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Brian O’Nolan and Irish Cultural Debate,
1931-1945

Carol Taaffe

Ph.D.

University of Dublin

2004
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university, and that it is entirely my own work. I agree that Trinity College Library may lend or copy this thesis upon request.

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I am very grateful to my supervisor, Dr. John Nash, for his excellent guidance and support throughout. Myles pointed out that Joyce asked nothing of his readers but that they should devote their lives to reading his works, a method of spending a lifetime that would endow them with 'a unique psychic apparatus'. A similar affliction might come of reading too many tangled analyses of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and for that, my apologies. In the course of writing this thesis, many people have been generous with their time and help. Anthony Cronin and Prof. Cathal Ó Hainle both gave their time to discuss Brian O’Nolan. John MacKenna and Dave McHugh kindly assisted with the RTÉ archive, Fr. John Paul Sheridan helpfully burrowed in the Boston College library, and Mary and Gráinne English generously checked my translations from Irish at short notice. I am grateful for the assistance of the staff of Trinity College Library, the National Library of Ireland, the John J. Burns Library, Boston College, and particularly to David and Loretta Koch of the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale. This research has been aided by a Trinity College Postgraduate Award, the Trinity Trust Travel Fund, and a Government of Ireland Research Scholarship.

Thanks also to the Court Apts posse (residents and drifters alike) who helped me forget the thesis when forgetting was needed - Cora Sherlock, Sinéad Hegarty, Trays Connell, Ann Stone and Kathleen Burke – and to Takako Iwaki, Hilary Lennon and Elizabeth Hsin-Yin Lee for not letting me forget it for too long. And I must give a special acknowledgement to those curious souls who have been waiting all this time for my thesis on the little-known lady novelist, Fran O’Brien. (You may wait.) My family taught me what little I know about humour, so the thanks of the long-suffering are also due to Seamus and Miriam, Francis and Amanda, and Orla and Tamsen. Rachel Hannah Taaffe deserves special appreciation for cleverly timing her arrival at a very dispiriting moment in the Gaelic Revival. This thesis can be dedicated only to my parents, Frank and Breege, who have been endlessly supportive and encouraging, and who have a wonderful library. I will, one day, return the books.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a historical study of Brian O’Nolan’s fiction and journalism which encompasses the early period of his career, from his earliest newspaper publications in 1931 to the first months of the uncensored, post-war Cruiskeen Lawn in 1945. Criticism of O’Nolan’s work has tended to concentrate primarily on his early fiction, particularly At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, and to some degree this thesis seeks to redress this imbalance. O’Nolan began and ended his literary career as a comic journalist, and in reading his fiction within its contemporary context, this study narrows the distinction between the humorous daily columnist and the experimental novelist. Unlike most studies of O’Nolan’s work, it closely examines the entire run of Cruiskeen Lawn in this period, and draws extensively on unpublished material held in the Brian O’Nolan collections in Boston College and Southern Illinois University Carbondale. By focusing on the early novels, and their metafictional elements, much previous criticism has cast O’Nolan as a precocious literary theorist. In contrast, this thesis contends that his humour was inextricably bound up with its time, and wholly engaged with contemporary intellectual controversies. It also argues against a simple understanding of his fiction or journalism as subversive satires of Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. By examining the various comic modes which O’Nolan exploited in his work, it demonstrates how a certain comic ambivalence and evasiveness run throughout his early writing, with a more consistently polemical tone emerging towards the mid-1940s. The ambiguity of the early writing is not simply a function of its literary sophistication, but a symptom of O’Nolan’s ambivalent response to contemporary Ireland, and to the position of the writer in Irish society.

The first chapter discusses O’Nolan’s invention of himself as author in the guise of Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen. It examines both the popular reputation of ‘Myles’/ O’Nolan, and the manner in which his literary personae were forged in response to contemporary Irish writers, most notably James Joyce. Chapter two explores O’Nolan’s intervention in contemporary literary debates through his first novel, At Swim-Two-Birds, and in particular its debts to the intellectual ethos of UCD.
in the early 1930s. The following chapter discusses the cultural underpinnings of The Third Policeman's nonsense, exploring the critical implications of its curiously estranged vision of Ireland. Chapter four turns to O'Nolan's writing in Irish, examining his satirical commentary on the Irish language revival in An Béal Bocht and over the first years of Cruiskeen Lawn. The last chapter traces the development of Cruiskeen Lawn throughout the war years, as the character of Myles progressed from a playful and inventive humourist to a more polemical satirist of Irish culture and politics. This study closes with a brief discussion of O'Nolan's 1943 plays, Faustus Kelly and The Insect Play, which illustrate an interesting point in the transition to his later, more satirical writing. In exploring the nuances of O'Nolan's humour within its social and cultural context, this thesis argues that its complexities and contradictions owe more to contemporary Irish cultural debate than has been recognised.
The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:


**CL**  Myles na gCopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn', *The Irish Times*.


**SIUC**  Brian O’Nolan Papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

**BC**  Flann O'Brien Collection, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.
Introduction
Brian O’Nolan and Irish Cultural Debate, 1931-1945

This study focuses primarily on the early period of Brian O’Nolan’s literary career, ranging from his contributions to the UCD student magazine, Comhthrom Féinne, in the early 1930s, to the first post-war Cruiskeen Lawn columns published in 1945. Appropriately (if inadvertently), its discussion of O’Nolan’s work opens and closes with his comic journalism – the ephemeral nature of the journalism itself serving as a reminder that the original nuances of O’Nolan’s comedy are lost without close attention to how his writing engaged with contemporary Irish culture. Notwithstanding his reputation as a satirist (and on occasion a polemicist), relatively little academic criticism of O’Nolan’s work has addressed his writing from a cultural or historical perspective. Of the eight monographs published on his work since 1975, six appeared after 1991 and these predominantly adopt a formalist or theoretical approach to his work. Thomas Shea’s 1992 study is representative of these, highlighting the degree to which O’Nolan’s works ‘anticipate many current critical concerns, especially theories of the novel’. Keith Hopper’s depiction of O’Nolan as a precocious post-modernist in 1995 coincided with M. Keith Booker’s reading of his fiction (after Bakhtin) as an example of self-reflexive menippean satire. This analysis was echoed in José Lanters’s survey of mid-century Irish satire in 2000, and was reiterated two years later in the most recent publication on O’Nolan, Keith Donohue’s The Irish Anatomist. However, while the latter two studies are theoretically informed, they also go some way towards examining the cultural context of his comedy. But to define O’Nolan primarily as a non-committal menippean satirist is to ignore the


2 Shea, Flann O’Brien’s Exorbitant Novels, p. 11.

greater (if not the most illustrious) part of a career that spanned nearly forty years. This reading is itself an indication that O’Nolan’s fiction (particularly *At Swim-Two-Birds*) has tended to dominate and direct criticism of his work. Nevertheless, it might be said that the past ten years has increasingly seen attempts to reconcile formalist analysis of O’Nolan’s writing (initially the dominant trend) with cultural or historical approaches.

While this thesis responds to points raised in earlier studies — for example, in discussing *At Swim* as an ambivalent comedy in chapter two, or *The Third Policeman* as a nonsense text in chapter three — its perspective is not restricted by a single theoretical precept. Rather, it addresses the various comic modes which O’Nolan’s writing exploits (such as satire, nonsense, and parody), and in doing so tracks his continually shifting dialogue with contemporary Ireland. The scope of this study is confined to O’Nolan’s most prolific period, from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s, to enable a close examination of his bilingual fiction, drama, and journalism in its historical context. Investigating how O’Nolan’s comic writing negotiated Irish culture in the 1930s and 1940s opens up unusual perspectives on a relatively neglected period of Irish literary history. The comic evasiveness of the early fiction (the difficulty of

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4 It is revealing that Donohue’s book does not stick too closely to the notion of O’Nolan as a menippean satirist, since the latter half is devoted to a chronological, and largely empirical, account of the development of *Cruiskeen Lawn* over its entire run.


6 Of his contemporaries in Ireland, O’Nolan has attracted the most critical attention; the most dominant prose writers of the time – Séan O’Faoláin, Frank O’Connor and Liam O’Flaherty – remain relatively neglected by academic criticism, though Elizabeth Bowen has fared a little better. General historical studies specifically addressing the 1930s and 1940s are also relatively rare (and old), among them Francis MacManus, ed. *The Years of the Great Test* (Cork: Mercier, 1967); Kevin B. Nowlan and T. Desmond Williams, eds. *Ireland in the War Years and After, 1939-51* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1969); Bernard Share, *The Emergency: Neutral Ireland 1939-45* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978); and Joost Augusteijn, ed. *Ireland in the 1930s* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999).
determining its satirical perspective) is one consequence of O’Nolan’s antipathy to the ‘little indigenous army of self-appointed demagogues’ which proliferated in all branches of Irish culture in the period, from literature to politics. But the ambivalent nonsense and double-edged comedy which characterise his early work (habitually undermining the subversive potential of his satirical voice) arguably reveal a certain conservatism on O’Nolan’s part, and indeed a larger degree of sympathy with the values of mid-century Ireland than is generally acknowledged. Despite his posthumous reputation as a scathing satirist, in the early 1940s O’Nolan’s writing was still marked by the kind of self-conscious duplicity that allowed Myles to play the plain man in the intellectuals’ broadsheet while still mocking the foibles of the Plain People of Ireland. This paradoxical stance is visible as early as *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which both emulates and ridicules Joyce’s modernism. But towards the mid-1940s, the ambiguities of the bombastic Myles na gCopaleen persona began to give way as the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column became increasingly topical, and Myles’s character consolidated into the scourge of Irish public life. As he did so, the column’s conflicts with Bertie Smyllie’s liberal *Irish Times* became more obvious, and O’Nolan increasingly revealed himself as a rather conservative intellectual (and ironically, one who was himself slightly imbued with the anti-intellectual bias of contemporary Ireland). Throughout the period under discussion here – a time when the draconian Censorship of Publications Act was first implemented, when Joyce was still a distant but imposing presence and O’Faoláin was exhorting his contemporaries to forge a new Ireland – O’Nolan’s fiction and journalism repeatedly queried the role of the writer in Irish society. This thesis argues that by the close of the war years O’Nolan had in some degree resolved this question for himself, as he belatedly assumed the guise of a benevolent guide - and less benevolent satirist - of ‘you Irish’.

This self-conscious attention to the persona of the author is addressed in chapter one, which investigates how O’Nolan’s fascination with the artifice of literature extended to his conception of himself as author. It examines O’Nolan’s various identities with reference both to his posthumous academic reputation (dominated by the fiction of

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Flann O'Brien) and the rather dissimilar popular legends surrounding Myles na gCopaleen. Discussing how O'Nolan created a mythic authorial personality in the guise of Myles, this chapter draws on profiles of the author from the mid-1940s which illustrate the distinction between the character of Myles during this period and his posthumous reputation. The contemporary profiles of Myles highlight a central problematic in his comedy by querying his relationship to his readership - some cast him as an incisive satirist, an outsider in literary Dublin, while others present him to be merely the licensed jester of the Dublin intelligentsia. This chapter investigates this conundrum by situating O’Nolan’s conflicted response to Joyce (notoriously attributed to a bad case of the anxiety of influence) in the context of the contemporary Irish reception of Joyce’s work. The ambivalence which O’Nolan exhibited towards Joyce - praising his literary skill while deriding his ambition, and insisting on his status as a repressed Irish Catholic, like any another – is typical of the manner in which Joyce was domesticated by sympathetic contemporaries. To this degree, O’Nolan was typical of his time, but he also exploited Joyce and his Irish reputation in a way that served to define his own priorities as a writer. Primarily, this was to assume the posture of the plain man, a cynic adrift among the ‘corduroys’ of the literary world. This was the guise in which Flann O'Brien first appeared in the public sphere in October 1938, intervening in a debate in the letters page of The Irish Times between Seán O’Faoláin and Frank O'Connor. As this chapter demonstrates, in the letter controversies which ran in the newspaper over the following two years many of the characteristics of Myles na gCopaleen were already in place. A regular theme of the letters was O’Nolan’s scorn for the self-importance of his fellow writers, particularly those who pleaded persecution at the hands of the Plain People of Ireland. In examining the letter controversies, this chapter closes by showing how O’Nolan negotiated his own place in the Dublin literary scene, crafting his authorial identity in response to the literary personalities around him.

The letter controversies dramatised in a very literal way the responsive nature of O’Nolan’s comedy. But his literary skills were first honed as a prolific contributor to the student magazine Comhthrom Féinne, and the sense of addressing (and reacting
to) an intimately-known and responsive readership survived into his later writing. The product of O’Nolan’s social, academic, and literary experiences in UCD was his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and chapter two examines the impact of this environment on the novel. It argues that *At Swim*’s double-edged comedy betrays a curiously ambivalent outlook on contemporary Irish culture, one which is characterised — in O’Nolan’s own words — by the novel’s ‘erudite irresponsibility’. Tellingly, *At Swim* itself presents authorship as a collaborative effort, whether this is implied in the student’s literary parodies or explicitly dramatised in the critical debates between his characters. Structured as a work in progress, the novel effectively stages the intellectual environment in which it was produced. Since *At Swim*’s semi-autobiographical frame narrative firmly roots its genesis in 1930s UCD, this chapter argues that O’Nolan’s non-committal comedy owed much to the paradoxes of the college’s intellectual life at the time. The fusion of modernism, popular fiction, Anglo-American culture and Middle Irish literature in *At Swim* is a cultural identity crisis writ large, but one that was only too familiar to O’Nolan’s fellow students, caught between the attractions of Joyce’s cosmopolitan modernism and the conservative nationalism of the Irish Free State.

In some respects, *The Third Policeman*, written in the first months of the second world war, signalled a retreat from the more parodic and satirical nature of *At Swim*. It quietly disengaged from contemporary events, at home and abroad, though its creation of a nonsensical universe ruled by an inscrutable (but hyper-rational) authority is strangely suggestive, appearing as it did at the end of the 1930s. Criticising a hotly patriotic correspondent to *The Irish Times* in 1940, O’Nolan bemoaned the lack of humour in Ireland: ‘...nonsense is a new sense... If present-day dictators possessed a sense of nonsense the world might be rocked with laughter instead of shocked with bombs.’ The remark is interesting, not least because the novel he had completed only months earlier had shifted into a notably different comic register from that of *At Swim*, its mode being more reminiscent of Victorian nonsense writing. While taking account

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8 O’Nolan used this phrase in a letter to his agents, A. M. Heath (3 October 1938), SIUC.
9 Letter from Oscar Love [Brian O’Nolan], *The Irish Times* (18 October 1940).
of earlier formalist readings of *The Third Policeman* as a nonsense novel, chapter three focuses specifically on how nonsense may be interpreted in a cultural context. *The Third Policeman* resists any deliberate allegorical interpretation (and though it shares some metafictional characteristics with *At Swim*, it is still not quite a metafiction), but neither is it simply whimsical in its form. This novel’s protagonist, like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, finds himself in a playful universe where it proves impossible for him to fathom the rules of the game. He is reduced to a habitual state of bewildered passivity in a place where common sense is exposed as a kind of madness shared by a whole community. But his is a particularly Irish circle of hell, and this novel presents an estranged (yet disturbingly familiar) version of Ireland, emphasising the surrealism latent in the ordinary. Though nonsense is a rather introverted literary mode, obsessed with rules of language and logic, one of the virtues of nonsense writing is its capacity to accommodate ‘...ambivalence and indirect attack, angst and muted self-assertion...’

