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Flann O'Brien and the Question of National Identity

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The theoretical background from which the author initiates his argument is the contention that the phenomenon of nationalism has been dangerously undertheorized and, consequentially, inadequately differentiated. In the central part of his article he goes on to argue how the recognition of the specificity of Irish literary texts necessitates the application of the national parameter. To corroborate this claim the author shows the need for a more analytic and differentiated approach to the concept of nationalism. The bulk of the paper is devoted to an analysis of how even such a decidedly modernist writer as Flann O'Brien is unimaginable outside the enabling conditions of his national identity

In the preface she wrote to her novel *Castle Rackrent* (1800) Maria Edgeworth voiced an opinion which is not only pertinent to the argument of my paper but alludes to the Union of Great Britain and Ireland (1800) and its anticipated consequences in a manner and with a confidence that from our bicentenary perspective appears wholly unfounded. The relevant passage concludes the preface and reads as follows:

There is a time when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits and a new consciousness. Nations as well as individuals gradually lose attachment to their identity, and the present

generation is amused rather than offended by the ridicule that is thrown upon their ancestors. Probably we shall soon have it in our power, in a hundred instances, to verify the truth of these observations. When Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back with a smile of good-humoured complacency on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence (1995:5).

The assertions in the first two sentences of the above passage derive from the eighteenth century's trust in the value and historical inevitability of progressivist universalism. The analogy between human beings and nations and the conviction that particularities are subsumed in or eradicated by values of a higher order stems from the perfectionist argument according to which humans, both as individuals and as a species, progressively attain a higher state of being. The probabilistic addendum in the third sentence replicates the form of a scientific deduction and rhetorically prepares the ground for the envisioned relationship between Ireland and Great Britain. In the next sentence the probability has become an actuality whose realization is merely a question of time. The fact that the preface was written, as Edgeworth's commentator informs us (1995:119), before the actual Act of Union only testifies to the unwavering certitude in which the Enlightenment project was held even at such a late date in the century. Even though the Union was institutionalized a short while after Edgeworth made her pronouncement, its efficacy was far from what she had envisioned and the word "complacency" seems surely out of place when recalling Ireland's tumultuous history within that Union. Perhaps the impossibility of that history may be glanced in Edgeworth's last projection of Ireland's feminized identity yielding to Great Britain and in the logical question which imposes itself as to who will be able and in a position to look back if the enabling conditions of Ireland's identity were to be submerged into the grasp of the neighboring island. That Edgeworth's quaintly archaic prophecy regarding the meltdown of Irish specificity within a more encompassing polity did not come to pass, testifying to, what I maintain, is the retentive power of national identity, represents the context and indicates the horizon of issues which I hope to address in my article.

2.

In his book *Enlightenment's Wake* (1995) John Gray develops an argument which accords with the theoretical position from which I approach the question of nationalism and, more to the point of this paper, the different ways I think it can be related to a body of literary texts. His position can be provisionally summarized as the recognition that the Enlightenment project with its "expectations of the evanescence of particularistic allegiances, national and religious, and of the progressive leveling down, or marginalization, of the cultural difference in human affairs" (1995:65) has been proven a failure in an age which has witnessed, to quote Gray again, "renascent particularisms, militant religions and resurgent ethnicities"(62). Alluding to Borges he goes on to say that there is a kind of Tlönist methodology within the sciences of man "according to which only that has reality which is at any particular time perceptible in academic discourse" (12). As an example he refers to a companion to political philosophy where nationalism does not even make an appearance because its authors do not count it amongst "principled ways of thinking about things". Gray makes the following comment:

These remarks imply that nationalism, easily the most powerful political phenomenon in the contemporary world, not only has no defense in principled thought, but never did; that the reflections of Hegel on the nation-state, and of Herder on national culture, do not count, and presumably never counted, as exercises in principled thought (13).

