Identity Crisis and Performance of Otherness in Late Modernism[1]

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Abstract:
Despite Benedetto Croce's dismissal of literary genres, modernists did show concern for generic distinctions, while also trying to change their status from binding constraints to free play and hybridization. Poets abandoned self-expressionism in favour of various degrees of impersonality, while novelists constructed characters through interior monologues which resembled soliloquies on an imaginary stage of the mind. Under the circumstances, the question whether drama was still possible in the modernist age, without lapsing under lyric or epic guises, seems inevitable to those engaged in genre studies from a diachronic perspective. The inquiry, which is a matter of epistemology no less than of the phenomenology of literary forms, has brought us before Irish Flann O'Brien as a telling example of a late modernist's use of drama as existential puzzle.

Keywords: Flann O'Brien, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, selfhood, otherness, representation

Traditionally defined as impersonation, the dramatic genre implies an extra rather than a soft sense of personal identity and a clear idea of what one sets out to represent. No wonder the classical definition of dramatic genres became critical in the dawns of modernity when reality came to be seen as effect of the laws of perspective, when dissimulation as defect of character was pitted against dissimulation as wise conduct of the *hombre secreto* of the baroque age, when the priority of being over representation was challenged either by the idea of the world being a stage with man playing an exemplary role in the eye of God, or by the social ethics of the individual acting out in society in respect of visor and degree. Finally, reality itself came to be seen as an effect of role playing, as in Lope de Vega's *Lo fingido verdadera* ('The Role that Became a Reality)" about Saint Genesius (a Roman actor who converted on the stage while playing the role of a Christian martyr), or in *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kid, where the killing is done in earnest on the stage.

Living in a period of transition from modernism to postmodernism and disputed by critics in respect to his canonical appurtenance, Brian O'Nolan, better known as Flann O Brian, one of his pseudonyms, was a contemporary of absurdist drama, which, along with Franz Roh's definition of magic realism in his 1925 book, *Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of the latest European Painting,* collapsed the conceptual bounderies of dramatic generic forms and concomitantly of the axiological operators in the good and evil equations.

Fig.1. Franz Roh: *Seltsame Arche* **(Strange Ark)**

The new Noah's Ark (Fig. 1) does not carry the saved archetypes of creation, but rather a collection of the dregs left behind by Noah and condemned by God to perish in the formless flood, in the chaos of the old and sinful world. Reality and illusion had become superimposed states, the formal logic of identity failing from the moment the nature of light itself – the physical and mythical substratum of the universe - had been found to exist in complementary states.

Representation implies a distance between the ontological and the figural plane, with rules of equivalence defined according to the poetics of successive phases of the history of art. In Plato's *Cratylus,* for instance, representation should not double up its object but serve as its model (*paradeigma).*

Although perceived by Heidegger as the age of the world picture, as in his 1938 Freiburg lecture, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes,* both notions that had merged into the compound noun had been distabilised, either by science or by the new signifying practices in vanguard art. Seen by most commentators as a satirist of either, Flann O'Brien inevitably adopted the shattered world picture they had generated. The world he lived in went through a dramatic crisis of legitimacy. O'Brien writes in his June 23rd, 1943 Cruiskeen Lawn column (signed Myles na gCopaleen) that the polls revealed the confusion people lived in, the alienation they experienced in an authoritarian regime calling them to task for political issues in which none of the present generation had been involved. They were forced into a world of the dead, that had fought with tooth and claw before their birth, leaving behind a country which had sent Bernard Shaw into exile and imposed on O'Brien the status of alien – an internally displaced person, as we call them nowadays. That society was an "as if" world, living in the subjunctive: "Everybody looked as if they were engaged in some criminal conspiracy, women trying to look as if they had the remotest idea of the meaning of Irish politics."

Shrewd O Brien apologizes for the use of **they** for **everybody,** whose agreement ought to have been in the singular, but the individual and his private consciousness had disappeared, being replaced with a citizen interpellated by the power system and identified, not by the Cartesian "I think," but by the agents of the Research Bureau. In the polling booth, a voter avoids being identified claiming to have lost his papers, but agents restore him to his better judgement, that is, determine him to behave like a responsible citizen:

> This man manages to sidle into the booth, avoids everybody's eyes, starts searching his pockets and makes no attempt to vote. He is ultimately asked for his name and stammers a name out after some hesitation. No, he cannot find his card. He does not know his number. The agents immediately challenge him. A Guard hovers in the background (using the patent wings devised by my Research Bureau). Then **me decent man** changes his tune, establishes his identity with devastating precision, causes a number of bystanders to identify him, casts his vote (instead of voting) and walks out leaving a very discomfited parcel of officials behind him, all wondering if they will receive solicitors' letters the next morning. A very bad low Irish type. (**emphasis mine**) (*na gCopaleen: web*)

The man looks suspicious, the perspective has changed: O Brien does not count, like Francis Bacon, the uses and abuses of dissimulation, he borrows the policeman's eye to interpret the role the individual is playing, always suspecting citizens of some malicious intent and foul act, as for what they actually think, nobody gives a damn. Nevertheless, O'Brien qualifies the whole affair as the individual's attempt at **personating** himself:

> In the polling booth also I saw evidence of that dreadful pest, the man who is anxious to give the impression that he is personating himself. I will not say that he tries to look like a suspicious character, for the sole reason that I try to write decent English and I will not permit myself (for one moment) to say "suspicious character" if I mean a character who is not suspicious but whose behaviour provokes suspicions on the part of others. (*na gCopaleen: web*)

Here is the very reversal of the relationship between reality and staging in which the definition of drama was originally grounded. Stripped of the Cartesian self-identity of being and thinking, the citizen of the modern slave societies, in possession of ID cards, are, as Kristeva says, called to trial, interpellated by the political power system and forced into social roles. Selfless and straightjacketed the common citizen becomes "decent" and also a person (**me decent man**) to the extent that he executes the mechanics of voting the right political runner according to the official view of *Irish Times*. Flann O'Brien obeys the rule by casting his vote – not "voting", he specifies, that is, by wasting the possibility of sincere choice –supposing the electorate might be granted something in the way of choice. Even if he seeks release for the true contents of his conscience by jotting down some satirical verse, he bitterly adds that criticism does not invalidate a vote, as nobody cares about such antics.

In another Cruiskeen Lawn column, of June 19th 1944, O'Brien casts himself in the negative role of a frondist citizen who discomfits the judge by speaking Latin. The text about the trial in court of one of *Brian O'Nolan's* personae, Myles na gCopaleen, takes the form of a law case brief, an institutional discourse specifying roles in a trial court script: Justice, Defendant, Detective, Sargeant (Prosecutor). Modern bureaucratic societies, with standardized roles in their everyday lives following pre-established scripts, have finally literalized the metaphor of the world as a stage.

The topic of the present essay, therefore, poses ontological and epistemological questions: what is it that passes for reality and what is fake, what is the meaning of face and mask in a world where scientists have decreed the principle of uncertainty and artists have abandoned the very ground of their poetics of representation which is the placing in relation of being and signifying as ontologically distinct. Searching for an answer, we set out from the working hypothesis that the controversy around the canonization of Flann O'Brien as either modernist or postmodernist can be explained by his outsider status in relation to both. Actually he was an insider in the sense that his eminent mind got to the essence of what was new and characteristic in the wake of contemporary scientific thought or art experiments, but, dolphin like, as Shakespeare's Cleopatra says about Antony, he had kept his mind above the culture he was visiting distancing himself through irony, burlesque or pastiche. He put his contemporaries' ideas and styles to the test, undertaking a critique of culture *in the elitist conte philosophique tradition which includes Plato's Republic, Tristram Shandy, Moby Dick* or *Gulliver's'Travels.*