Hence, *The Third Policeman* may be read as a peculiarly suggestive fable of 1930s Ireland – with its emphasis on bizarre convention, capricious authority, and its motifs of monotonous repetition and circularity (though it also ridicules contemporary science and a mechanistic world, in the style of Chaplin’s *Modern Times*). Equally pertinent in this context, however, is the novel’s self-reflexive nonsense mode itself, which ultimately undermines the novel’s critical potential and maintains the air of ‘erudite irresponsibility’ which O’Nolan had cultivated so effectively in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The idea that nonsense, or at least a finely-honed sense of absurdity, was the best protection against all kinds of demagoguery and shrill polemics was put to the test in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Chapter four addresses the Irish-language material of its first three years, as well as O’Nolan’s only Irish novel, *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*), in the context of the language politics of the early 1940s. While the column was distinguished from the outset by a fondness for nonsense and wordplay, arguably the opportunity of writing for a national daily gave added impetus to O’Nolan’s satirical

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talents. The column may have been intended to provide some light relief in wartime, but the old-guard of the Irish language revival and the scions of the Gaelic League were the first victims of its satire. This chapter investigates O’Nolan’s complicated relationship with his first language, and his attempts in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to dissociate it from its popular image as the dead or dying repository of a rural folk culture. His support for modernisation of the Irish language, and his antipathy towards its appropriation by exclusivist nationalists, arguably indicated a desire to see it incorporated into the mainstream of Irish life. But the voluntary phasing out of the Irish columns in late 1943 effectively ended O’Nolan’s period as a bilingual writer. This chapter explores some of the reasons for this change, arguing that the rise of conservative and xenophobic elements in the language movement at the time only exacerbated O’Nolan’s frustration with the cultural politics surrounding the Irish language. This frustration was unambiguously expressed in his unfinished manuscript on the history of the language revival (probably dating from the late 1940s), which challenges a nationalist interpretation of the causes of language decline in the nineteenth century, and addresses the economic reality of life in the surviving Gaeltachts. The course of O’Nolan’s commentary on Irish language politics is a revealing one, as it developed from the playful mockery of the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* to the pointed satire of his 1944 sketch, *An Scian (The Knife)*, and acquired an analytic and polemical character in the later revival manuscript. This development was broadly representative of the changes in *Cruiskeen Lawn* over the war years, which was increasingly inspired less by the anarchic spirit of Groucho Marx, than by the frustrations of a beleaguered civil servant.

Chapter five broadly traces this development in the column up to the end of 1945, when the suspension of the Emergency press censorship finally allowed Myles to comment freely on the matters of the day. Following a chronological progression, it demonstrates how the comic set-pieces which dominated *Cruiskeen Lawn* until 1943 (such as the Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction, the Catechism of Cliché, or anecdotes about the Brother) slowly disappeared as the column broadened its scope and became increasingly topical and discursive. *Cruiskeen Lawn* knowingly played
off the traditional reputation of *The Irish Times* and goaded the new readership which Smyllie was cultivating among the Catholic professional middle-class. Ensconced in the leader page for many years, it also gleefully undermined Smyllie’s rhetoric across the way. Tellingly, once *Cruiskeen Lawn* began to appear bilingually in September 1941, the Plain People of Ireland became a regular feature of the column’s humour almost as quickly as the absurdities of Seán O’Faoláin and *The Bell*. As a satirical weapon, the Plain People were a particularly double-edged device; though they frustrated the urbane and lettered Myles, he also used them to scorn the plaintive editorialising of Smyllie or O’Faoláin. A theme of both the letter controversies and *At Swim-Two-Birds* was thus played out at greater length in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, as O’Nolan used the farcical, sometimes bombastic Mylesian persona to accuse liberals and conservatives alike of a patronising and paternalistic attitude to the plain citizen. Ironically, as Myles acquired an increasingly polemical and aggrieved tone towards the mid-1940s, the same charges could have been levied at O’Nolan himself. This chapter closes with an examination of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the summer and autumn of 1945, as Myles turned his attention to the condition of the post-war world. The evasive, self-reflexive, and ambivalent comedy which had characterised O’Nolan’s writing from *At Swim-Two-Birds* onwards was by this stage giving way to the unadulterated scorn of the satirist.

The two Myles na gCopaleen plays produced in early 1943 exposed O’Nolan’s writing at an interesting point in this transition (one which provides an endpoint to his early career), and a brief discussion of these plays forms an endnote to this thesis. Neither *Faustus Kelly*, a satire of local politics, nor O’Nolan’s adaptation of Josef and Karel Capek’s *Insect Play* was a critical or a commercial success, and what might have appeared a promising venture in 1943 proved little more than a brief anomaly in his career. Dublin’s drama critics dismissed *Faustus Kelly* as a conventional Abbey comedy, one which missed its opportunity to satirise contemporary Ireland. *The Insect Play* won a more mixed reception, though many reviewers disdained the added humour (or ‘music hall’ element) which O’Nolan introduced to the Capeks’ political fable. O’Nolan, as ever, listened to his critics - there is no evidence of him again
attempting a full-length play and that summer Myles began to abandon his customary vaudeville for a more sustained satirical tone in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The path towards his later fiction was now set: *Faustus Kelly* showed none of the formal inventiveness of O’Nolan’s early novels, and it is interesting that the play he originally offered to Hilton Edwards (and which was rejected in favour of the satirical *Insect Play*) was one ‘...involving the audience in horrible concepts of time and life and death...’\(^1\) - surely an adaptation of *The Third Policeman*. As Edwards may have recognised, Dublin’s critics expected satire from Myles na gCopaleen, not the self-reflexive concoctions of Flann O’Brien. However, this thesis offers close contextual readings of O’Nolan’s early writing – both fiction and journalism, in Irish and in English – to demonstrate how deeply all of his work (and not just his satirical journalism) was engaged with Irish cultural debate in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed in his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O’Nolan self-reflexively points to the impact of his social and intellectual environment on its composition. And the collaborative nature of *At Swim* is echoed throughout O’Nolan’s early writing, whether in his incessant parodies, his dramatic dialogues (or monologues), or even the mischievous embodiment of an implied reader in the guise of The Plain People of Ireland. This thesis aims not only to retrieve a sense of the cultural context informing O’Nolan’s work, but to analyse the nuances of the long comic dialogue which he conducted with contemporary Ireland. Comedy may have the capacity to be subversive, but it is also adept at expressing and enforcing conformity. In addressing O’Nolan’s writing throughout his early career, this study illustrates not only the subversive elements of his comedy, but also the degree to which it was complicit with the social and cultural values of mid-century Ireland.

\(^1\) Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Hilton Edwards (20 June 1942), SIUC.
Chapter One
From Brian O’Nolan to Myles na gCopaleen:
The Invention of a Writer

‘I considered it desirable that he should know nothing about me but it was even better if he knew several things which were quite wrong’ (TP, 59).

Brian O’Nolan was adept at evasion, ambiguity and misdirection, exploiting all the tricks available to the comic writer. Nevertheless, this chapter explores the identities of Brian, Flann, Myles and their brethren with reference both to O’Nolan’s critical reception and to his own promotion of his various literary personae. The contradictions and paradoxes inherent in his comedy have inspired an interesting critical history, with the popular reputation of ‘Myles’ (from the 1940s to the present) contrasting with the image of O’Nolan/Flann O’Brien posthumously constructed by his academic critics. Keith Hopper argued in 1995 that the critical reception of O’Nolan to date had been largely split between an indigenous school of criticism that is ‘invariably folksy and anecdotal, and often lacking in critical acumen’ and that of international post-structuralists who ‘locate O’Brien’s work within an experimental tradition of avant-garde fiction, [and] their critiques are invariably (and deliberately) decontextualised’. This may be a slightly opportunistic simplification - in the absence of full-length studies, Hopper cites brief references to O’Nolan in overviews of post-modernist metafiction, rather than the more varied journal articles on his work - but the stark contrast he draws between Irish and international criticism is instructive. For the Irish reader, the Mylesian legend is as unavoidable as it is for the Dublin pub-goer, who literally encounters Myles (or his image) in most of O’Nolan’s past haunts. It is unsurprising that this lingering presence should have left its mark on the earliest Irish

1 Hopper, Flann O’Brien, p. 18.
2 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
3 There was only one full-length study then published that might have fitted Hopper’s description of the international criticism on O’Nolan: Thomas F. Shea, Flann O’Brien’s Exorbitant Novels. A lack of critical acumen is an unfair charge to level at Anthony Cronin’s critical biography, No Laughing Matter, or at J.C. C. Mays’s long article, ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination’, in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, ed. Timothy O’Keeffe (London: Martin, Brien & O’Keeffe, 1973), pp. 77-119, which is regularly
publications on O’Nolan, which Hopper dismisses (as he does all biographical criticism) for mystifying ‘the cult of the author’. However, these publications came from friends and colleagues whose reminiscences were evidently intended to facilitate O’Nolan’s growing reputation, rather than provide critical responses in themselves (though they interestingly followed a precedent set by Joyce criticism). A more telling aspect of Irish criticism in the period to which Hopper refers was the burgeoning interest in O’Nolan’s relationship to the Irish language and Gaelic literature, subjects which were first explored in the 1980s. Generally focusing on the more topical and satirical aspects of his writing, this necessarily brought criticism of O’Nolan into the arena of Irish cultural politics, where it has largely remained since the late 1990s. As with Hopper’s ‘tribal retrieval’ of O’Nolan as a post-modernist in 1995, the most recent tendency in criticism (originating in Ireland or otherwise) has been to consciously merge formalist and cultural approaches to his fiction. Less than ten years later, the critical landscape can no longer be split - even broadly - between folksy anecdotes and a deracinated post-structuralism; in the twenty-first century Brian O’Nolan has been reinvented as a precociously post-modernist, post-colonial, menippean satirist.

cited as one of best (and by Hopper himself). Neither is the ‘international brigade’ wholly innocent of sentimental Mylesiana.

4 Hopper, Flann O’Brien, pp. 18-19. He expresses profound scepticism about the merits of biographical or psychoanalytical criticism, or indeed any attempt to solve the problems of text with reference to the life. This casts Hopper’s attempt to read certain passages of The Third Policeman as an expression of O’Nolan’s repressed homosexuality in a more Mylesian light.

5 The obvious reference here is the 1973 collection Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, edited by O’Nolan’s publisher Timothy O’Keeffe, with contributions from his brother, Kevin O’Nolan, Niall Sheridan and his colleagues John Garvin and Jack White; although it is notable that the collection closes with J. C. C. Mays’s long critical essay. Hopper also cites Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp’s Flann O’Brien: An Illustrated Biography (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), his friend, Anthony Cronin’s biography, No Laughing Matter, and Clissmann’s Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction.


7 Hopper, Flann O’Brien, p. 21.

But if Hopper’s depiction of a critical terrain divided between cosy appreciations of the legendary Myles and impeccably academic post-structuralism was a little questionable, the contrast could have easily been inspired by O’Nolan’s work itself. Such a contradiction is latent in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a novel whose semi-autobiographical passages formed an extended in-joke for O’Nolan’s cohorts in UCD, and which derides literary self-indulgence, particularly that of modernist writers. At the same time, its student narrator’s pedantry liberates himself (and his readers) from literary convention and the tedium of real life, reinventing the novel as a ‘self-evident sham’ (*ASTB*, 25) and releasing himself and his friends into a literary fantasy. The novel can appear cosy, insular, and anti-intellectual, yet it unmistakably delights in its own cleverness and in the intoxication of turning fiction loose on fiction. *Cruiskeen Lawn* displays similar characteristics: it conducts comic dialogues with its readership but it also has an entirely introverted preoccupation with language and logic. Throughout O’Nolan’s fiction and journalism, the self-conscious showman and the scholar exist side by side, a contradiction writ large in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and which has probably contributed to the fact that only one extended study of the column has been published over the last forty years. Admittedly, its relative neglect must be largely a matter of expediency – after all, few would care to plough through its twenty-six year run, much of it highly variable in quality. However, it also implies a general assumption that a daily newspaper column is of dubious literary value, as if the garrulous showmanship of Myles na gCopaleen were responsible for the demise of the more discriminating Flann O’Brien. O’Nolan’s critics have repeatedly blamed *Cruiskeen Lawn* for distracting him from the proper business of writing novels, perhaps with some justification. Hugh Kenner’s musings on the matter are fairly typical of the secondary value placed on the column: ‘Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the column? For ruin is the word’. However, as Stephen Young points out, *Cruiskeen Lawn* exploits the same strengths as the fiction, ‘systems of competing voices, or styles, in patterns of maximum digressiveness’, and arguably its

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9 Keith Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*.
ephemeral and episodic nature was more congenial to O’Nolan’s talent for improvisation than the extended effort needed to produce novels. References by his critics to the demands of newspaper work and the temptations to play up to readers are generally made with a measure of distaste, though O’Nolan was evidently a writer who benefited from a responsive readership, as can be seen from his reaction to the commercial failure of *At Swim* and the rejection of *The Third Policeman.* Jack White, a colleague in *The Irish Times,* contended that Myles productively exploited a relationship with his readers which was far more intimate than that available to any novelist: ‘In effect he was able to keep up a dialogue with his audience, absorbing the reactions into the next work to be produced.’ In contrast, Anthony Cronin presents this as a disabling influence:

… [Myles] gradually came to represent, even for his most fervent admirers, the quintessential Dublin intellectual, combining the wit and brilliance which they liked to think of as characteristic with the acerbic, denigratory outlook which was also common. The type was familiar, perhaps too familiar… The fate of many licensed jesters had overtaken Myles. He had become his admirers and they him, so that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Admittedly, *Cruiskeen Lawn* probably exacerbated O’Nolan’s showman tendencies, encouraging him to exploit the posture of the plain man ensconced in *The Irish Times* who scorched artists, ‘corduroys’ and all their narcissistic preoccupations (such as the campaign against literary censorship). Nevertheless, a fondness for role-playing and an attention to the relationship between the writer and the reader were already characteristics of his fiction, most obviously in *At Swim,* and *Cruiskeen Lawn* serves as an invaluable guide to the earlier work in other ways as well. Most importantly, as an ephemeral newspaper column, it forces O’Nolan’s critics to examine their own

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12 Stephen Curran also makes this point: ‘In his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds,* audiences already figure as an indispensable structuring motif, and the presence of an alert, responsive readership proved a precondition for the satirical program initiated in his journalism.’ *No, this is not from The Bell*’; Brian O’Nolan’s 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn Anthology*, *Éire-Ireland* 32.2-3 (1997), p. 80.
assumptions about literary value. At Swim and The Third Policeman raise similar questions, though critical readings of the novels have not always taken account of this. Both novels challenge casual distinctions between high and low culture; At Swim's indiscriminate parodies contrive to reinvent the experimental modernist novel as a 'belly-laugh', while The Third Policeman is a murder mystery re-written as an epistemological thriller. They may be auto-critical metafictions, but they are also highly sceptical of scholarship and similarly earnest intellectual pursuits. An American reviewer of the 1951 edition of At Swim identified an unusual difficulty which the book presents to its critics:

..."At Swim-Two-Birds" is neither a profound dissection of the human enigma nor a sophomoric attempt to impress through obscurity. It is simply a tremendously effective satire on Irish literature, a very funny book at a high literate level...