Contrary to this position, the perspective of agonistic liberalism which Gray contrasts to this theoretical erasure of historically effective agency and which informs the following reading recognizes

that the exemplars of the liberal form of life are always particular common cultures, and that it is to them, rather than to any universalizable principles which they might embody, that allegiance is owed.... on the agonistic view allegiance will always be to a particular form of common life, not to abstract principles which may be elicited from it. This is so, on the agonistic view, if only because there is no impartial or universal standpoint from which the claims of all particular cultures can be rationally

assessed. This is, in effect, to deny the philosophical anthropology of the Enlightenment, by affirming that human identities are always local affairs, precipitates of particular forms of common life, never tokens of the universal type of generic humanity (79).

Returning to the issue of nationalism, Gray contends that in the modern world nations are the vehicles of such common cultures. Taking issue with the idea of difference as choice Gray expands on the tenacious power of these formations by proposing that “cultural identities are not constituted, voluntaristically, by acts of choice; they arise by inheritance, and by recognition. They are fates rather than choices. It is this fated character of cultural identity which gives it its agonistic, and sometimes tragic character” (124). Let me add to this that the fated notion of identity and the different ways it can be related to and experienced could hardly find a better example than in the fraught relationship all writers have always had with their cultures and particularly with its language as that part of the cultural sphere within which they carry out their projects.

One consequence of these Enlightenment assumptions has yielded the condition that in comparison to other social phenomena nationalism has been dangerously undertheorized. I would contend that this outcome is the product of two mutually contradictory positions. On the one hand in some quarters nationalism and its different expressions and embodiments have been deemed not worthy of theoretical consideration; these entities have been scorned as anomalies, atavisms. I would venture so far as to maintain that in certain academic circles and venues the discourse on nationalism is viewed with suspicion if not with prohibitory hostility. On the other hand, the opposite position has held nationalism and its attendant manifestations as sacrosanct, unique, something that ought to be sheltered from the probings of theoretical acumen. In my opinion both the derogatory and the celebratory viewpoints have contributed to the practice of approaching nationalism in an insufficiently undifferentiated manner. Let me quote a pertinent statement made by Scott Brewster in his discussion of nationalism and revisionism in Ireland:

One must avoid analyzing nationalism in the singular, in the abstract, and one must avoid imputing the bad example to a nationalism other than one's own. One must pluralise, and speak in the particular, so that specific forms or manifestations of nationalism and of violence are analyzed. The key is to view matters in terms of variety rather than verity. (Brewster 1999:21)

In an article on Yeats's theatre Shaun Richards warns that nationalism should not be approached as "constituting an undifferentiated whole". He finds support for this contention in Simon During citing his judgement that nationalism "has different effects and meanings in a peripheral nation than in a world power" (1994.200). Therefore, to return to the question of Irish literature and its broader context, I would contend that the procedure of recognizing the specificity of Irish literary texts does not only presuppose an inscription of a difference into a body of textual production which has all too often been viewed as a homogenized entity but necessitates a more analytic and differentiated approach to the concept of nationalism itself.

3.

Those who question the value of searching for or engaging with the specificity of Irish culture and literature generally operate with a cultural context, based on language and territorial proximity, which is supposedly more universalist. Of course one need not have an over-subtle theoretical apparatus to reveal that this broader context is marked and dominated by British identity appearing in its different guises. In addition, experience has taught me that decisions made as to the context in which we read the literatures and cultures of Ireland and the United Kingdom are never disinterested judgments but stem from particular, local agendas. Of course the foregrounding of Ireland's specificity and the interest shown for Irish matters is not immune from similar considerations. The proliferation of cross-cultural readings of Ireland can, amongst other things, be explained precisely by the fact that it offers an exemplary site of contentious theoretical practices. Nevertheless, however these are conceived what cannot be contested is that if Irish identity receives differentiated recognition it must be recognized as a national identity.

