there is no complete silence in the novel. Even when the word 'silence' is used, the reader remembers that the student narrator's voice goes on (237). The appearance of the gramophone undermined the dominance of writing and changed the way writers represented voices and noise. Rather than using onomatopoeia, O'Brien uses a technique of layering voices rather than noises. The author manages to replicate the same experience a listener has with radio and all the static, disruptions and delays. Technological developments can also blur the lines between human and nonhuman, as with *An Béal Bocht* and the pig squeals misunderstood as Irish language through recording.

The collection ends with Ruth Clemens and a comparative essay between *The Third Policeman* and *The Following Story* by Cees Nooteboom. In both works, there is a

nonhuman force that seems to disrupt the key distinction between life and death. Clemens cites Rosi Braidotti and her idea that anthropocentrism stands as an obstacle to finding a conceptualization of life that generates itself even beyond death. When the narrator in O'Brien's novel contemplates his execution, he engages with the idea of joining a nonhuman life. Without a name, he avoids the trap of a fixed identity, which appeals to him. Pluck's theory leads to people "becoming-molecular" (266). For the narrator, his wooden leg means that he has less life in his body, and Clemens points out the lack of logic in this statement. Becoming molecular means becoming imperceptible, which defines an understanding of life that goes beyond the human-centric.

Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman takes upon itself the task of creating multiple connections between the Irish author's work and various fields of study that are very relevant in the current academic landscape. Not only that, but it offers openings for new lines of research, essential for any scholar interested in exploring these themes in Irish literature. Undoubtedly, Flann O'Brien cannot be omitted from this conversation.

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