Don't take it too seriously, and "At Swim-Two-Birds" really is a masterpiece, but a masterpiece of comedy, not of Joycean depth.17

The difficulty is to divine how to read At Swim as 'a masterpiece of comedy'. As a highly literate comedy it invites a literate response, but the text so thoroughly usurps and travesties the work of the critic that to offer this response seems to miss the point. (In one sense, it should have been entirely predictable that the author of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman would, in later years, become obsessed with the evils of the growing Joyce industry.) Any reader familiar with Cruiskeen Lawn's diatribes against scholars and exegetes might well baulk at the incorporation of Myles into an academic framework.18 Ironically, the preoccupations of his counterpart, Flann O'Brien, reveal a writer as enamoured of the nuts and bolts of fiction as any of the Harvard scholars he derided. In Brian O’Nolan, the plain man meets the literary narcissist, and criticism of his work is forced to come to terms with this schizophrenia.

15 O’Nolan did publish an anthology of Cruiskeen Lawn in 1943, though this was the only one to appear in his lifetime.
16 This is the term O’Nolan used in a letter to Ethel Mannin (14 July 1939), SIUC.
17 Arthur Kuhl, 'New Books', cutting dated 2 April 1951. SIUC.
18 In 1949, for example, he expressed the fond hope that all his books might be catalogued for posterity: 'Why, the horde of American thullabawns now infesting Dublin looking for the footprints of James Joyce might even do a thesis on them! (Or am I presumptuous in aspiring to such fame?).' CL (28 August 1949), cited in Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 148.
There is another double bind facing O’Nolan’s critics. While Hopper points out that At Swim contrived the death of the author long before Roland Barthes did (or at least it seems to, in fact Trellis is given a last-minute reprieve), O’Nolan himself nurtured a kind of personal celebrity in the guise of Myles na gCopaleen. While the self-reflexive nature of his fiction extended to his presentation of himself as author - the multivalent Myles being the authorial persona on stilts - this self-consciousness was not a post-modernist means of slaying the ‘author-god’. In fact, the way in which O’Nolan fetishised the idea of the author showed how indebted his outlook was to 1930s literary Dublin. If his self-reflexive habits produced a myriad of authorial personae in place of the personality cults accompanying most successful Irish writers, his conscious manipulation of the author’s persona was hardly unusual in a culture which had already played host to Yeats, Joyce, Moore and Gogarty, none of them famed for their artlessness. But whatever credence is given to O’Nolan’s assertion in 1964 that ‘...the compartmentation of personality for the purpose of literary utterance ensures that the fundamental individual will not be credited with a certain way of thinking, fixed attitudes, irreversible [sic] technique of expression...’, the distinction between Flann, Myles and plain Brian O’Nolan was arguably his least successful literary illusion. The brilliant polymath that provided O’Nolan with a stock comic character all through his writing career, from Brother Barnabas to Myles na gCopaleen, eventually migrated to fuel the legend of Brian O’Nolan himself, and lost most of its irony in the process. It is curious that posthumous biographical sketches of Myles/ O’Nolan quickly began to read like cliché, given his own campaign against the form. In literary memoirs of the 1950s, the standard unholy trinity in Irish literature, Joyce, Beckett and Flann O’Brien, acquires a less sober counterpart in Kavanagh, Behan and Myles na gCopaleen. John Ryan, editor of Envoy and also the proprietor of the Bailey, fixed the standard thumbnail portrait of O’Nolan as a frustrated, hard-

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19 As regards commodification of ‘Myles’, O’Nolan was there long before Bord Fáilte posthumously elevated him into the pantheon of Dublin literary characters, with Myles featuring in advertisements for Odearest mattresses: ‘Omniscient omnipotent Myles/ Writes a column in multiple styles/ While chastising the nation/ He gets inspiration/ From Odearest – a Buddha all smiles’. Costello and van de Kamp, Flann O’Brien: An Illustrated Biography, p. 95.

20 Hopper, Flann O’Brien, p. 111.

drinking civil servant in his reminiscences: 'Myles had reached the zenith of his powers while still a student of University College. His life, thereafter, was a diminuendo.'

His life thereafter, of course, comprised his entire literary career. The image was not contradicted in *Dead As Doornails*, in which Anthony Cronin presented a more nuanced picture of brilliance stultified (and even policed) by its environment, an assessment repeated in his later biography:

Brian became somehow fixed at a time of brilliant promise and pyrotechnical display, unable to shake off the reputation for prodigious cleverness he had early acquired. This reputation was transplanted from the hothouse confines of U.C.D. to the equally pernicious atmosphere of intimately acquainted Dublin. His humour became the currency of its denizens, the mode of his column their manner of response... The fate of the licensed jester had befallen him. He existed in and through the response and understanding of his audience.

Ironically, in setting the scene for O’Nolan’s largely frustrated literary career (as they see it), these memoirs employ the kind of shorthand characterisation that would be exploited satirically in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Their Dublin is a grim city, populated by pious hysterics and state functionaries, one that is magically insulated from European culture and over-endowed with frustrated artists furiously drowning their sorrows. The more subtle *Dubliners* might echo through such representations of intellectual life in the city, but O’Nolan himself was highly aware of the interplay between fiction and life that produces the necessary half-truth, and he wisely recognised the usefulness of the well-placed cliché. ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ himself rested on a wealth of literary convention, being a strangely erudite stage-Irishman descended from Gerald Griffin’s *The Collegians* by way of a more sentimental namesake in Boucicault’s *The Colleen Bawn*. By the time the first biography of O’Nolan was published in 1987, this stereotyping had lost all its playfulness. Brian O’Nolan seemed to have acquired the

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flimsy proportions of a *Cruiskeen Lawn* 'Bore' or 'the Brother'; its first chapter announced him as 'A Dublin Character'.

To some degree, in popular terms (as far as this can be gauged), he has remained 'the Dublin Character'. In late 1960 and early 1961, *Cruiskeen Lawn* ran a short series on 'The True Biography of Myles na Gopaleen', a fantastic account of a life of myriad achievements that followed the polymathic pattern set by *Comhthrom Féinne’s* Brother Barnabas thirty years earlier. An equally fanciful Mylesian character still resurfaces in *The Irish Times*, though now the tall tales have turned into anecdotes, and art masquerades as life. The stories which have proliferated about Brian O’Nolan over the last forty years, generally equipped with a punning punchline, echo the scurrilous activities of Sir Myles na gCopaleen (the da) or the contrived adventures of Keats and Chapman. A typical example is a tale about the parliamentary secretary, Brendan Corish, returning from lunch one day to find an individual spilled across the steps of the Customs House. He found himself helping up a drunken O’Nolan, who yet had the wit to mutter ‘Corish Iompar Éireann’. The other guise in which Myles finds himself resurrected is as a guardian of standards in public life, the pose he adopted in the later years of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. New outbreaks of political chicanery or incompetence often see fresh appeals to the caustic wisdom of the sage of Santry. In 2001, one of the many controversies attending the Flood tribunal prompted one political correspondent to find a fitting contemporary equivalent to Myles’s nickname for the Dáil, a ‘magisterium of chancers’ (the answer was provided by Tom Gilmartin’s remark that the Irish politicians who had solicited money from him ‘made the Mafia look like a crowd of monks’). Though the artful wit captured in the anecdotes was a characteristic of the Mylesian persona from its very beginning, the reputation for political baiting and drunken mishaps was really only acquired in the

24 Costello and van de Kamp, *Flann O’Brien: An Illustrated Biography*, p. 15. This characterisation was reflected in the title of a recent RTÉ radio programme on Brian O’Nolan, a series of four radio interviews entitled ‘Myles, Yer Only Man’ (prod. Dave McHugh, 2004). Ironically, in their interviews, both Micheál Ó Nualláinn and Anthony Cronin were at pains to dismiss the image of O’Nolan as the bitter, irascible drunk of Dublin legend.


In the early 1940s, Myles na gCopaleen had a somewhat more eccentric image, one deriving entirely from the writing itself.

It is a measure of the success that O’Nolan had accrued in the first years of *Cruiskeen Lawn* that the first profiles of Myles na gCopaleen were published in 1943; all looked back over O’Nolan’s entire career to date. It was, in fact, the year in which O’Nolan was most in the public eye. *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* were behind him, he had two plays produced in Dublin that spring, one of which was subsequently published by Cahill, along with an anthology of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Neither of the plays was well received and they performed relatively poorly at the box office, compounding the failure of *The Third Policeman*. In the spring and summer, he served as secretary to the tribunal on the recent fire in a Poor Clares’ orphanage in Cavan; the report it published in September exonerated the order from responsibility for the deaths of thirty-five children unable to escape the building. As his wife attested:

> In later years... [he] would aver to the subject of the Cavan fire, and his memories of the event never faded. In its combination of indifference, pettiness and lack of charity, the disaster encapsulated much of what he felt was wrong in the Ireland of his day.  

Keith Donohue argues that all these events combined to create a significant change in *Cruiskeen Lawn* in 1943. This was the year when the Irish columns dropped out of sight, but also when the column became increasingly polemical and satirical: ‘The character of Myles evolved from an Irish-speaking outsider to a man without a nation before finally settling into the role of The Citizen’. Whether it is a matter of coincidence or not, around the same time O’Nolan was first publicly identified with Myles na gCopaleen. At that stage, Myles’s celebrity was well established; there was no question of ‘Flann O’Brien’ (past beneficiary of the A.E. memorial prize) being

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28 Although arguably O’Nolan courted the reputation even in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which the student narrator has a particularly fluid lifestyle.


30 Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 123.
revived to sell the plays O’Nolan was producing in the Abbey and the Gaiety in 1943. Myles even made a unique guest appearance at the first night of *Faustus Kelly*:

...there were many enthusiastic calls for the author at the final curtain. These were answered by a gentleman, dressed as the traditional stage Irishman with pipe, caubeen and cutaway coat who did a little bit of a jig and then silently vanished.\(^{31}\)

Tempting as it is to imagine O’Nolan aping the stage Irishman on the boards of the Abbey itself, the appearance was by a company actor. The stunt was evidently a means of protecting O’Nolan’s identity, or at least of not rubbing his superiors’ noses in the fact that a civil servant in the Department of Local Government and Public Health was satirising local councillors on the stage of the national theatre. However, his flimsy cover was blown three months later in a profile written by the American journalist, Richard Watts, for the *New York Herald Tribune*. A press attaché in Dublin, Watts had reviewed *Faustus Kelly* for *The Bell* and was sufficiently impressed to report back to the American public that ‘The most interesting new writing talent I have encountered in this war-time visit to neutral Ireland is that of a civil servant named Brian O’Nolan.’\(^{32}\) Little harm to O’Nolan to have his fame spread far and wide in New York, but *The Irish Times* obligingly marked the recognition given to their columnist by replicating a large portion of Watts’s article, including the identification of O’Nolan with Flann and Myles.\(^{33}\) Perhaps the public confirmation of this badly-kept secret (after all, he had been identified with Flann on the dust-jacket of *At Swim-Two-Birds*) encouraged O’Nolan belatedly to assume some measure of the authorial responsibility he had avoided in *At Swim* and replace his trademark nonsense with the tones of the outraged citizen. At any rate, Myles’s earlier Abbey appearance as a farcical stage-Irishman, a postscript to the performance of his most bluntly satirical piece of writing to date, brought into dramatic relief the already diverging aspects of the Mylesian persona. *Faustus Kelly* itself is a play pulling in two directions, its first act staging a farcical council meeting where the language itself is a leading character,

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33 ‘Myles on the Front Page’, *The Irish Times* (3 July 1943), p. 3.
while the following two acts are left to work out a fairly leaden plot concerning the moral bankruptcy of politicians. However, it is interesting that Watts’s sketch of Cruiskeen Lawn in the subsequent Tribune article shows that at the time, the column was primarily regarded as an erudite, literary endeavour, rather than a cutting satire. It also presents the column’s author in a manner quite distinct from the posthumous Mylesian legend:

His is a column devoted to magnificently laborious literary puns, remarkable parodies of De Quincey and others, fanciful literary anecdotes, an erudite study of clichés that sounds like the result of a collaboration between Frank Sullivan and the faculties of Trinity College and the National University, scornful dissection of the literal meaning of high-flown literary phraseology and a general air of shameless irony and high spirits.34

Watts’s article captures the peculiar intellectual dignity that was as important to the Mylesian comic persona as the tailcoat and cigar were to Groucho Marx. A slightly different picture emerges from an interview that O’Nolan gave to Stanford Lee Cooper of Time magazine the following summer, when his ‘shameless irony and high spirits’ were evidently in full force. Though the article was not published until August, perhaps the prospect of his immortalisation was the inspiration for Myles to comment in May that:

It only occurred to me the other day that I will have biographers. Probably Hone will do me first and then there will be all sorts of English persons writing books ‘interpreting’ me, describing the beautiful women who influenced my ‘life’, trying to put my work in its true and prominent place against the general background of mankind, and no doubt seeking to romanticise what is essentially an austere and chastened character, saddened as it has been by the contemplation of human folly.35

34 Watts, ‘Flann O’Brien: Man of Names and Talents’.
35 CL (19 May 1943), cited in Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 3.
When the *Time* profile appeared, it came complete with the mysterious beautiful woman (O’Nolan’s obscure and deceased wife of 1933, Clara Ungerland, ‘blond, violin-playing daughter of a Cologne basket weaver’) and a tale of a dramatic attack on the author in a German beer-cellar for disparaging the name of Hitler. Otherwise, the image which O’Nolan (or Cooper) presented was deliberately humdrum. The author was a ‘conscientious, hard-working civil servant... busy with matters of state’, who avoided ‘the metropolitan arty crowd’ in favour of ‘the talk at the tough bars and quayside pubs’ (perhaps a slight exaggeration on someone’s part, the Scotch House being a favourite of many civil servants). O’Nolan, a prodigious chess player, ‘writes so easily that he grows bored with it’, which explains the abrupt conclusion of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. As the presence of Clara Ungerland testifies, it is dangerous to take any of this too seriously, but it is an interesting portrait of O’Nolan as a self-professed plain man, a deliberate outsider in literary Dublin.

The first domestic profile of Myles, published in *The Bell* in 1946, came to quite the opposite conclusion. Whatever bravura O’Nolan had displayed to his American interviewer, his *Bell* profiler, Thomas Woods (a fellow civil servant who wrote under the pseudonym ‘Thomas Hogan’), was not convinced by the broadsides against ‘corduroys’ and their ilk in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, or any other swagger of intellectual independence. Presciently, in 1946 he was already writing that Myles na gCopaleen’s best days were behind him, unconsciously setting the tone for the critical work that would follow:

...[Myles] shows clearly the influence of his environment – the denigratory atmosphere of certain back-rooms inhabited by the native ‘highbrows’ is found in his work. He is the highest form of the metropolitan intellectual... His growth is thwarted by the debility characteristic of the kind of post-coitum depression of a city that did once produce something. Myles is our type – he is the active embodiment of Dublin’s, and Ireland’s, destructive element.

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36 This apocryphal marriage was investigated at length in Costello and van de Kamp, *Flann O’Brian: An Illustrated Biography*, pp. 48-49.