Although within cross-cultural readings the issues raised by contemporary revisionist readings of Irish history have to be engaged both because of their factual evidence and their theoretical interest, I believe that it is indispensable, especially for those of us who approach Ireland from other cultures, to make a preliminary engagement with the issue of nationalism. Terence Brown has formulated the centrality of nationalism within Irish history and culture in the following manner:

Where other Europeans have engaged in a conflict about the very nature of man and society themselves, Irishmen and women, writers, artists, politicians, workers have committed themselves to a vision of national destiny which has often meant a turning away from much uncomfortable social reality to conceptions of the nation as a spiritual entity that can compensate for a diminished experience (1985:105).

Irish literature shares the same preoccupation and it is the context of its national culture that legitimizes it as a specific subject. My choice of Flann O'Brien was dictated by the conviction that even such a decidedly modernist writer, with all the cosmopolitan connotations such an appellation bears, is nevertheless unimaginable outside the enabling conditions of his national identity. Joseph Lennon counts him amongst the company of James Stephens, Joyce and Liam O'Flaherty as those Irish novelists who disrupted the English form of the novel. Although it could easily be shown that the innovations made by these writers were often considered not as Irish per se but as modernist novels I agree when Lennon continues and holds that such writers "made a conscious distinction between Irish novels and English novels. Their innovations must, therefore, also be considered as breaks with a colonially imposed literary standard" (1996:79)

4.

My reading of O'Brien's texts seeks out the different ways they refer to and inscribe what I recognize as the multi-faceted presence of Irishness. Furthermore my analysis will show the manner in which his narratives embody the author's relationship towards this phenomenon. As a sort of precautionary measure it ought to be stated that cross-cultural reading, such as the present one, are apt to overlook indices of which the natives take immediate cognizance while, at the same time, the gaze from abroad might register elements which the native consciousness has naturalized to the point of invisibility.

From the perspective of this paper the most interesting aspect of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is O'Brien's reprocessing of the mythological past. The Sweeney legend is one of the most important intertexts used by O'Brien in the novel and as such permeates the narrative on a number of levels. As a character positioned within a particular setting and temporal framework, Sweeney with his tale and its particular brand of language constitutes a major thread of O'Brien's

narrative. However, of particular pertinence to my reading is the context in which Sweeney finds himself there. Namely, by entwining the Sweeney legend into the self-evident “sham” - as he calls it - of his text O'Brien undermines whatever grounding the story might have retained for the reader. Put otherwise, the legendary figure of the past is no more than another fabrication of O'Brien self-undermining textuality.

On a more superficial level, there are a number of explicit references to what I have targeted as the Irishness of O'Brien's texts. An example of the relational nature of Irish identity is evident when we read of the narrator “discussing the primacy of America and Ireland in contemporary letters and commenting on the inferior work produced by writers of the English nationality” (1967:45). This assessment is found twice in the book (160). Later in the text the same sense of superiority and greater worth is projected into the past when Shanahan remarks on “the real old stuff of the native land, you know, stuff that brought scholars to our shore when your men on the other side were on the flat of their bellies before the calf of gold with sheepskin around their man” (75). The argument over the inclusion of the waltz into a social ceremony pertains to the same argument: “We must make allowances. One old-time waltz is all I ask. It's as Irish as any of them, nothing foreign about the old-time waltz”(133). Mr. Connors's conclusion that “Because a thing is foreign it does not stand to reason that it's bad” (134) implies the narrow insularity out of which these statements derive. The narrator's attitude stands jokingly above these pronouncements on what can jokingly be labelled Irish exceptionalism. When one of the characters contends that “jumping” is “the one thing the Irish race is honored for no matter where it goes or where you find it” (85) we recognize another lampoon of O'Brien's deflationary rhetoric.

On a very abstract level there are at least three items in the novel *The Third Policeman* (1967) that can be considered within the problematic of Irish identity. The narrator of this strange tale is of Irish identity but it is indicative of O'Brien's engagement with the question that he has lost his name. Numerous lines of inquiry can be mustered to show how this loss implicates issues of identity. Just to mention one, the loss of the personal name can be seen as indicating a submergence into a collective anonymity. To take another instance, de Selby's scientific discourse and his schemes, running parallel to the primary story, can be seen as a tangential commentary on the ideology of a romanticized and primitivist Ireland. To take this contention a step further one could say that the mechanized nature of the otherworld, the contraption-like terms in which it is described, parody the aestheticized and ethereal mode in which it had been evoked in revivalist lore.