Modernism, meaning the 1900-1940 timespan, was a culture of contempt. Sexism, racism, eugenics were running rampant in the Western world. Originating in bio-sociology and psychiatry, the ideas of Nordau, Ray Lankaster, Gabriel de Tarde, Charcot, or Giuseppe Tomasso had impaired the representation of huge masses of people – women, Jews, handicapped and mentally ill persons – already before the turn of the century. The representation of Ireland as backwarded had a long tradition behind it, having been initiated by the early discourse of colonialism, or by what we might call, paraphrasing Frantz Fanon, Celtic faces, English masks. *Gesta Stephani* commissioned by King Stephan, the Conqueror's grandson, claimed that the Normans had civilized the lands inhabited by the Celts in the king's attempt to earn legitimacy. *Walter Map's De nugis curialium* ("Of the trifles of courtiers") includes an episode about King Herla of the ancient Britons who returns to his land with a ghostly company being perceived as a stranger after the Anglo-Saxon invasion and disappearing completely after the ascent of the Plantagenets to the throne of England. His descendants are later spoken of as *filii mortue* (Cap. XII). In *The Poor Mouth* (1941), a mock autobiography attributed to a certain Bonaparte O'Coonass, who ends up in jail, and supposedly edited by Myles na Gopaleen, O'Brien speaks about his folks demonized by contemporaries as poor or decayed as of an extinct race:"All that, nevertheless, is only the neighbours' talk and cannot be checked now because the neighbours are all dead and their likes will not be there again." (O'Brien 1941: web). Successively displaced in their lordship by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans, the Irish seemed to be haunted by the sense of an apocalyptic end. The Celtic Dawn had disseminated an agenda of revival, pointing however to foreign models and an artificial past, that was not felt to have a binding force on or even relevance to the present circumstances. On the contrary, Joyce mocks the salvation script in his story "Grace", Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* re-establishes his ascendancy over Bloom who had picked him up from the brothel's floor, his host acknowledging him as teacher and learning from him the identitarian practice of narration. Samuel Becket demystifies the script of resurrection and grace by showing Murphy, the protagonist of the homonymous book published in 1938, raised from his state of torpor only to be placed in an asylum. Humiliated by the fundamentalist Citizen in a Dublin bar, Bloom finds compensation in a dream of power with Jews displacing the Pope and Emperors. Anticipating Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Becket too exposes the danger of allowing oneself to be annihilated by the other's look. Murphy pulls the wrong lavatory chain, releasing gas – pre-Creation chaos – instead of fighting back Mr Endon's contemptuous look. Existentialism replaced Gabriel de Tarde's model in *The Law of Imitation* (*Les lois de l'Imitation*, 1890) of the brain as imitative organ with self-assertiveness. Being bound to imitate, the mind could at least apply itself to choice subjects, reading books and contemplation of exemplary

conduct so as to imitate some valuable object. At the other end of modernism, with memories of a world conflagration and expectations of a second one, existentialists saw nothing worth imitating around them. For Sartre or Beckett, the others are hell, to quote Gracin at the end of Sartre's play, *No Exit*. The individual should work out his own identitarian project and set it up for the others' contemplation. Interaction with the other is the site of the genealogy of personality, characters being often constructed as couples, such as Murphy and Endon (Beckett's *Murphy*), Vladimir and Estragon (Beckett's W*aiting for Godot),* Murphy and Kelly (O'Brien's "Two in One"). They are "two in one", evolving as a duo, the script itself engaging in a dialogue with some previous text. For instance, O'Brien's Murphy says he is "condemned": he is jointly damned with Kelly, who had "killed" him by working him into a fit of fury and a criminal act which had ruined his life and forced him under the other's ... skin, in both a literal and figurative sense. This story of twin sins, Murphy feels he is compelled to tell, reminding us of Coleridge's ghostly ancient mariner forcing his confession upon the wedding guest.

O'Brian's intertexts are not cultural indices used by the elitist party – Pound, Eliot, and Joyce – as signs of recognition shared by a coterie who looked down on the mob and who employed them to prevent art from falling in the hands of the laity, but a site of cultural critique. The story of the pig pampered by the Old Grandfather in *The Poor Mouth* and the grotesque travesty of piglets in babies for the purpose of getting money from the tax agents in exchange for the promise of teaching them to speak English is strongly reminiscent of a comic interlude in a medieval mystery play where a poor family passes off a pig for a newborn baby to avoid confiscation. The proximity of the religious drama staging the birth of Christ had a blasphemic effect, but it was necessary to relieve the audience from the tension of watching the heavy, dogmatic matter of the Biblical script. O'Brien is thus exposing the absurdity of Irish stereotypes concocted by the English, which appear as grossly incongruous and antiquated.

The mere paraphrase of a text with substitution of elements has a deflating effect, as in this ironic reversal through commutation to low register of Stephen's successive textual embedding from Clongowes to heaven by his friend Fleming in the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a young man*: "O'Coonassa is my surname in Gaelic, my first name is Bonaparte and Ireland is my little native land." (Compare to *Stephen Dedalus is my name/ Ireland is my nation./ Clongowes is my dwelling place/ And heaven my expectation,* in Joyce's Künstlerroman) (O'Brien 1941: web)

Deliciously parodic is O'Brien's commonsensical rewriting of the decadent aesthetes' topoi, such as the superiority of masks over living creatures, or of the characters over the living author, as in Pirandello. Yeats had suggested the emancipation of Ireland through the adoption of a mask, or imitation of great past civilizations – Byzantium or even heroic Ireland of ancient times.