His best work, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is far behind him, and the line of his present work [*Cruiskeen Lawn*] is brilliant but futile.38

Far from O’Nolan’s self-portrait as the caustic outsider, he was damned as a typical example of the Dublin intellectual, and of the species at its worst. Woods’s judgement, harsh as it was, would be echoed over forty years later in Anthony Cronin’s biography, which cast Myles as the licensed jester of the metropolitan crowd.39 The post-Joycean environment (this ‘post-coitum depression’) certainly left its mark on O’Nolan’s writing, but arguably he exploited a more nuanced relationship with his audience than these readings allow. Woods may have been correct to observe that ‘Myles is our type’, but given the ironies of the Mylesian persona, this is not necessarily a reliable diagnosis. It is telling that O’Nolan’s interview for *Time* resulted in a crafty compilation of the biographical clichés such profiles used to ‘explain’ an author’s work (the mysterious beautiful woman, for one), along with nods to the effortless and eccentric brilliance that was part of the Mylesian mystique. Such a self-conscious dialogue with form – in this case the critical biography - was as much a part of *Cruiskeen Lawn* as it was of the novels. One of the products of this self-reflexiveness in *At Swim* is a sense of authorship as a collaborative effort - between the storyteller and his audience, between the author and the other authors he is merrily plagiarising. Myles na gCopaleen was created in the same fashion. It is telling that O’Nolan once queried regarding Joyce: ‘Did he seek to evolve for himself, chiefly by talking in strict confidence to stooges, mostly American, a mythical personality? Did…. (pardon me while I swallow this yellow capsule!)… did… James Joyce ever exist?’40 While he regularly accused Joyce of encouraging a cultish reputation, he was no innocent in the matter himself; Myles was Brian O’Nolan’s mythic personality, albeit one who eventually became indistinguishable from his author. Of course, this was hardly Joyce’s only influence on O’Nolan – indeed, a lament for his debilitating

40 *CL* (16 June 1954).
influence on the latter has become a critical cliché. But introducing Joyce in this context serves a dual purpose: not only did he provide O’Nolan with a foil against which to define his own priorities as a writer, but O’Nolan’s curiously ambivalent response to Joyce can itself illustrate the extent to which he was typical (or untypical) of the Dublin intellectuals of his time.

**A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Joycean**

It is significant that *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O’Nolan’s first novel, blatantly (though selectively) parodies both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, though he was already protesting to Ethel Mannin in 1939 that the novel had ‘nothing in the world to do with James Joyce’. Whether or not he was to be believed, reviewers were understandably predisposed to think otherwise. Seán O’Faoláin’s complaint that the whole thing reeked of ‘spilt Joyce’ was typical of the critical responses to the novel both on its first British publication in 1939 and its re-issue in 1960. All this ‘spilt Joyce’ had an ironic intent, however. In a 1938 review of new Irish fiction entitled ‘The Joyce Country’, O’Nolan’s friend Niall Sheridan complained that the dominance of Joyce was now so complete that Dublin itself was beginning to look like ‘an inferior plagiarism from *Ulysses*’. If there were no means for the Irish novelist of the 1930s to escape the Joycean shadow, then parading the influence on stilts – as *At Swim* does – might at least knowingly preclude comparisons with the more famous writer. Naturally, if that was the strategy, it did not work. But neither did it do O’Nolan any no harm to invite identification with his notorious predecessor. As early as 1935, he published parodies of ‘Work in Progress’ in the UCD student magazine,

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42 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Ethel Mannin (14 July 1939), SIUC.


Comhthrom Feinne (one of which was reproduced in Ireland Today in 1938). Though O’Nolan often chided Joyce for an aesthetic ambition far beyond the reach of the plain people of Ireland, an acquaintance with his work undoubtedly lent a sheen of sophistication to the bearer, even (or especially) in a censorious climate like that of Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. Tellingly, on O’Nolan’s Irish days in Cruiskeen Lawn (which appeared mostly between 1940 and 1943), tirades against the quaint revivalism of writing in the Irish language often ended with Joyce being wheeled out as the case for the opposition. And at the time, Myles was clearly recognised as a Joycean acolyte, albeit an unpredictably critical one. Throughout the 1940s, he generally added his own gloss to Irish Times reviews of the latest Joyce criticism, and the connection between the two writers was sealed when John Ryan invited O’Nolan to edit the special Joyce issue of Envoy in 1951. The contributors whom O’Nolan gathered for that issue – including Denis Johnston, ‘Andrew Cass’ (his civil service boss, John Garvin), Niall Montgomery, and Patrick Kavanagh - produced a rather ambivalent portrait of Joyce as a brilliant crank, one whose identity was firmly rooted in Irish Catholicism, whatever his protestations of non serviam. In a firm gesture of repatriation that followed a couple of decades of American scholarship, the consensus seemed to be that Joyce could only be properly understood by an Irishman. The double movement to ostracise Joyce’s achievement while insisting upon his credentials as a repressed Irish Catholic (just like any other, notably themselves), is revealing. What is intriguing about the much-discussed relationship between O’Nolan and Joyce (which notoriously culminates with the latter darning Jesuits’ socks in The Dalkey Archive), is not so much Joyce’s influence on O’Nolan, or even the latter’s

45 O’Nolan made two excursions into an Irish Wakean language: ‘In Brathair Barnapas cott. Tri Filid in Domain Homer O Greacap, Fergil O Latinnip ocus Parnabus O Gaedelaip’, The National Student/Comhthrom Féinne, 11:3 (June 1935), pp. 80, 83, and ‘Pisa bec oc Parnabus. Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais le Briain O Nuallain’, Ireland Today, 3 (February 1938), pp. 138, 165. One Cruiskeen Lawn column claims an attempt in 1951 to translate Ulysses into Irish, with extract as proof: ‘If they won’t read it in English, I said to myself, bedamn but we’ll put them in the situation that they can boast they won’t read it in Irish aither.’ (HD, 135).

46 This emphasis was anticipated by Thomas MacGreevy in his insistence on the ‘deep-rooted Catholicism’ of Ulysses. ‘The Catholic Element in Work in Progress’ in An Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamation of Work in Progress (New York: New Directions, 1929, 1972), p. 121.

47 O’Nolan himself typified this tendency: ‘It seems to me that Joyce emerges, through curtains of salacity and blasphemy, as a truly fear-shaken Irish Catholic, rebelling not so much against the Church but against its near-schism Irish eccentricities… His revolt, noble in itself, carried him away. He could not see the tree for the woods. But I think he meant well. We all do, anyway.’ ‘A Bash in the Tunnel’, in A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish, ed. John Ryan (Brighton: Clifton Books, 1970), p. 19.
occasional vituperation of him. A more curious aspect of the relationship is the various ways in which O’Nolan exploited Joyce (the personality, as well as the work) as a means of illustrating his own identity as a writer.

To a certain extent, O’Nolan invented Joyce in his own image; according to his introduction to the Envoy issue, Joyce was ‘a truly fear-shaken Irish Catholic’ who ‘spent a lifetime establishing himself as a character in fiction’ (substitute ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ there and the effect is much the same). Not only that, but he asserted on more than one occasion that ‘his true felicity... was in writing comic stuff’, as well as an ‘almost supernatural skill in conveying Dublin dialogue’. From the Dedalean student narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds to Myles’s intermittent incarnations as a Joycean critic, Joyce and his work served as a fairground mirror for O’Nolan’s aesthetic preoccupations. At Swim-Two-Birds and Cruiskeen Lawn bear out José Lanter’s contention that while Irish satire of the 1920s had focused on the turbulent political scene ‘...by the 1930s this focus has shifted to a concern with the increasingly precarious position of the individual, especially the artist himself, in a conservative, even repressive society’. O’Nolan’s fiction, which typically places a passive protagonist in a merry-go-round structure, is a good example of the kind of writing Lanter describes, but it was Joyce who had set the agenda for it. For the generation who followed him, the rebellious Stephen Dedalus was the archetype of the Irish artist, albeit an archetype who could not be imitated. By 1951, the portrait of the Irish artist which O’Nolan presented in his Envoy essay, ‘A Bash in the Tunnel’, had become a rather more curious concoction. It provides the punchline to a tall tale about a man (‘that oddity, an unauthorized person’) who manages to lock himself into the dining car of a train in order to consume illicitly vast amounts of CIE whiskey. Locked in the car, which shunters move into a tunnel, he is unwittingly left to conduct a night-long bash that lasts for three days: ‘I was in bed for a week. Did you ever in your life hear of a greater crowd of bastards?’

48 Ibid., p. 19.
50 Lanter, Unauthorized Versions, p. 7.
Funny? But surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly
locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully
drinking somebody else’s whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by anonymous
shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple
word ENGAGED! 52

The image fits Joyce, O’Nolan contends, who, like our friend here, manifests ‘a most
Irish characteristic – the transgressor’s resentment with the nongressor’. It fits
O’Nolan even better, who (using a characteristically regressive image) locks his man
in a box within a box, another one of his passive creatures who is shunted about while
maintaining an illusion of studied preoccupation. While O’Nolan draws attention to
the mischievous transgression of this ‘unauthorized person’, the man’s disgruntled
submissiveness is slightly more telling.

It is revealing that O’Nolan conflates Joyce with a portrait of the Irish artist (albeit the
Irish artist as Brian O’Nolan), as if he were the very embodiment of the species.
Arguably, the association was rife as early as the 1930s, when O’Nolan was just
setting out on his career. With Ulysses hailed as a masterpiece, if a notorious one, and
the even more notorious ‘Work in Progress’ appearing piecemeal over the 1920s and
1930s, Joyce’s position was already overbearing. O’Nolan’s contradictory impulses to
identify with Joyce at one moment, and dissociate from him the next, are curiously
suggestive of the ambivalent regard in which literary Dublin held him in the 1930s
and 1940s. In 1934, Samuel Beckett starkly sketched the Irish literary scene in a
review of recent Irish poetry, which divided contemporary Irish poets between
‘antiquarians and others, the former in the majority’. 53 With the battlelines so plainly
drawn, Joyce was becoming an important piece of cultural currency. Whatever the
reservations O’Nolan later professed towards modernist writers, it was surely a more
attractive prospect to be identified with the sophisticated, ‘modern’ successors to the

52 Ibid., p. 18.
assume that O’Nolan was familiar with this review since Denis Devlin, one of its subjects, was a friend of
revival generation, than with faded imitators of past glories. As Niall Sheridan recalled of his fellow students in 1930s UCD: 'We felt that the Anglo-Irish Renaissance was already a spent force, though the stature of Yeats – especially since *The Tower* poems – was beyond question. Sam Beckett, whom we knew personally, had opened new horizons with *Murphy*. Joyce, of course, was in the very air we breathed'. And as Cronin argues, Joyce served an almost symbolic function for O’Nolan’s university circle (in marked contrast to the realist novelists coming to prominence in Ireland, who seemed to studiously ignore his presence). The Catholic literati of the National University were inevitably following in his footsteps, but the Joycean legacy was a difficult one:

Joyce and his challenge would be defused by making him a mere logomachic wordsmith, a great but demented genius who finally went mad in his ivory tower…

On the other hand Joyce and a view of modernism as a predominantly aesthetic philosophy could still provide a sort of absolution and a sort of charm against infection for those who despised the new Ireland...

Cronin suggests that while many of these students were critical of the nationalist and religious pieties of 1930s Ireland, an outright rejection of such sacred cows (in the Joycean manner) would be felt as a betrayal of a newly-won Irish identity. Joyce could, however, be assimilated as a deranged aesthete who could nevertheless be invoked to castigate the philistine tendencies of de Valera’s Ireland. But O’Nolan himself openly ridiculed the implication that a familiarity with Joyce might guard against contamination by the plain people of Ireland. The reviewers who dismissed *At Swim-Two-Birds* for being derivatively Joycean ignored the criticism implicit in his reduction of the experimental modernist novel to a more populist farce. Admittedly, O’Nolan’s criticism was just as often directed towards Joyce’s critics and followers as to the writer himself. In 1948, one Joyce critic commented with displeasure that while the ‘Philistines’ had merely stagnated in Joyce’s Dublin, at present the new Catholic

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his in UCD (a collaborator on the parodic novel, *Children of Destiny*) and one of the few who received a complimentary copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1939.


middle class was 'rampant and aggressive' with 'only Peadar O'Donnell's *The Bell*
and (to a lesser degree) the *Irish Times* to raise their voice in protest, as Matthew
Arnold used to do'. Myles seized on the implicit condescension towards the lumpen-
Catholics, protesting that he had already warned Costello, Dev and Cosgrove to
'Watch that Romish crowd. Keep a sharp eye on your men. Those fellows would form
a middle class as quick as they’d look at you! And then? Well, you know what it was
like being the laughing-stock of Europe... How would you like to be the laughing-
stock of the New York publishing houses?'. He played up the hint of Anglo-Irish
prejudice towards a philistine Catholic Ireland, while subtly laying claim to Joyce as
one of the tribe:

...Nobody can say Joyce hadn’t courage – I’d no more dream of trusting meself
outside the door of a taxi – some of those middle-class Catholic croppies might
knife you in the neck with a pike or something. You’d take your blooming life in
your hands and that’s the truth. There’s some kind of a secret about Joyce though –
I think he had a class of an understanding with that crowd. Couldn’t be up to them.
Live where you and I would starve...  

O’Nolan returned to the theme in an *Envoy* article in 1950. The point at issue was the
sneering condescension of intellectuals for ‘the herd’, particularly in the virulence
often expressed towards popular newspapers and those who contributed to them.
Denouncing ‘the herd’ was a legitimate exercise, he conceded, but not in the hope of
reforming them. And again, he neatly appropriated Joyce – more commonly the
weapon of such cultural elitists - to argue the case for the opposition:

If everybody in Dublin wrote books and plays and wallowed in the political and
literary precisities of the *New Statesman* and defunct *Horizon*, the town would be
the despair of Joyce if he were still in it and would in any event be generally
uninhabitable.

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*CL* (18 August 1948).
57 *CL* (18 August 1948).
58 Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Baudelaire and Kavanagh’, *Envoy* 3 (1950), p. 79.
Though hardly a cultural leveller himself, O’Nolan disdained the manner in which Joyce could be exploited to scold the unenlightened mob. The virtues O’Nolan praised in his writing were quite distinct from those valued by many of his early critics; Myles’s usual praise for Joyce is succinctly echoed by The Dalkey Archive’s Mick Shaughnessy, who admires him for ‘...his dexterity and resource in handling language, for his precision, for his subtlety in conveying the image of Dublin and her people, for his accuracy in setting down speech authentically, and for his enormous humour’ (DA, 96).