In a much more forthright fashion the narrator indicates the Irish context and gives his opinion on the very first page of the novel: "My father I do not remember well but he was a strong man and did not talk much except on Saturdays when he would mention Parnell with the customers and say that Ireland was a queer country" (1976:7). I note also a later dialogue in the novel which spins out the yarn of the man up in the sky and his neighbors who press the man with weapons to tell them of his doings up there. The narrator's comment reads as follow: "That is a nice piece of law and order for you, a terrible indictment of democratic self-government, a beautiful commentary on Home Rule"(159). Finally, I draw attention to those places in the text where the vistas of Hell are described in terms of the Irish landscape, to be more precise as a "bogland". The following passage gives the fullest evocation of this scenery:

Brown bogs and black bogs were arranged neatly on each side of the road with rectangular boxes carved out of them here and there, each with a filling of yellow-brown brown-yellow water. Far away near the sky tiny people were stooped at their turf-work, cutting out precisely-shaped sods with their patent spades and building them into a tall memorial twice the height of a horse and cart. Sounds came from them to the Sergeant and myself, delivered to our ears without charge by the west wind, sounds of laughing and whistling and bits of verses from the old bog-songs.(86)

This passage attains its full subversive charge within intertextual positionings with those Irish texts that have devoted themselves to the buildup of a powerful psycho-emotional investment in issues of land. Simply put, the narrative situation where this passage appears - in a description of Hell - demystifies this investment. If O'Brien's text configures Hell using Irish geography then it can be surmised that the reverse metaphoric identification is not far behind.

The very first chapter of O'Brien's third novel *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) mentions two elements that are pertinent to my argument. Elaborating the Irish setting O'Brien mentions an obelisk and rhetorically postulates a number of possibilities regarding the question in whose honor it had been erected. After a number of honorees - the Creator, Scotus Erigena, Parnell, all dignitaries of the Irish pantheon - have been emphatically denied the roll-call ends with a deflationary identification: "No indeed: Queen Victoria" (1993:8). Another way the English presence intrudes upon the projected Irish identity can be found a few

pages later when De Selby commissions a local to paint the name of his residence on the gate. The name he had chosen was “a hybrid” combining the Irish word *mor* and the English word *lawn*. What eventually appears on the gate is the word *landmower* where the elision of the Irish component shows an incompetence in the medium which, throughout the project of constructing a national polity, has been proffered as a vehicle of legitimating a distinctive identity. In the two passages from the book, one dealing with commemorative memory and the other with language an essentialist identity is undercut by the presence of the other against which it has sought to establish its distinctiveness.

The Dalkey Archive recycles the evocation of the bogland scene and the sergeant's exposition of the preposterous “mollycule” theory from *The Third Policeman* with a difference that is relevant to my present concerns. In the later novel the bogland scene is a childhood memory which cannot accommodate the sergeant's exposition of the molecular transformations under way between humans and machines. Awakening from his reverie the narrator's thoughts are as follows: “The scene was real and incontrovertible but at variance with the talk of the sergeant. Was it not monstrous to allege that the little people winning turf far away were partly bicycles?” (78). In this hallucinatory scene O'Brien reworks the incompatibility between a pristine rural idyll and technological know-how and machinery. Reemploying again the passage concerning the strange metamorphosis between man and bicycles which he had used in *The Third Policeman* O'Brien adds a comment in *The Dalkey Archive* which is of immediate interest to my reading. The narrator notes that there is more in the molecular transformations “than the monstrous exchange of tissue for metal.

- And what would that be? the sergeant asked curiously.
- All decent Irishmen should have a proper national outlook. Practically any bike you have in Ireland was made in either Birmingham or Coventry.
- I see the point intimately. Yes. There is also an element of treason entailed. Quite right. (82).