> In the poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' (1915) and the essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), Yeats expounded the belief that every man has an ideal counterpart, an intimate double, an anti-self in whom every trait is the opposite of his own. Poets, according to his doctrine, gain imaginative intensity through the struggle to realize in their poems a vision of this Mask. Thus the lecherous Dante labored to create a 'Dante' of austere and unforgiving purity, the poet as we infer him from the poem. [...] The reader of Yeats's work must try to suspend some of his Freudian convictions, such as the postulate that a man's fundamental self is the birth-self, the baby, an incoherent monster of appetite. To Yeats, the fundamental self is what a man strives to become, not what he originally is. (Albright 2013 : 36)

In his story *Two in One,* dramatized as *The Dead Spit of Kelly*, O'Brien has the infamous character glorify his *métier*–the stuffing of dead animals–for combining the skills of several professions – zoologist, chemist, sculptor, artist or carpenter. Taxidermy had decayed, Murphy complains, to the use of French plastic cast to produce copies instead of the original animal skin processed with art. The mean stuffing process is thus ascribed a history whose Yeatsian masks are Carthage of the fifth century – founded by the previous centre of power, Tyre, Carthage had by then become the commercial centre of the Mediterranean – and Austria of the sixteenth century, when the ruling Habsburg dynasty reached the peak of their power.

In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Father's oration in praise of characters is grounded in the argument that they are eternal, which cannot be said of authors or the actors interpreting them. O'Brien takes this new statement in dramatic poetics to its absurdist consequences in *At Swim Two Birds*, where the first narrator is presented as a poor, anonymous student, while his characters either usurp his place – like Trellis – or rebel against the surrogate author threatening to kill him.

It was in *June 19th,* 1944 that O'Brian, insensitive to the war raging on the continent, turned to the new ideas and vocabularies of quantum physics that had recently emerged, changing completely the world picture of classical physics. O'Brien not only understands the esoteric language and shockingly new theories which still sound unfamiliar after decades of schooling, but he also finds fault with the new field on account of its lack of elegance: the formally unaccountable passage from quantum to macro levels of analysis:

> The point, of course, about Eddington's handling of the experiment was his realisation that it could only give information about a double wave system which "belonged" as much to the electron as to the material comparison standard necessarily used. Very well To reach a result it had been necessary to investigate the circumstances where the double wave can be replaced with single waves (really, this sounds like barber-shop talk!) –or in other words, to examine the process where you are slipping from macroscopic to microscopic; call them "magnitudes" by all means, terminology is unimportant. [...] "I do not think they [the number of particles in the universe] affect it [the experiment in the laboratory] at all, but the Cavendish and other experiments having given the result they did, we can deduce that space will go on and on, curving according to the mass contained in it until only a small opening remains and that the 10 (to the power of 79) particle will be the last particle to be admitted through the last small opening and will shut the door after it."Bye-bye, 10 (to the power of 79). Mind that step!" (*na gCopaleen: web*)

The scientific theory of the end of the universe is humoroulsy forced upon a real life scene in which the host sees his guest to the door advsing him to watch the stair. The number of electrons was said to indicate the stability of the system: the atoms with an even number of electrons were considered to be more stable than those with an odd number. That is probably why, in the conclusion to the "ontological phantasmagori" of *At Swim-two-Birds*, we read that "Evil is even, truth is an odd number [...]". O Brien's satirical onslaught targeted the collapse of ontological boundaries allowing physicists to make inferences from one level of reality to another-from subatomic to the macro-world of classical physics- and to blur the distinctions between what is real, material and what is only possible. Sir Arthur Stanley Edington, the butt of O'Brien's satirical onslaught, claimed there was no logical distinction between actual particles and mathematical fictions. Particles are conceptual carriers of a set of variates-a wave function, a system of possible, not actual states.

We shall freely invent particles to carry the sets of variates that our form of analysis groups together. The provision of a carrier is not so much a necessity of thought as a necessity of language [it is] desirable to distinguish the 'mathematical fictions' from the 'actual particles'; but it is difficult to find any logical basis for such a distinction [since] '[d]iscovering' a particle means observing certain effects which are accepted as proof of its existence; but it seems to be a matter of fashion or convention that one sort of effect rather than another is accepted as critical for this purpose. (Eddington 1946: 31)

The ruled paper used by the student in At Swim-Two-Birds is this blank sheet for mathematical language on which versions of plots and counterfactual characters cross paths with the inmates of the original chronodiegetic plot.