At the same time, while At Swim shows that O’Nolan was obviously one of the more appreciative readers of Joyce among Irish novelists, the novel also betrays a certain adherence to the values of contemporary Ireland (aesthetic and otherwise) which worked to exclude him. As the following chapter demonstrates in greater detail, to some degree At Swim echoed the contemporary consensus on Joyce in literary Dublin, a place still infused with revival ideals on the uses of a national culture, and quite prepared to believe that Finnegans Wake was ‘the ultimate fantasy in cod’. As Joyce’s rising status was consolidated in the 1940s and 1950s with an increasing number of imposingly academic studies of his work, a strawman was created which enabled Myles to cast himself as the bard of common sense. By 1954, he was deploiring the fact that by including so many ‘salacities’ in Ulysses, Joyce had needlessly alienated a great number of his potential Irish readers: ‘I ask — though no Bowdler I — is it not a great pity that an expurgated edition of ‘Ulysses’ is not published, virginibus puерisque?’. The plea might be tongue-in-cheek, but it is interesting that ten years earlier Myles was quite prepared to defend Joyce’s ‘obscenities’ on aesthetic grounds:

...Rouault uses qualities of violence and crudity to establish awe, reverence and stillness, while Joyce, in stating his arid and cold view of life, uses what would be

59 CL (16 June 1954).  
60 Ibid.
discerned for obscenities if isolated... art is not necessarily 'beautiful', nor has it necessarily any evangelical function... art may also displease, disturb, frighten or disgust.\(^6^1\)

Joyce exposed a mass of contradictions in the Mylesian persona. On occasion he needed to be defended from the mob, or rather, from the rather narrow values of contemporary Ireland; at other times he had to be seized from the clutches of those who high-handedly berated the philistinism of the plain Irish. His obscenities or obscurities could be defended on the grounds of artistic merit, but his aesthetic preoccupations could also be declared to be farcically self-indulgent.\(^6^2\) The ambivalence was not peculiar to O’Nolan; a Mylesian image of Joyce as an egotistic, self-obsessed figure turns up even in John Garvin’s *James Joyce’s Disunited Kingdom and the Irish Dimension*, a book peppered with asides on O’Nolan’s comic appropriation of Joyceana and which sometimes reads as though Garvin had in turn acquired Myles’s wry perspective on his subject.\(^6^3\) For example, discussing how the encyclopaedic mode of the ‘Ithaca’ episode of *Ulysses* anticipates the (dis)organisation of *Finnegans Wake*, Garvin remarks that:

> There is a logical progression in his mind from his name endorsed on a schoolbook as of Clongowes Wood, Sallins, Co. Kildare, Ireland... the Universe, to the artistic representation of all human history as a universalisation of the solipsistic projection of the imago of James Joyce.\(^6^4\)

The judgement could have come from *Cruiskeen Lawn*. It would be curious to know which way the influence ran and whether, as Thomas Woods argued in his *Bell* profile, Myles was simply a typical product of the embittered Dublin intelligentsia.

\(^{61}\) *CL* (5 April 1944).

\(^{62}\) Myles remarked of Jack Yeats that ‘Unlike Joyce he was not an abominable prig and expressed himself freely instead of taking refuge in Joyce’s peculiar form of ‘silence’.’ *CL* (11 April 1957), cited in Powell, ‘An Annotated Bibliography of Myles na Gopaleen’s (Flann O’Brien’s) “Cruiskeen Lawn” Commentaries on Joyce’, p. 56.

\(^{63}\) Garvin was a colleague and friend of O’Nolan’s in the Department of Local Government who supplied *At Swim-Two-Birds* with its Greek epigraph.

(No doubt this bitterness was due not only to the ungenial atmosphere of contemporary Ireland, but to these intellectuals’ position – in the wake of Yeats and Joyce - as a particularly belated addition to ‘the most belated race in Europe’. The article which Garvin had earlier contributed to the *Envoy* issue was in parts even more caustic than his comment above, yet he himself was no sour Dublin know-all, but a committed Joyce scholar. Bearing this in mind, the reason behind the largely uneasy response to Joyce from Irish writers, even from declared admirers such as Garvin (and O’Nolan), arguably bears more consideration than that offered by Woods. Indeed, examining how Joyce’s texts were mediated by Irish writers and critics, including O’Nolan, and how they were acculturated to 1930s and 1940s Ireland (as much as they could be), throws into relief the dominating literary values of the post-revival period. To follow the trajectory of the domestic response to ‘Work in Progress’, or the changing attitudes to *Ulysses* over this time, is to see a clash of cultures developing comparable to that dramatised in *At Swim*’s dissonant comedy. The Irish response to Joyce can be construed, like *At Swim* itself, as a debate over the proper condition of Irish literature, one which was all the more interesting for the little sustenance it drew from the texts which it purportedly addressed.

The differing responses to Joyce in the surveys of Irish literature published by John Eglinton, Stephen Gwynn, and Aodh de Blácam in the mid-1930s starkly illustrate the faultlines in contemporary literary criticism. The Joyce whom the revivalist Eglinton evokes in *Irish Literary Portraits* is ‘Roman in mind and soul’, indeed, this slightly dubious ‘Romano-Celtic Joyce’, by forcing the English language to unaccustomed tasks, shows himself to be an enemy of ‘the whole of the English tradition’. In *Irish Literature and Drama*, Stephen Gwynn also focuses on Joyce’s Catholicism, though from a nationalist perspective. Here, Joyce is the dispossessed Catholic failed by his country and *A Portrait* is a post-Parnellite study of ‘a diseased soul in a diseased

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67 Ibid., pp. 142-143.
country’. Only the most glancing (and apologetic) reference is made to the difficulty of *Ulysses*, Gwynn being more concerned to establish that ‘the poignant cry of the dispossessed runs all through Joyce’s writing’. However, for Aodh de Blácam, an avowed nationalist but also a rather puritan exponent of Irish Ireland, not even such a political appropriation of Joyce was desirable. *A First Book of Irish Literature*, his survey ranging from the mistiest reaches of Gaelic epic right up to Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland*, simply omits any reference to him at all. According to de Blácam, Canon Sheehan ‘rivals Carleton as the greatest Irish novelist’, but where Synge is described as ‘grotesque’, and Shaw a propounder of ‘black paganism’, perhaps the omission should be taken as complimentary. Indeed, his most loathed enemy is ‘modernistic writing’, which had now seduced even Padraic Colum who had once ‘almost carried the Abbey school back to the Ireland of the people’. While de Blácam might be dismissed as a reactionary of Irish Ireland, his response (or non-response) to Joyce was only an extreme example of a fairly widespread condition. His assurance that ‘the Ireland of the people’ was the ultimate court of address for a work of literature echoed Corkery’s placement of the truly Irish writer among the crowd at a hurling match in Thurles. The realist novelists of the 1930s, whom O’Nolan implicitly mocked in the anti-realist *At Swim-Two-Birds* (and quite openly abused in *Cruiskeen Lawn*), made similar assumptions. Among Joyce’s earliest Irish admirers was Frank O’Connor, whose criticism of his later work seems partly inspired by a hangover of revivalist ideas about the instrumental role of culture and art in the life of the nation (or ‘the people’). A Joycean aesthetic, deemed by popular consensus to be remote and inaccessible – as well as indecent – could hardly fulfill such a role.

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69 Ibid., p. 195.
72 Ibid., p. 220.
73 Ibid., p. 218.
However, initially there were plenty prepared to welcome *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* as the work of an urban Catholic writer qualified to speak for the rising Catholic middle class, though the direction signalled by ‘Work in Progress’ made such an interpretation difficult to sustain.⁷⁵ For Joseph Hone, writing in 1923, *A Portrait* had announced ‘the passing of that literary Ireland in which everyone was well bred except a few politicians’,⁷⁶ but the literary Ireland which succeeded it charged Joyce with complicity in a new aesthetic aristocracy. Seán O’Faoláin’s dismissal of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* sounded a characteristic note. The piece, he wrote:

...comes from nowhere, goes nowhere, is not part of life at all. It has one reality only, the reality of the round and round of children’s scrawls in their first copybooks, many circles of nothing...⁷⁷

Given that O’Faoláin’s manifesto for *The Bell* in 1940 would declare it to be ‘not so much a magazine as a bit of Life itself’,⁷⁸ this was criticism indeed. (Ironically, in articles published over the next few years, he also freely criticised the ethical, even spiritual, deficiencies which he detected in realism and naturalism.⁷⁹) By the time *Finnegans Wake* was published in 1939, Joyce had solidified for O’Faoláin and O’Connor into the monomaniacal parody of himself which would become familiar in many *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. Perhaps disillusioned by his later work, another theme of his Irish critics was now his unjust treatment of Ireland, a criticism reiterated

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⁷⁵ See also the 1922 revised edition of Ernest Boyd’s *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance*, where he flourishes *Ulysses* as ‘...a masterpiece of realism, of documentation, and a most original dissection of the Irish mind... Dedalus and Bloom are two types of Dubliner... At the same time they serve as the medium between the reader and the *vie unanime* of a whole community’. Cited in Robert H. Deming, ed. *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, Vol 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 304. It is revealing that it was less these representative Dubliners who seemed to matter to Boyd than ‘the social organism of which they are a part’ (p. 305). This is *Ulysses* as written by Charles Dickens, and while Boyd’s point is valid, it is curious that the first impulse of so many Irish critics was to salvage a sense of community from the text.


even by the contributors to the 1951 *Envoy* issue, whose indignation might reasonably have been cooled by the passing of time. In the late 1930s, O'Connor argued (like Gwynn) that though *A Portrait* created a protagonist whose ‘despair is the despair of Ireland’, it was nevertheless ‘an extreme and fantastic book’ replete with an ugly hostility towards Ireland, and one to grow out of. By 1943, this disquiet had developed into a ‘strong sense’ of Joyce’s artistic failure: ‘...Joyce’s virtuosity seems to me to belong to a second rate brain’.* The trace of bravado chimes with O’Nolan’s facetious remark that Joyce was, in fact, ‘illiterate’: ‘He had a fabulously developed jackdaw talent of picking up bits and pieces, but it seems his net was too wide to justify getting a few kids’ schoolbooks and learning the rudiments of a new language correctly. Every foreign-language quotation in any of his works known to me is wrong’.* To his compatriots (as to himself), Joyce was simply another Icarus who had flown too close to the sun. However, there was no Joycean irony to temper their judgements.

Set against this backdrop, O’Nolan’s deliberately mischievous comments on Joyce and his critics begin to make more sense. It is striking, for example, that both revivalist critics and O’Nolan’s own contemporaries reinvented Stephen/ Joyce in the image of a Catholic nationalist. While O’Nolan also equated the two in his own mind, what he found to praise in Joyce’s work was not its illustration of the colonial Catholic, or its realistic service to Dublin, but its technical virtuosity and its monumental humour. Where his response most corresponds to those of his

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80 Frank O’Connor, ‘A Broadcast that was Cancelled: Lawrence and Joyce’, *The Irish Times* (21 July 1937). This was written as a lecture for the ‘Great Writers of Today’ series on Radió Éireann, which was never broadcast. O’Connor reported that the lecture was rejected since it was not submitted for assessment five days in advance of broadcast, Joyce and Lawrence were not deemed to be ‘writers of today’ (great or otherwise), and the lecture was felt to be pitched solely at a literary audience. It is debatable which of the three characters in question (Joyce, Lawrence, or O’Connor) was the real source of offence.

81 Frank O’Connor, ‘James Joyce – A Post-Mortem’, *The Bell* 5:5 (February 1943), p. 371. Years later in *The Backward Look*, his judgement remained much the same: ‘Nothing that I or anyone else can say will change the fact that *Ulysses* is one of the great monuments of Irish literature... [but] it is at its greatest not in its construction, which is haphazard, nor in its rhetorical experiments, which are frequently otiose, but in its description of the poetry of everyday life in Dublin... This unique quality of Joyce’s work is, I think, what makes it impossible for anyone except a native Irishman – or, as Joyce himself seemed to think, Jew – to understand what underlies it’. *The Backward Look* (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 209-10.

82 *CL* (16 June 1954). Of course, it was O’Nolan and friends (Anthony Cronin, Patrick Kavanagh and others) who decided to mark the fortieth anniversary of Bloom’s travels with the first literary pilgrimage around Dublin.
contemporaries is in his reaction to Joyce’s self-invention as an artist. Or rather, not in
his reaction to the Joyce who created *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, but in his dislike of
the mythic personality of *A Portrait* and the only slightly less mythic impresario who
directed the reception of the later works. Hence, O’Nolan’s insults worsened in
proportion to the growth of Joyce’s critical reputation; by 1957, Myles was calling
Joyce ‘a complete prig, a snob, and a person possessed of endowment unique in the
archives of conceit. Nearly all the commentators he attracted must be classified as
literary scruff... Nobody but a Dubliner could appraise its subtlety.’ 83 And nobody but
this particular Dubliner could be quite so unforgiving of the fact that Joyce’s work
strained beyond the ‘comic stuff’. Joyce’s self-conscious artistry, though genially
parodied in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, met with similar antagonism from other Irish writers.
O’Connor viewed Stephen Dedalus suspiciously as the ‘composed character of the
shabby-genteel artist’,84 reminiscent of nothing but his creator’s vanities, while
O’Faoláin juxtaposed Liam O’Flaherty - as a critical realist who would do service to
the ‘new Ireland’ - with the aloof introspection of Stephen Dedalus.85 Though
O’Nolan hardly shared O’Faoláin’s intellectual bias towards the functional uses of
literature, the same caricature of Joyce sometimes crept out in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. In
March 1944, an *Irish Times* review of Harry Levin’s *James Joyce: A Critical
Introduction* initially set the pedant in Myles railing against the stray apostrophes that
bedevilled the title of *Finnegans Wake*; it also inspired a long and unflattering
disquisition on modern artists. According to Myles, they compared unfavourably with
their medieval counterparts, who were ‘decent workmen’ and modest church-goers:

Nowadays your “artist” is a neurotic imbecile; he has the cheek to discern in his
own dementia the pattern of a universal chaos and it is no coincidence that most of
his books are dirty and have to be banned. Beware of “culture”, reader; of “art” and
“artists” be careful and apprehensive. Such things were very fine when they came
out first, they were part of the commonplace shape of life and nobody could
possibly take exception to them. But when isolated in our own day to become

83 *CL* (6 June 1957); cited in Powell, ‘An Annotated Bibliography of Myles na Gopaleen’s (Flann
merely a self-conscious social cult... know then that words like “culture” and “art”
do not mean what they meant. One great danger is this: if we admit that an artist is
necessarily neurotic, many neurotic poor souls will conclude that they must be
artists. And that is not an attitude that should be encouraged, however much it may
float our poor country out into the main stream of European culture.86

Given O’Nolan’s disapproval of the idea that the artist might be isolated from ‘the
commonplace shape of life’ as part of a ‘self-conscious social cult’, it is little wonder
that his vituperation of Joyce grew in proportion with the latter’s academic
canonisation.87 Though O’Nolan never threatened to acquire the revivelist or
nationalist nostalgia for a popular national culture which afflicted some of Joyce’s
earliest Irish critics, traces of the ethos remain in his irritation at the degeneration of
culture to ‘cult’.