Compared to the earlier text O'Brien has here jokingly added and intertwined the discourse of national identity into his procedure of “improvisatory freedom” (Grgas 1999:270) with which he deals with science. As a matter of fact, *The Dalkey Archive* can be read as a frolicsome subversion of the hierarchy of discourses and practices constituting a particular culture. These discourses have

a tendency to cross over to each other so that no one discourse remains stable or tells a definite story. Each poaches, admittedly in a self-undermining fashion, on the other. O'Brien's text positions the discourses of religion, science and art within a hilarious momentum whose energies challenge the rigidities of its domicile cultural order.

O'Brien's subversions can of course be more bitingly concrete. When in *The Dalkey Archive* the apparition of Saint Augustine says that his shortcomings stem from that side of him which is Irish (33); when the same otherworldly interlocutor states that there are not only two Saint Patricks but "*four of the buggers in our place and they'd make you sick with their shamrocks and shenanigans and bullshit*" (35); or when the character Hackett says of Judas "that devil of a man was at heart a country Irishman, consecutively because of his eerie love of the sod -" (62) - all of these are instances where O'Brien mocks the smug pieties of holiness, of origins and love of land which are perpetuated by a specific notion of Irishness. The same can be said of the way that Dr Crewett explodes the nation-building role of the trans-Atlantic Irish with his comment that "they and the Italians, both sterling Roman Catholic races, are answerable for the enduring system of crime and vice in America" (91). As a final reference from the novel I draw attention to the opinion O'Brien has Joyce, the returnee, voice about his countrymen and Europe:

One of the great drawbacks of Ireland, he said, is that there are too many Irish here. You understand me? I know it is natural and to be expected, like having wild animals in the zoo. But it's unnerving for one who has been away in the mishmash that is Europe today. (163).

The statement does not accord with the historical image of a country decimated by hunger and calamity. On the contrary, the emphatic "too" betokens a surplus. I read the caustic and bitter metaphor of animals and zoo as O'Brien's jocular redeployment of the rhetoric of dehumanization used to justify colonial subjugation. Finally the negative connotations of the word "mishmash" are overturned in the text because of the implied opposite Europe offers to the paralysis of a homogenic Ireland.

Throughout *The Hard Times* (1961) the reader encounters sporadic references to elements which are constitutive of Irish identity. Very early in the text the discourse of nativism manifested in religious affiliations, sport activities and the language are topics in a conversation which concludes with Mr Collopy's

disparaging assertion that the Irish are as prepared for Home Rule as “the blue men in Africa” (1995:18-19). The image of Irishness O’Brien is working with in the text needs to be evaluated keeping in mind that the present of the novel is 1910 when nativism was a formative ingredient in the emerging Irish self-consciousness. However, this is far from being the only instance of deflating the ideal of the emergent identity.

Thusly, the importance of Collopy’s answer to the Pope’s inquiry after “beloved Ireland” - “Only middling, Your Holiness. The British are still there.” (135) - and its targeting of colonial occupation is enfeebled by the fatuity of the scene where it is pronounced. In O’Brien’s text Irishness is not taken as an unquestionable point of origin but implicated in a network of reciprocal scrutiny. At one point the older brother explains that Ireland is not “suitable” to him explaining: “An Irish address is no damned use. The British dislike and distrust it. They think all the able and honest people live in London” (64). Regardless of the ironic overtones in which this statement has to be read the text positions the Other - Britain in most cases - as the more appealing pole. In his first letter from London the older brother emphatically states that “it’s better” there (101). If the abjection of the foreign is integral to the buildup of self-identity and is an important part of the social logic underpinning the valuing of identity, what O’Brien achieves is a reversal of the process, undermining its very mechanism.