Unlike O Brien, Samuel Becket modelled his fictional world on a chronotope inspired by the New Physics: "Nothing never had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it." (67)

Contrariwise, O'Brien's adaptations are ironic. The *Various Lives of Keats and Chapman* could very well be described as the double wave mentioned by Eddington and quoted by O Brien: the wave function of the proton and the wave function of the electron whose interference causes states of the system different from the states the two particles collapse into when being on their own. Chapmen and Keats are a transhistorical party standing for mis-translation, departure from the original: Chapman rewriting Homer, Keats reading this travestied Homer. The sketches are lovely examples of punning, with signfiers sliding under signifieds: Axel's Castle, the headquarters of disinterested end-of-the century aesthetes, created by *Villiers de L'Isle Adam*, slides under a mercantile version called *CHAPMAN'S CASTLE*: "Once upon a time Chapman inherited a large mountain estate which contained *a* derelict castle and was reputed *to* contain unknown quantities *of* wild sheep and deer. Keats advised his friend to sell the place immediately, as the *castle* was uninhabitable, sheep-farming was too speculative- particularly for an amateur-and in any case he (Keats) was in need of ready money." (O'Brien: web)

The epistemological crisis of the age, known as deconstruction of knowledge, induced by the Rudolf Carnap school of logical positivism (*The Logical Syntax of Language*, 1934) had also affected the definition of role and actor. Converting the *Two in One* narrative into a play, O Brien introduces the stage direction: "Utterance by way of thought, he proceeding in dumb show." Logos and the language of the body are set apart. The body is not entrusted, as in postmodernism, with the capacity to communicate thought, moreover, to create a reality

On the contrary, Husserl's 20th century version of the Lockean *"There is nothing* in the intellect that was not *previously* in the *senses"* that is, his phenomenology of knowledge derived from successive percepts of the object, inspired Carnap's rejection of interpretation: I can see a body performing certain gestures but I cannot know what they mean, they tell me nothing about the individual's intentional meaning:

 Let us take as an example the term 'angry'. If for anger we knew a sufficient and necessary criterion to be found by a physiological analysis of the nervous system or other organs, then we could define 'angry' in terms of the biological language. The same holds if we knew such a criterion to be determined by the observation of the overt, external behaviour. But a physiological criterion is not yet known. And the peripheral symptoms known are presumably not necessary criteria because it might be that a person of strong self-control is able to suppress these symptoms. If this is the case, the term 'angry' is, at

least at the present time, not definable in terms of the biological language. (Carnap 1938: 59)

If the body has no intelligible language of its own, how does acting on the stage convey meaning any more? The Vienna School of analytic philosophy threatened to discredit the time-honoured art of impersonation. Pirandello and Sartre elaborated on Husserlian psychology as well. Here is Sartre:

> [...] in the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine. But the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other. (Sartre 1943: 222)

Sartre seems to be commenting here on Beckett'novel published five years before, as Murphy, who is plying chess with ego-centred Mr Endon sees himself "stigmatized in those eyes that did not see him": "In the cornea, horribly reduced, obscured and distorted, his own image" (149).

In Pirandello's novel *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926), Moscarda realizes one day that who he thought he was and what his wife saw in him were completely diffrent affairs:

> And others? Others are not in me at all. For others, who look from without, my ideas, my feelings have a nose. My nose. And they have a pair of eyes, my eyes, which I do not see but which they see. What relation is there between my ideas and my nose? For me, none whatever. I do not think with my nose, nor am I conscious of my nose when I think. But others? Others, who cannot see my ideas within me, but who see my nose without? For others, there is so intimate a relation between my ideas and my nose that if the former, let us say, were very serious while the latter was mirth-provoking by reason of its shape, they would burst out laughing." As I ran on like this, a fresh anxiety laid hold of me: the realization that I should not be able, while living, to depict myself to myself in the actions of my life, to see myself as others saw me, to set my body off in front of me and see it living like the body of another.(Pirandello 1933: web)

Pirandello takes epistemological pessimism about physical-*behavioural* statements to its extreme showing life converted to unintelligible performance, even to the performer. The difference between Pirandello and O'Brien is that the former wrote that in earnest while the latter staged the earlier 20th century mixing pot of ideas while laughing at it from behind the stage or from the stalls. Acting out for O'Brien was this particular mode of exorcising the demons of his time and making them the object of his consciousness and of public gaze in a comic show unmarked for genre but which could be seen as a form of cultural critique in existentialist key.

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