If O’Nolan found fault with Joyce and the cultish aura of the modernist writer, the
corollary might be that he found the pose of the plain man more congenial for himself.
Certainly, he exploited the comic incongruity in re-integrating ‘James Aquinas Joyce’
as he liked to call him) back into the mainstream of plain Dublin life. But in doing so,
he could not only set off Joyce’s vanities to their best advantage, but also the
narrowness of contemporary Dublin. On one occasion, an encounter with a street
orator calling for the revival of the Irish language drew Myles into a curious
digression:

On many sides I hear it said that English “must go”. Very well. But.... are we
absolutely sure.... that .... we.... have English?... Poor Jimmy Joyce was the boy
that made English ‘go’ - I knew the father well, many a ball had with his hat inside
the back room in Corless’s fine figure of a man always wore a frock coat grey
derby never struck a woman in his life. I hear there’s not two consecutive words of

86 CL (21 March 1944); reprinted in FW. pp. 121-122.
87 ‘Finnegans Wake by reason of language and image left a sort of Wake Island in the sea of literature, yet
today it is regarded as a towering chef d’œuvre, used by some people as a prayer book – and indeed I have
heard its author referred to as St. James’. CL (22 December 1964), cited in Powell, ‘An Annotated
Bibliography...’, pp. 61-62.
English in that book *Flanagan's Awake* matteradann what anybody says. Could we... make that the national language?"88

The cosy and claustrophobic city that Joyce had satirised in *Ulysses* was resurrected by Myles in all the Joycean hangers-on who had ever claimed to shake his father’s hand. The shrill language revivalist whom this column mocked simply represented another aspect of this insular culture. Myles could have found no better antidote to all of this than *Finnegans Wake*, a text so inscrutably aloof (as well as international) that it outraged all the homely virtues of mid-century Dublin. For all his criticism of Joyce in later years, at a time when O’Nolan was referring to his contemporaries as ‘an eruption of literary scabies’, he reserved praise for Joyce and Yeats as the only two Irish writers of genius in the last century.90 Even in 1956, when ridicule of Joycean critics (generally American) was standard in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, O’Nolan defended *Ulysses* from charges of difficulty and obscurity, arguing that its ‘mental ingestion in full calls for intelligence, maturity, and some knowledge of life as well as letters’.90 So while O’Nolan’s criticism of Joyce often chimed with the judgements of his contemporaries, he was also usefully exploited in Myles’s negotiations with the Plain People of Ireland - one day being cast as a villain of the literary elite, and the next as an intellectual scapegoat of Ireland’s cultural guardians. If this seems a strange contradiction, the conclusion of that 1944 article on the modern artist is illuminating in its way:

...People who call to my lodgings for advice often ask me whether being Irish is itself an art-form. I am not so sure that the answer can be yes. One asks oneself whether the state of being Irish is characterised by the three essential requisites of James Aquinas Joyce – *integritas, consonantia, claritas*. This question each one of us must answer for himself, first looking into his own heart. It would save so much trouble if we could all answer in the affirmative. “Paudrig Crohoore, R.H.A.”,

89 *CL* (1 September 1944); reprinted in *BM*, p. 256.
would be a grand way out; that each citizen would be an artist would save us all a lot of trouble and embarrassment.  

‘Paudrig Crohoore, R. H. A.’ might be read as a caustic reminder that the Irish self-image in the age of de Valera was as artificial as any stage-Irish creation - much like ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ himself, given his literary pedigree. At the same time, the proposal to consider each citizen an artist did not only remove the temptation for artistic posturing (in order to distinguish one from the common herd); it also reminded the promoters of art as a ‘self-conscious social cult’ that each artist was a citizen as well. While Joyce might have been a ‘charm against infection for those who despised the new Ireland’, his apparent detachment jarred with Myles’s taste for controversy and provocation, which from the late 1940s onwards led to him play the part of the outraged citizen, or plain person. Interestingly, while the resurrection of Joyce in The Dalkey Archive mirrored the inclusion of a Dedallean student narrator in At Swim-Two-Birds, O’Nolan’s portrait of the artist had soured in the intervening years. J. C. C. Mays argues that ‘the image of Joyce that Brian O’Nolan sees is an image of himself as artist’ and that his treatment in The Dalkey Archive is effectively an expression of ‘embittered self-hatred’. It was, at the very least, a fairly blunt means of literary revenge, making the writer comically subservient to the Catholic Church and its guardians of literary morals, the Catholic Truth Society. But O’Nolan did an even stranger thing in this novel by twinning Joyce with the evil genius, De Selby, the

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91 CL (21 March 1944).
92 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 52.
93 At least, this is how Joyce was perceived by many Irish writers – coupled with a monstrous conceit. As Frank O’Connor put it: ‘In A Portrait he only puts God’s point of view about himself; in Ulysses God’s point of view about life; in Finnegans Wake God’s point of view about the universe.’ The Backward Look, p. 211.
94 Originally Niall Montgomery suggested to O’Nolan that Joyce should be resurrected in The Dalkey Archive as the evil genius who had been composing the commentaries on his work over the previous twenty years. O’Nolan replied that ‘The J. A. J. development you suggest for TDA is ridiculous. Dragging him in at all is gratuitous but, I hold, defensible for the purpose of weighing down the book’s message of derision. But you overlook some facts I insist on keeping in sight – (i) TDA will be read by middle-class chinors of reasonable education; (ii) about 50% of them will have HEARD the name James Joyce; (iii) about 3% will have read something BY Joyce (iv) the fraction who have read any of the exegetical bullshit or are aware of its absurdities is too tiny to be expressed.’ Brian O’Nolan to Niall Montgomery (10 January 1964); cited in Shea, Flann O’Brien’s Exorbitant Novels, p. 159.
96 Ibid., p. 242.
eccentric inventor of a substance with the power to destroy the world. His narrator, Mick, imagines having the two collaborate on a ‘monstrous earthquake of a new book, something claiming to supplant the Bible’ (DA, 131) - placing the conservative supporter of the status quo in collaboration with a destructive and subversive personality. Though the final portrait of the artist in O’Nolan’s fiction was again of Joyce (or Joyce/De Selby), it unwittingly dramatised the contradictory facets of his own literary personality more starkly than ever before.

The Beginnings of Flann and Myles

The first real appearance of the ‘Brian O’Nolan – Myles na Gopaleen – Flann O’Brien triumvirate’ was in October 1938, six months before the publication of *At Swim–Two–Birds*. It was then that ‘Flann O’Brien’ made his debut in the letters page of *The Irish Times*, sparking off the farcical correspondence which would run intermittently in the paper over the following two years, and which finally drove its editor, Bertie Smyllie, to commission *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The preoccupations of Flann and his siblings (Oscar Love, Lir O’Connor, his sister Luna, and others) were already very much those of Myles na gCopaleen: the self-importance of Dublin’s writers and the subversive potential of the plain man. Since the letters make the most of O’Nolan’s facility for erudite ingenuity and endlessly digressive nonsense, they form an obvious bridge between *At Swim* and the newspaper column. But the letters also show him to be jostling for his own space in literary Dublin, heralding the arrival of a new character on the scene. It is significant that Flann O’Brien made his first appearance to intervene in a quarrel between Seán O’Faoláin and Frank O’Connor over the future of the Abbey Theatre. The (very public) private argument they had been conducting between themselves for a fortnight in *The Irish Times* was exploded - and summarily ended - by O’Nolan’s irreverent contribution. His playful alter ego Flann, who was very soon to be revealed as a novelist in his own right, signalled a new and very different kind of literary personality. The rather earnest sense of cultural responsibility

Keith Donohue was the first to locate Flann O’Brien’s earliest appearances in *The Irish Times* in 1938. *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 14.
assumed by O’Faoláin and O’Connor (then still a director of the Abbey) was ridiculed by an adversary who had more in common with Joyce’s inscrutability and playfulness, but who showed a mischievous taste for controversy that was all his own.

Flann’s intervention in the debate, ‘Ideals for an Irish Theatre’ (or rather, the Abbey Theatre), struck immediately at what he detected to be its underlying snobbery. O’Faoláin had complained that the Abbey was without direction or identity, too fascinated with ‘P. Q.’ (the dreaded ‘Peasant Quality’) to maintain theatrical standards and in need of a transfusion of contemporary European drama. He challenged O’Connor to state its agenda and to establish the theatre’s identity and goals, as Yeats and Lady Gregory had done in earlier years. O’Connor took the more pragmatic view that a theatre was founded on practice, not theory, and though this was the essence of the disagreement, the correspondence between the two rambled on at great length over a fortnight, each avoiding the other’s attacks with a series of new digressions. O’Connor defended his ‘P. Q.’ actresses on the grounds that those from ‘good schools’ were often educated ‘out of knowledge of their own people’ and their accents simply would not suit the Abbey’s rural material. O’Faoláin replied churlishly that not even realistic plays required ‘adhering slavishly to common, or garden, or bog-field actuality’; furthermore, the only realist writer which Ireland had was George Moore ‘and he was the essence of Cockney vulgarity’. O’Connor, in response, declared that whatever faults the theatre had, they were also the faults of Irish life, Irish authors and Irish audiences - particularly of the kind of Irish audiences who guffawed at moments of high tragedy on the stage. In a parting shot of patrician sorrow, O’Faoláin lamented the condition of a theatre that had once had a reputation: ‘Whatever one might say of the so-called “Anglo-Irish” they had taste… in future, when I come to town I intend to go to the movies. They are at least honest in their vulgarity.’ Enter Flann O’Brien:

99 Frank O’Connor, The Irish Times (3 October 1938).
100 Sean O’Faolain, ibid. (12 October 1938).
101 Frank O’Connor, ibid. (12 October 1938).
102 Sean O’Faolain, ibid. (15 October 1938).
I do not know whether the petulant bickering which is going on in your columns, between Mr. O Faoláin and Mr. O’Connor is a private affair or whether any puling highbrow gentleman of refined tastes may take a part...

The issue between these two items is plain and quite unimportant. Mr. O’Connor wants plays about peasants acted by peasants, who know not the muck that passes for education at “good schools”, and presented, preferably, before an audience of—peasants, I think; people, at all events, who would be too bucolically shy to laugh uproariously when diverted by something which Mr. O’Connor considers desperately tragic... But none of this nonsense for Mr. O Faoláin. He asks the Abbey directors to give some idea of what they want and what they do be about in their dim boardroom. He then tells them what they want in a few well-deserved, well-chosen words...103

Flann neatly captured the unwitting arrogance of O’Faoláin’s pronouncements: ‘Mr. O Faoláin is a man that must be listened to because he succeeded in becoming outright an authority on Old and Middle Irish, a thing that most people cannot do properly in a whole lifetime; and what is more, he has written a serial for the *Irish Press*. His solution for O’Connor’s problems anticipated the activities of Myles na gCopaleen’s WAAMA League Escort Service. Since the audiences at the Abbey had degenerated in recent years from ‘an esoteric coterie’ to those who came looking for a good laugh and got it (‘notwithstanding the fury of a 1,000 red-faced art-stuffed boyos in the wings’), he advised the directors to invest in five hundred extras (peasants, naturally) who could occupy the stalls and laugh only when directed. But his advice was not confined to the directorship of the Abbey. Since Dublin was ‘crawling with artists and art-critics’, he suggested that O’Faoláin and O’Connor might acquire a large hall, ‘like the Sweep place in Ballsbridge’, and quarantine them all there together in a mammoth Art Jamboree: ‘The City Manager would welcome the project because he could use the place for a rubbish dump, and nobody would mind or notice or know the difference’. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was no reply to Flann, but also no further letters between O’Connor and O’Faoláin.

103 Flann O’Brien, ibid. (15 October 1938).
One of the more amusing features of this correspondence is how Mylesian it had become even before the intervention of Flann/ O’Nolan. This is an anachronism, of course, since Myles would not raise his head for another two years, but with all the correspondents’ strutting and posturing, their hyperbole and high-handedness, it is easy to see where O’Nolan learned the tricks of his trade. By the time Flann O’Brien hijacked the debate, all that was needed was a little quiet deflation and a few gratuitous insults. Interestingly, the derision that both O’Connor and O’Faoláin expressed towards the plain people of Ireland (whether those who smirked at Abbey tragedies, or who clung to the vulgarities of realism), would be parodied at length in Cruiskeen Lawn. So too would the inverse snobbery expressed in a fear that artists might be educated ‘out of knowledge of their own people’. But the primary target of Flann’s letter was the declamatory tone that both writers quite naturally employed in the pages of The Irish Times. Whatever O’Nolan owed to Joyce (in reacting against his example as much as in following it), his playful, anti-intellectual postures were as much inspired by the writers dominating the domestic scene. To read Cruiskeen Lawn at length is to encounter a frequent irritation with Ireland’s self-anointed critics and cultural guardians. (The irony, of course, is that Myles himself would eventually lead the band.) But it was not only soap-box oratory that provoked the ridicule of Flann O’Brien, but the common tendency towards high-handed denunciations of the cultural and intellectual poverty of the great mass of the Irish public. Predictably, it was Seán O’Faoláin who (a month later) inspired Flann’s next appearance in The Irish Times. In a recent speech to the Dublin Literary Society, O’Faoláin had deplored the fact that Irish novelists wasted ‘half their spirit’ in battling a native provincialism. Flann O’Brien might have been expected to agree with this (since he implied that pronouncing on such things was none of the novelist’s business), but he was still not impressed:

104 The speech was entitled: ‘Are Modern Novels Telling the Truth?’. O’Faoláin felt that engaging with such problems made the work of Irish writers ‘restless, and lacking in equanimity’. They should ‘ignore such things as the censorship, which was merely the tool of vested interests, and devote themselves to their own undisturbed vision of life’. ‘Modern Novels Criticised’, ibid. (5 November 1938).
I see that tremendous cerebrite, Mr. Sean O Faoláin, has been at it again. He announces that Irish novelists are in a bad way, thanks to the "venom of provincialism and nationalist and religious obscurantism". What other way would they be, or what can Mr. O Faoláin expect from a nation that associates the name of Marx with a day at the races or a night at the opera?¹⁰⁵

Lest this might seem a backhanded insult to the plain people (however unlikely this is, given that Flann seemed to have more in common with the Marx triPLICATE than with their namesake), he suggested that before O’Faoláin left for more civilised shores – as he was bound to do – he might establish a branch of the Dublin Literary Society or the P. E. N. Club in every town and village in Ireland: ‘The branch could be occupied with decontaminating provincialism, dispersing obscurantism and promoting the ballet, verse-speaking and Weltanschauung...’. This still elicited no reply from O’Faoláin, but instead O’Nolan’s pseudonymous syndicate sprang into action for the first time. A ‘Hazel Ellis Warren’ praised Mr. O’Brien for ‘pouring cold water on the pseudo-intellectuals of our city’ who were forever proclaiming their lives to be in danger from ‘the barbarous, priest-ridden Irish people’,¹⁰⁶ a point swiftly echoed by ‘Mumbo-Jumbo’.¹⁰⁷ Soon afterwards in January 1939, the march of the plain people on the O’Faoláin/ O’Connor duet resumed when Flann responded to O’Faoláin’s angry remarks on an Irish Times review of an O’Connor play: ‘...Time’s Pocket has justified itself ten times over if it serves to draw from Mr. Sean O’Faoláin one of those amusing letters in which he protests once again that he is “an artist”’.¹⁰⁸ Flann had finally hit his mark - this time O’Connor condemned his letters as ‘personal abuse’, and called on the editor of The Irish Times to identify its author and distinguish the newspaper from ‘the methods of literary gangsters and hooligans’.¹⁰⁹ Smyllie smoothly replied that the identity of the author was known to him, and the next day (in

¹⁰⁵ Flann O’Brien, ibid. (8 November 1938).
¹⁰⁶ Hazel Ellis Warren, ibid. (10 November 1938). Another Hazel Ellis (whose play was being produced in the Gate that week) replied the following day to deny responsibility for the previous letter.
¹⁰⁷ ‘Here when one or two of the younger people get into print they immediately embark on a ludicrous campaign of arty posturing in the Press and elsewhere, whining about their “spirit”, their “art”, and talk about how difficult it is for a man to get “some peace”...’. ‘Mumbo-Jumbo’, ibid. (11 November 1938).
¹⁰⁹ Frank O’Connor, ibid. (13 January 1939). O’Faoláin genially declined to reply to him, but strangely he accused the Irish Times drama critic, David Sears, of playing the plain man – a criticism surely more suited
the guise of ‘Art O’Madan’) he indicated the close of this correspondence with liberal praise for the entertainment it had provided.\textsuperscript{110} 

Evidently, from the very outset of these letter controversies O’Nolan’s characteristic themes were established. The vanity and self-importance of the Irish writer (or at least, of the Irish writer as represented by Seán O’Faoláin) was a main focus of attack, and in particular, the Irish writer’s very loud protests at his persecution by the plain people. Noting that O’Nolan’s baiting of O’Faoláin over the following years did not prevent him from becoming a contributor to *The Bell*, Keith Donohue argues that there was no real animosity lying behind these letters: ‘Beneath O’Nolan’s writings as Flann O’Brien or Myles na gCopaleen lies a deep irony about meaning, truth and whether language was an adequate tool for logic and reason... The artifice of the debate takes precedence over the character of the debater’.\textsuperscript{111} There is some truth in this - certainly there was a large element of theatricality in O’Nolan’s personae, as well as a love of disputation for its own sake.\textsuperscript{112} But equally, the main themes of these letters (however playful) are also present in O’Nolan’s fiction, and it is no coincidence that when *Cruiskeen Lawn* first appeared regularly in English in September 1941, the artists’ association, WAAMA (headed by O’Faoláin), was its first object of derision. Like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which was in the hands of its publishers at the time, these letters very pointedly expose any condescension on the part of a literary coterie towards the values of the Irish at large. *The Irish Times* provided O’Nolan with the perfect opportunity to bait the Dublin intellectual on home ground. However, given the venues from which he mounted his attacks – an experimental novel and a broadsheet largely ignored by the plain people of Ireland – it has to be admitted that O’Nolan was really only playing the prodigal son. And beyond the fun to be had in drawing his literary elders and betters into unwinnable arguments, or in beginning the

\textsuperscript{110} Others wrote in praising the O’Faoláin/ O’Connor/ O’Brien battle as much-needed entertainment in troubled times. Richard MacBurke (18 January 1939); ‘Mitteleuropa’ (21 January 1939).