The Poor Mouth (1941) can be viewed as an exemplary Irish novel which, according to Gerry Smyth, “has developed a range of forms, narratives and styles which engage with the relationship between nation and geography, from full romantic identification to a radical scepticism couched in tones of irony and parody” (Smyth 1997:62). As an example of this radical scepticism *The Poor Mouth* gives expression to an apocalyptic ending of the pastoral representation of Irish identity. The depicted squalor and backwardness of the “centre of the Gaeltacht” can be read as a powerful invective aimed at the idealisation of a supposedly untainted region of Irish origins. Instead of providing sustenance and a source of self-legitimization, in O’Brien’s acerbic vision rural Ireland is a place of paralysis and mind-numbing passivity. Needless to say, the fact that the text was originally published in Irish enmeshes the language itself in this work of subversion and demystification.

More so than in the other novels, in *The Poor Mouth* O’Brien deconstructs one version of the Irish national ‘political imaginary’ understood here, to use Richard Kearney’s formulation, as “stories, myths or other forms of dramatic collective representation”. On the same occasion Kearney maintains that the

'political imaginary' posits goals and origins, establishes and resolves crises and creates a distinctive sense of cultural self-identification and self-imagining (Kearney 1997:189). Let me draw the reader's attention to the episode in *The Poor Mouth* where the narrator is describing being chased by an evil thing through "the Paradise of Ireland". O'Brien incorporates into the text a typographical drawing the narrator sketches to help the Old-Fellow fathom the enigma of the previous night's encounter. A telling footnote O'Brien uses to explain the ideogram of the Sea-cat is of great relevance to my argument:

The good reader will kindly notice the close resemblance between the Sea-cat, as delineated by O'Coonassa, and the pleasant little land which is our own. Many things in life are unintelligible to us but it is not without importance that the Sea-cat and Ireland bear the same shape and that both have all the same bad destiny, hard times and ill-luck attending on them which have come upon us (1988:76-77)

A whole set of metaphorical identifications are implied in the similarity between the delineated contours of the supposedly horrendous beast and the map of Ireland. O'Brien's lambasting of Gaelicism, placed within the framework of discourses legitimating Irish paradisiacal distinctiveness, biting targets the hampering and debilitating effects of a nativist ideology. However, to use O'Brien's phrasing, regardless of this critique the Ireland written here is not a distant or a foreign entity but a land the author relates to as his own.

Although the Irish national identity, as evidenced by its tenacious presence, was an enabling condition of O'Brien's work there can be no doubt that in his hands it was scrutinized, it was problematized and unraveled into opposing positions of dissent and retrieval. Reading O'Brien one senses a transgression of the exclusionary logic of identity. However, it needs to be pointed out that transgression takes place because there is a prior sense of stable conceptualizations of society and culture. To reformulate this, perception of transgression relies, necessarily and without paradox, upon the recognition of national identity; transgression would not be discernible were there no such identity to be transgressed and affirmed as "real". It could be argued that O'Brien's engagement with national identity can be viewed as parallel to his problematizing of the novel form. To paraphrase the opening statement of *At Swim Two Birds*, the national identity that can be derived from his texts asks why it should be only one of a kind.

5.

The editor of a recent collection of essays entitled *Irishness and (Post)modernism* (1994) situates these entities in a perspective which has something in common with my reading of O'Brien's work. On the one hand, John S. Rickard writes, there are the "big words" that imply or designate the shaping power of a specific, essential national identity and culture" and on the other the newer appellations "that imply the existence or development of a transnational, global avant-garde culture". He goes on to maintain that the assumption behind the volume was

that modern and contemporary Irish writing provides a rich site for examining the tensions between these two sets of cultural and literary terminology - one rooted in the needs and mythology of a postcolonial national experience and the other in the needs and mythology of an emerging international, even global, culture (1994:13).

To a certain extent that tension is the very nexus of O'Brien's project which, in that regard, is exemplary of the predicament of Irish culture. For the sake of argument I propose an image of a culture, geopolitically located at the margin of a continent and yet in the very center of the dominant trans-Atlantic circulation of power and commodities, where different temporalities and spatialities coexist in a state of conflict and reinforcement. In a sense, the manner in which O'Brien addresses identity in his novels exemplifies the strategy of holding in balance these different options.