\textsuperscript{111} Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, pp. 16-17.

\textsuperscript{112} In response to O’Faoláin’s suspicions about the substantiality of ‘Flann O’Brien’, he in turn was moved to wonder whether such a preposterous person as ‘Mr Sean O Faoláin’ existed at all. ‘Apologia Pro Vita Sewer’, *The Irish Times* (16 January 1939).
philistines’ march on the Abbey Theatre, O’Nolan may have had another (less selfless) motive in writing these letters. Whether intended to or not, they certainly helped ‘Flann O’Brien’ to gain some notoriety before the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in March 1939.\(^{113}\) Ironically, perhaps startled by the irascible responses he had finally elicited from O’Faoláin and O’Connor on 13 January, O’Nolan wrote to his publishers two days afterwards proposing to replace the pseudonym ‘Flann O’Brien’ with ‘John Hackett’.\(^{114}\) (His fears of reprisal were unsubstantiated, since O’Faoláin eventually gave *At Swim* a fairly positive review in *John O’London’s Weekly*.\(^{115}\)) Nevertheless, any self-interest O’Nolan had in generating these literary free-for-alls was at least consistent with his criticism of O’Faoláin and O’Connor. In contrast to their high-mindedness, Flann O’Brien declined to take the business of literature as anything other than plain *business*.

So by January 1939, many of the salient features of Flann/ Myles were already in place. But running parallel to the *Time’s Pocket* farrago was a more sober (though equally heated) controversy in the letters page over Franco’s Spain, and one in which O’Nolan may also have been involved. The latter correspondence involved a character called Oscar Love, who played a more facetious part in later Flann O’Brien-generated controversies, also contributing to the flurry of letters that greeted the arrival of

\(^{113}\) Admittedly Flann O’Brien appeared a full week before A. M. Heath wrote to O’Nolan enquiring about a pseudonym (19 October 1938), SIUC. However, ‘Flann O’Brien’ later denied authorship of the forthcoming *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the *Irish Press*: ‘...the supposed book is anti-clerical, blasphemous, and licentious and various lengthy extracts from it have been concocted to show the obscenity of the work’. Letter to *The Irish Press* (4 January 1939); reprinted in *Journal of Irish Literature* 3:1 (January, 1974), p. 68. Of course, there were no excerpts from ‘the supposed book’ to be had, but this served as a nicely roundabout advertisement.

\(^{114}\) ‘...I am afraid the title “At Swim-Two-Birds” must be changed, likewise “Flann O’Brien”. I have long had a hobby of provoking dog-fights in the newspapers here on any topic from literature to vivisection and I have been using “Flann O’Brien” as a pen-name for some time. Lately I intervened (rather injudiciously) in a ridiculous controversy started by Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain... challenges to fisticuffs have been issued...’. Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Longman’s (15 January 1939), SIUC. On hearing that his publisher was to meet O’Faoláin, O’Nolan wrote that ‘I believe O’Faoláin is a decent man but when he begins to write letters to the paper on the subject of Art he becomes the most unspeakable boob possible without a glimmer of humour... I don’t know whether O’Faoláin knows who I am but I would be glad if you would give him no information. He has already denounced me as a public sewer and a rapscallion and anything you say might be taken down in evidence and used in evidence against ME.’ Letter from Brian O’Nolan to T. F. Burns, Longman’s (6 February 1939), SIUC.

\(^{115}\) Seán O’Faoláin, ‘Irish Gasconade’, *John O’London’s Weekly* (24 March 1939), p. 970. Cronin remarks that ‘Although he had... some reason to feel aggrieved, the review was not ungenerous... on balance he tended to see the book as a display of youthful brilliance and high spirits which would lead to better things.’ *No Laughing Matter*, p. 92.
Cruiskeen Lawn in 1940. The debate over Spain had been instigated following a pro-Franco speech by Dr. Walter Starkie of Trinity College in which he referred disparagingly to conditions in Spain under the nationalist government. In reply, some correspondents elaborated on Franco’s atrocities, while others defended Starkie with claims about the government’s murder of Catholic priests and nuns. Oscar Love was an early entry to the fray, challenging one pro-Franco correspondent’s account of life in Spain:

Mr. Hutchinson might forget his conducted tour through Franco land, leave the tinted pages of Dr. Starkie’s wanderings, and turn to Alice in Wonderland for relief. It may then be realised how many travellers in Spain resemble Alice—

“The dream-child moving through a land
Of wonders wild and new,
In friendly chat with bird and beast—
And half believe it true.”

In his next letter, the ever-literary Oscar cited another piece of nonsense from G. K. Chesterton; he also made the more curious claim to have been in Spain in 1934, where he witnessed some of the government’s adult education initiatives. If this was O’Nolan, then he was participating in two very different debates concurrently (and in very different ways), sometimes contributing letters under different names on the same day. The argument over Spain, in which Oscar Love was the only dubiously-named individual participating, was a long way from Flann O’Brien’s playful provocation of O’Connor and O’Faoláin. Nevertheless, it is possible that this was O’Nolan, appearing in an uncharacteristically forthright guise (despite the nonsense quotes from Carroll and Chesterton). A certain amount of caution is needed here, since critics generally ascribe the collection of pseudonymous letters which bombarded The Irish Times in 1939-1940 to a syndicate of O’Nolan and friends such

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117 Oscar Love, ibid. (10 January 1939).
as Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan (though the latter’s brief account of these letters does not mention his own contribution). However, Oscar Love did sign his letters from Blackrock, where O’Nolan’s family was living at the time. It is even feasible that O’Nolan did visit Spain in 1934, since his whereabouts in the early months of that year are notoriously vague, his biographies generally supposing him to be on an academic exchange in Germany. Assuming that Flann O’Brien and Oscar Love were one and the same, then O’Nolan was already compartmentalising his authorial personality, using one pseudonym for facetious literary frays and another for more serious matters, a point which is underlined by the resurrection of Oscar Love some years later when the matter of Spain was raised again in The Irish Times. It is a timely reminder that Brian, Flann and Myles were shadowed by a host of minor characters; apart from the Mylesian Brother Barnabas and Count O’Blather, O’Nolan also worked in the guise of some less idiosyncratic authors: Lir O’Connor, Jimmy Cunning, George Knowall, John James Doe, and perhaps more. His multiple literary personalities were not only splintered but at times surprisingly inconsistent; there is not much correspondence between the inventiveness of Myles na Gopaleen and the banalities of Lir O’Connor. In assuming so many literary identities, arguably O’Nolan risked acquiring none at all; at this stage of his career (on the eve of Cruiskeen Lawn), it was a literary fate that might have seemed probable on the evidence of the varied and consciously mannered styles of At Swim-Two-Birds. But the irony is that O’Nolan’s precise and deadpan prose is immediately distinctive, and in any case, very soon the personality of Myles would come to dominate all the others.


121 This is a notoriously shady period of O’Nolan’s biography. Though he is often placed in Germany on an academic exchange between December 1933 and June 1934, judging from his contributions to Comhthrom Féinne, Cronin finds this unlikely, No Laughing Matter, pp. 67-68. His hypothesis is that the trip only lasted a few weeks; if so, it still might be feasible that O’Nolan also visited Spain at the time.

122 See The Irish Times (18 October 1945) and (7 November 1945).

123 In the 1940s, O’Nolan intermittently wrote as Lir O’Connor for the The Irish Times (many of these articles are reprinted in The Irish Digest), and in the 1950s as Jimmy Cunning for The Irish Pictorial Times, as George Knowall for The Nationalist and Leinster Times (Carlow), as John James Doe for The Southern Star, and as Matt Duffy for The Sunday Review. The Flann O’Brien collection in Boston College also includes a couple of Irish articles by a ‘Sean O Longain’ (unlisted in any of O’Nolan’s bibliographies), with the name ‘Myles na Gopaleen’ added in the margins.
However, the final outing of O’Nolan and friends in the letters page of *The Irish Times* exposed a telling point about his various literary identities. This outburst was provoked by Patrick Kavanagh’s review of Maurice Walsh’s novel, *The Hill is Mine*, on 20 July 1940. In his review, Kavanagh had raised a question close to O’Nolan’s heart: ‘What is an artist? Can a writer of bestsellers, like Maurice Walsh, be an artist?’ The answer was yes, given that ‘nearly all the prose and verse innovators of the past twenty-five years or so’ (including Eliot, Yeats and Joyce) had nothing in particular to say, achieving only a kind of empty virtuosity. The replies, when they began, were largely spurious, careering off into a debate over boy scouts and the Hitler Jugend. Flann only made his appearance when Kavanagh’s poem, ‘Spraying the Potatoes’, was published in *The Irish Times* in the midst of the debacle: ‘Perhaps the *Irish Times*, timeless champion of our peasantry, will oblige us with a series in this strain covering such rural complexities as inflamed goat-udders, warble-pocked shorthorn, contagious abortion, non-ovoid oviducts and nervous disorders among the gentlemen who pay the rent’. However, aside from Flann’s complaint on 29 July that Irish writers did not take each other seriously unless they had been banned for obscenity or had provoked a catastrophic libel case, there was little else in this vast correspondence which bore any relation to its headline on the letters page: ‘Literary Criticism’. Kavanagh was eventually allowed the final word, and seized on just this point. Returning to his original review, he asserted that these ‘disciples of Joyce and Eliot’ were ‘expert in the art of saying nothing’:

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124 From January 1939 onwards, he maintained a low level of nonsense correspondence in the letters page. See Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, pp. 18-19. Another particularly literary outing was in May 1940, prompted by a complaint that an exemplary performance of *Three Sisters* at the Gate Theatre was not receiving its due support from the Dublin public. In reply to an outraged citizen (the ‘saucy’ H. P.), who blamed the decline in theatre audiences on Hollywood films and xenophobic Gaels, Flann O’Brien agreed that ‘overmuch Gaelic and Christianity’, combined with the lure of ‘exotic picture palaces’ was taking its toll: ‘I do not think that old men like ‘H. P.’ and myself can expect to do much to stem the tide of Gaelic barbarism in Dublin, but if he thinks it would do him good I am prepared to correspond with him on the subject of Joseph Conrad’. Flann O’Brien, *The Irish Times* (4 June 1940); reprinted in *MBM*, pp. 187-188. Flann’s mockery of the pretensions of the literary Dubliner launched a long correspondence on the dear, dead days of the well-bred *litterateur* involving competing anecdotes about Conrad, Coleridge, Swinburne, Lamb, Ibsen, and Dostoyevsky - otherwise known as ‘Flann Doyle, born and raised in Goatstown’. ‘Whit Cassidy’, ibid. (13 June 1940); reprinted in *MBM*, p. 196.

125 Patrick Kavanagh, *The Irish Times* (20 July 1940); *MBM*, p. 203.

There is tragedy here, and I, for one, am shy to bring these literary scouts and touts to a raw awareness of their tragedy. Too soon they will know the misery of literary men without themes, poets without burdens, ploughmen without land. Such grief has Higher Education brought to simple-minded, decent fellows, who might have developed in happiness as Corporation workers in actual sewers...\textsuperscript{127}

This might have been a little gallling for O’Nolan, given that the reviewers of \textit{At Swim-Two-Birds} had also criticised its fluency in saying nothing.\textsuperscript{128} Ironically, despite his multiple pseudonyms and provocative posturing, the correspondence that he had conducted on and off in \textit{The Irish Times} over the previous two years had been surprisingly consistent in its themes. Though by the summer of 1940 the whole thing had developed into unadulterated nonsense (at which point other \textit{Irish Times} readers, including its editor, were in on the act), Flann’s contributions still showed his characteristic impatience with all forms of literary pomposity. It is interesting that O’Nolan did not take issue with Kavanagh’s harsh opinion of the literary greats of the previous quarter century: \textit{At Swim}’s reviewers may have complained that it had nothing to say, but it could be argued that this quasi-modernist text was making the very same point about the targets of its parodies. Ironically, O’Nolan’s critics over the past decade have been passing the same judgement on his own work. In diagnosing a healthy polyphony in his fiction, or arguing that he is primarily an ambivalent menippean satirist, the implication is that he manages, in virtuoso fashion, to avoid saying anything at all. His critics cast this in a more positive light than Kavanagh’s depiction of modernist authors, but it inadvertently hints at the same empty virtuosity. However, this conclusion is not wholly true. Certainly, O’Nolan was a more self-conscious – or more sophisticated – writer than many of his contemporaries; one as inclined to question the parameters of critical debate as to engage with his opponents. But, as is evident from the sharp satire of the language revival in \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn} and \textit{An Béal Bocht}, or in the more polemical direction of the column from the mid-1940s

\textsuperscript{127} Patrick Kavanagh, ibid. (7 August 1940); \textit{MBM}, p. 225. The sewer gag had originated with Seán O’Faoláin.