Those who all too easily disparage nationalism contending, for instance, that contemporary developments have wholly undermined the very reason for its existence are unable of holding these things in balance. On the other hand a writer such as Richard Kearney can offer a constructive argument precisely because he is insightful enough not to turn a blind eye to the retentive power of nationalism nor to denigrate it as an undifferentiated atavism. In his discussion of "Postnationalism and Postmodernity" Kearney offers guidelines which are indispensable if the phenomenon of nationalism is to be approached in a constructive fashion:

In endeavoring to go beyond negative nationalism one must be wary, therefore, not to succumb to the opposite extreme of anti-nationalism. Those who identify all forms of nationalism with

irredentist fanaticism habitually do so in the name of some neutral standpoint that masks their own ideological bias. To roundly condemn Irish nationalism, for instance, refusing to distinguish between its constitutional and nonconstitutional expressions and omitting reference to the historical injustices of British colonialism and unionism, amounts to a tacit *apologia* of the latter. It also fails to appreciate the fundamental role of nationalist ideology in the formation of the *British* nation-state at the end of the eighteenth century. (Nationalism is not the prerogative of the Irish.) (1997:58)

Even a writer as critical of older pieties as Colm Toibin purports to be not blind to the staying power of communal ties. In his contribution to the collection of essays *Ireland: Towards new identities?* (1998) he makes the following statement: "Foster's position is clear, he wants Ireland to become a pluralist, post-nationalist, all-inclusive, non-sectarian place. So do I. But there are other (I hesitate to use the word atavistic) forces operating within me too that I must be conscious of" (36).

My approach to questions of national identity derives from the felt need to renounce the proclivity of theorizing from uncontextualized hypothesis. It is apparent that overarching theories of nationalism, both the ones that celebrate and the ones that denigrate it as a social fact, fail to do justice to the conflicts between nationalisms, the different self-representations that vie within the context of an individual national formation and between nationalism and other socio-historical options. At the very beginning of his analysis Richard Kearney gives a warning which is all too often forgotten: "I consider it unwise to anyone today to speak *about* the 'national question' without also stating where he/she is speaking *from*" (1997:1). This is the case with those pronouncements which disparage nationalism as such identifying it in all instances with an exclusionary form of community.

However, what is ignored in such a statement is that the agency of exclusion or the power to exclude has been unevenly distributed and put into practice through history. In other words, there have been different kinds of nationalism. The unwillingness to make that differentiation contributes to the suspicion of nationalism as such. This suspicion is oftentimes explained by nationalism's unwillingness to negotiate the other and its tendency to homogenize the difference that is encompassed by its boundaries. However, I want to conclude by drawing attention to the easily verifiable truth that transnational discourse is often guilty of the same blindness demonstrated in the unwillingness to address what does

not comply with its theoretical precepts and in the proclivity to homogenize the many variegated manifestations of nationalism.

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FLANN O'BRIEN I PITANJE NACIONALNOG IDENTITETA

Teorijska podloga autorove argumentacije jest prosudba da se fenomen nacionalizma na opasan način nedovoljno teoretizira i da je, kao posljedica toga, nedostatno diferenciran. U središnjem dijelu izlaganja autor zastupa mišljenje kako prepoznavanje specifičnosti irskih književnih tekstova iziskuje uporabu nacionalnog parametra. Želeći potkrijepiti tu postavku autor ukazuje na potrebu analitičnijeg pristupa pojmu nacionalizma. Glavnina rada posvećena je čitanju koje pokazuje kako se i zasigurno modernistički pisac kao što je Flann O'Brien ne može zamisliti izvan omogućujućih uvjeta nacionalnog identiteta.

Key words: nationalism, Ireland, Flann O'Brien, identity, ideology

Ključne riječi: nacionalizam, Irska, Flann O'Brien, identitet, ideologija

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