\textsuperscript{128} ‘I did not notice that he had a single original idea to express; and I should reluctantly put him among the bores.’ Frank Swinnerton, ‘Right Proportions’, \textit{Observer} (19 March 1939); ‘...having all but exhausted, with the exercise of much ingenuity, the subject of Irish content and Irish style, will he not now sit down and try his hand at writing an Irish novel?’ Anon. ‘Nest of Novelists’, \textit{TLS} (18 March 1939).
onwards, quite a substantial amount of his work does not match the level of
ambivalent, self-reflexive humour which can be found in *At Swim*. The letter
controversies which O’Nolan intermittently conducted from October 1938 until
*Cruiskeen Lawn* began in October 1940 are an interesting if cartoonish illustration of
his humour at work. Cumulatively, the letters form a grand, shaggy dialogue, much
like the endless dialectic in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and the
dialogues of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, or even the debates between Collopy and Fr. Kurt Fahrt
in *The Hard Life*, or De Selby and St. Augustine in *The Dalkey Archive*. Individually,
the letters are also models of intellectual agility, mimicry, and evasion, but for all their
nonsense, they do not simply provide argument for argument’s sake. There is more to
them than argument about argument; for all their fantastic inventiveness, their
preoccupations show them to be rooted in their time and place. It is a curious paradox
of *At Swim-Two-Birds* that O’Nolan firmly contained the various fantastical levels of
the text within the student’s realistic, semi-autobiographical frame narrative; the
image could be used for his humour in general, which never wholly works free of its
moorings in contemporary Dublin. It is no accident that Flann O’Brien first appeared
(in ‘Ideals for an Irish Theatre’) in the midst of a debate between two prominent
writers, the subtext of which was the role of the Irish writer in public life. While
O’Faoláin complained because O’Connor did not appropriate the public and
declamatory position which Yeats had occupied at the helm of the national theatre,
O’Nolan made the very debate itself ridiculous. When, again, O’Faoláin complained
of the obstacles which censorship and obscurantism presented to the Irish writer,
O’Nolan made his perfectly reasonable grumble appear precious and patronising.
Since the late 1930s saw the passing of the reviverist generation that had had such an
impact on Irish culture and politics, it was natural that O’Faoláin should have resisted
the contemporary impulse to return Irish writers to the sidelines (though worse was
promised by the Censorship of Publications Act). It was equally natural, given that it
was this cross-infection of culture and politics which produced the most reactionary
elements of the Gaelic revival, that O’Nolan should have derided any attempts by his
fellow writers to mount the rostrum again.
Given O’Nolan’s antipathy to the very public and vocal roles assumed by writers such as O’Connor and O’Faoláin, as well as to the more remote mythos already accumulating around Joyce, it is easy to see why he has been cast as a peculiarly diffident individual skirting behind the masks of Flann, Myles, and their various associates. But this image is arguably more a creation of his readers than of his work – now forming part of the myth of Brian O’Nolan himself. While the playful, hyper-literary Flann O’Brien almost monopolises academic criticism, and the acidic Myles (shielding the elusive civil servant) arguably dominates his popular reputation, it is nevertheless questionable how important these individual identities are in themselves. The distinction between Flann and Myles is extremely precarious, though admittedly one of the many things they have in common is a body of writing whose ironies, exaggerations and mannered styles allowed O’Nolan a certain evasiveness. But O’Nolan did not really hide himself behind his various masks - as Bernard Benstock points out, in *At Swim* ‘the author himself began the process of confusing himself with his literary creations’. In his very first novel, O’Nolan placed himself (or a creature confusingly like himself) in the starring role, and as Joyce did, resolutely blended fiction and life throughout. Indeed, apart from *The Dalkey Archive*, all of his fiction assumes a wavering, sometimes self-referential, first-person narrative, though these are coupled with an ostentatiously literary and artificial style. If O’Nolan was hiding behind the masks of Flann and Myles, he at least ensured that the illusion was fairly transparent. While his early comedy can seem to negate any authorial standpoint (charged with a seemingly endemic irony, it is also full of interior contradictions) this hardly contrived the death of the author – indeed, it is significant that O’Nolan created an endless array of extravagant and imposing authorial personalities in Brother Barnabas, Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and others. There is certainly a tension in his early writing between comic indeterminacy and the satirical impulse, but the fluidity of Myles na gCopaleen is a more telling guide to the nuances of O’Nolan’s comedy than the tenets of literary theory. The intellectual slapstick of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the adoption of polemical positions which can be adjusted, abandoned, attacked, and adopted again, reveal a comic writer in creative friction with his

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environment. While O’Nolan was not quite the empty vessel that Kavanagh implied him to be, the dominance of parody in his fiction is perhaps one indication that he was an essentially *reactive* writer. The irascible Myles of legend may be a muddle of academic criticism, popular notoriety, and endless anecdotes, but the more mischievous and irresponsible personae which O’Nolan fashioned in the late 1930s and early 1940s were partly crafted in response to the literary personalities around him: an inscrutable and playful Joyce, or an earnest and slightly didactic O’Faoláin. The following chapter investigates more fully the manner in which O’Nolan’s comedy engaged with contemporary Irish culture, examining how the intellectual environment of 1930s Dublin shaped the strangely ambivalent comedy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. 
Chapter Two

At Swim-Two-Birds and 1930s Ireland

Reviewing At Swim-Two-Birds on its publication in 1939, Jorge Luis Borges aptly described it as an exploration of ‘the many ways to conceive of the Irish novel’. But while At Swim might be read as a novel about writing a novel, it is more specifically a novel about writing an Irish novel of the 1930s. Its student narrator - a latter-day Stephen Dedalus presents his reader with a work in progress which mixes parodies of the Irish literary revival, Joycean modernism and contemporary popular fiction, from the cowboy western to the moral fable. These literary parodies, combined with the seedy realism of the student’s frame narrative, have bolstered O’Nolan’s reputation as a representative figure of a disillusioned, post-independence generation. However, this chapter challenges the image of O’Nolan as a subversive satirist who was wholly frustrated by social and intellectual life in the Irish Free State. It argues instead that At Swim’s humour betrays a curiously ambivalent outlook on contemporary Irish culture, one that is explicable in terms of the intellectual environment which informed At Swim’s double-edged comedy. This novel is not simply a collage of literary styles; it dramatises the process of composition, demolishes the notion of original genius, and allows its characters to oscillate between the roles of writer and reader, storyteller and audience. Above all, it indicates that collaboration is an inevitable component of literary production, whether this is implied in the student’s literary parodies or explicitly dramatised in the critical debates.

3 See Terence Brown, ‘The Counter-Revival: Provincialism and Censorship 1930-65’, in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. III, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), pp. 89-93. Interestingly, at the time of publication The Irish Times called At Swim ‘a jeu d’esprit’ which was written with ‘verve’ and ‘gusto’. Anon. ‘Irish Author’s Experiment. Erudite Humour in Novel Form’, The Irish Times (25 March 1939). It was not until its re-issue in 1960 that the novel was overlaid with the disappointments of
between his characters. Dialogue is made an essential element of the text, and O’Nolan acknowledges Dublin’s oral culture as much as its literary heritage. By structuring his novel as a work in progress, he could draw attention both to his contemporary intellectual environment and the influence of his literary precursors. The result is an intertextual work which also emphasises the actual context of the act of writing (and reading). But while the internal development of *At Swim* is determined by a diverse range of writers and readers, tellingly, the novel is ultimately focused through the student’s semi-autobiographical frame narrative. O’Nolan began writing *At Swim* shortly after his graduation from UCD in 1935, and to a large degree its humour plays on the contradictions of the college’s intellectual life in the early 1930s. The student narrator may imitate the avant-garde literature popular among his contemporaries, but he also shows a suspicion of its pretensions that is more congenial to the Ireland of his day.

Since *At Swim*’s central conceit is to expose itself in the process of being written, the critical battles between storytellers and audience are intrinsic to its development. True to the convention of the Fianna tales, Finn only tells his stories when prompted by Conán, but his modern-day successors are similarly reliant on a responsive audience. *At Swim* presents the process of composition as a communal effort - effectively it is a text designed in committee. The torture of Trellis is passed from hand to hand, the student is criticised and goaded by his friends; when Brinsley complains that Furriskey, Shanahan and Lamont are indistinguishable, the student is prompted to include a memorandum of their ‘respective diacritical traits or qualities’ (*ASTB*, 161). There are also more subtle influences at work. Though Lamont expresses impatience with ‘Sir Storybook’ (*ASTB*, 78), aka Finn MacCool, his account of Sweeny’s leaps from tree to tree nevertheless inspires a contemporary equivalent, the yarn about Jumping Craddock. No new storyteller entirely sheds the other’s style, and the account Orlick gives of Trellis’s torture, for example, passes from the quaint coinages of Finn MacCool to the student’s starched prose, to the slang of the Dublin cowboys (*ASTB*, 175). The notion of the author as an original genius is thoroughly demolished in *At Ireland’s mid-century, as well as the disappointments of O’Nolan’s later career. See John Jordan, ‘The
Swim; each new digression embarked on in the novel is as a response to something else, and each new storyteller betrays the influence of his predecessors. Admittedly, each character recounts his tale primarily in the style suitable to his own genre, so At Swim often reads not only as a novel produced by committee, but as an experiment in assembly-line fiction - albeit with all the pieces inserted in the wrong order. There was a precedent for this: while O’Nolan was in UCD, he colluded with the poets Denis Devlin, Donagh MacDonagh and other friends in composing what Niall Sheridan called ‘the Great Irish Novel.’ This was to be a parody of a generic best-seller, which would apply the principles of the industrial revolution to literature. Each contributor would write a chapter, and the book – with the working title, Children of Destiny - was to be constructed from a series of ‘ready-made’ fictional clichés. At Swim certainly owes something to this project, but it is also the student magazine writ large; a model of chaotic composition. The only structure this novel really has is that of a work in progress, and both O’Nolan’s playful intertextuality and the student’s self-reflexive frame narrative suggest that the process of writing is a collaborative effort.

O’Nolan’s model of the writer at work is not the bard alone in his cell, but the raconteur at large in the pub. This makes At Swim interesting not only as a metafiction – which is how much criticism approaches the text – but also as a novel which is highly aware of its own cultural context, and so which provides a snapshot of intellectual life in Ireland at a


Niall Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, pp. 41-44. Of course, the title travesties the ‘Soldiers of Destiny’ – Fianna Fáil.

O’Nolan later declared rather despondently in Cruiskeen Lawn that his ‘...sole contribution to the terrestrial literatures has been to refute each and every claim to originality on the part of other writers’ (4 March 1958). Even the central conceit of At Swim is not wholly O’Nolan’s own. The Flann O’Brien collection in Boston College includes an undated notebook belonging to his father containing many outlines for stories and plays. Like his son’s work, these sketches all hinge on a clever conceit or punchline, and many posit an unsteady boundary between fiction and reality. In ‘Six Authors in Search of a Character’, a man keeps a register of unused characters (from writers such as Shakespeare), for consultation by aspiring authors. In many other stories, acting, or playing games, transgresses into real life. One story has it that whatever a man imagines comes true; in another: ‘A madman (not so very mad, though) collars all the lady novelists he can lay hands on – or all their characters...’

significant point of transition. There is none of the revivalist ambition for a unifying national literature in At Swim; instead, its combination of incongruous styles presents an image of a fractured literary culture. And significantly, this rag-bag of a novel is presented as a product of the student-narrator’s perspective on Irish literature – a student who is an undergraduate in 1930s UCD, as was O’Nolan himself. The form of At Swim (parodies followed by parodies) might owe more to Ulysses than to A Portrait, but it is At Swim’s framing portrait of the artist which most clearly exposes the contrast between Joyce’s Dublin and post-Independence Ireland. Where the Royal University’s students in A Portrait hang about the steps of the National Library of Ireland discussing Aquinas or the grand future of Irish nationalism, their successors in At Swim, now students of the National University, give the impression that unrelenting cynicism is the prevailing feature of intellectual life in 1930s Ireland. And as O’Nolan’s friends later testified, the student’s narrative in At Swim-Two-Birds cuts peculiarly close to the bone, since much of it faithfully reproduces conversations which O’Nolan had with his student friends while writing At Swim. One friend, Niall Sheridan, quickly recognised his own contribution to the work:

...he [O’Nolan] began to show me sections of the book as it progressed, explaining the rationale behind each episode and its place in the overall design. Very soon, these sessions began to form part of the text, and I found myself (under the name of Brinsley) living a sort of double life at the autobiographical core of a work which was in the process of creation.7

The frame narrative of At Swim suggests that its cynical perspective on Dublin’s post-revival, post-Independence and post-Joycean literary environment was fairly representative of O’Nolan’s university circle. In any case, At Swim is a novel firmly rooted in O’Nolan’s experience of UCD in the 1930s, a place still soaked in nationalist sentiment, yet which appreciated the contrary ambitions of its prodigal son, James Joyce. Not only were O’Nolan’s literary skills trained in its student magazine, Sheridan, ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, p. 44. Cecil ffrench Salkeld provided the inspiration for Michael Byrne. A mock invoice sent to ‘Mr O’Nolan, Author’ from ‘Michael Byrne, Inc.’ (presumably Salkeld) charged for: ‘Spare endings, for Novel “At Swim 2 Birds”... Loan of

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Comhthrom Féinne (whose parodic style anticipates At Swim), the novel effectively dramatises its student narrator's intellectual environment.\(^8\)

**The Genesis of At Swim-Two-Birds: Comhthrom Féinne and ‘the National’**

O’Nolan graduated from UCD with a BA in English, German and Irish in 1932, and returned from October 1933 to August 1935 to write an MA thesis on Irish nature poetry. It was in the UCD student magazine Comhthrom Féinne that ‘Scenes from a Novel’ (the kernel of At Swim-Two-Birds) was first published in May 1934. This story, which tracks the revolt of a set of characters against their author, was designed to effect the demise of Brother Barnabas, the persona O’Nolan had used for his frequent contributions to the magazine. It is likely that O’Nolan began writing At Swim in mid-1935, around the time he finally graduated from UCD and joined the civil service.\(^9\) That the university’s academic environment remained a presence in the novel is visible on one level simply from the texts which O’Nolan chose to parody: the Finn MacCool sections of At Swim are based on Standish Hayes O’Grady’s 1892 collection of Fianna tales, *Silva Gadelica*, and the lays which the mad King Sweeney sings are translations from the Middle Irish epic *Suibhne Gelt* - both of which were cited in the bibliography of O’Nolan’s MA thesis.\(^10\) Similarly, the student’s friend

\(^8\) Although O’Nolan was a prolific – and influential – contributor to Comhthrom Féinne, Clissmann argues that the tone of the magazine’s humour was already established by the time his articles first appeared in late 1931: ‘...this particular type of humour influenced O’Nolan to a very great extent so that he wrote largely in response to it and to satisfy the needs of a known audience.’ Clissmann, *Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction*, p. 65.

\(^9\) In 1935, Niall Sheridan referred in Comhthrom Féinne to the novel O’Nolan had just begun. ‘Literary Antecedents’, *Comhthrom Féinne* 11:3 (June 1935), p. 63. However, in ‘The Poultry Business’, an unpublished article written on the re-issue of At Swim, O’Nolan referred to the novel being composed around 1937. He wrote to Timothy O’Keeffe on 1 September 1959 (SIUC) that he had placed the article in Development, but it did not subsequently appear. It is held in Boston College.

\(^10\) Brian Ó Nualláin, *Tráchtas ar Nádúr-fhíllíocht na Gaedhilge* (UCD, unpublished MA thesis, 1934). The physical environment of the university also made it into At Swim in the most literal fashion. O’Nolan’s later contribution to a history of the college practically repeated the student narrator’s description of his college: ‘I entered the big Main Hall at an odd hour on the second day of Michaelmas term 1929, looked about me and vividly remember the scene. The hall was quite empty. The plain white walls bore three dark parallel smudgy lines at elevations of about three, five and five-and-a-half feet from the tiled chessboard floor. Later I was to know this triptych had been achieved by the buttocks, shoulders, and hair oil of lounging students...’. Brian O’Nolan, ‘The Last of the Old Physics’, in *A Centenary History of the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin, 1855-1955*, ed. James Meenan (Tralee: Kerryman, 1956), p. 240. See ASTB, p. 33.
Brinsley drily observes of the author that 'the plot has him well in hand' (ASTB, 99), a comment which originated in Niall Sheridan’s description in *Comhthrom Féinne* of O’Nolan’s work in progress. A translation of Catullus which Sheridan had published made a brief appearance in *At Swim*; he also claimed to have owned the original of the tipster’s letter which O’Nolan replicates in the text. Their graduation night celebrations provided the appearance of the hapless man covered in ‘buff-coloured puke’ (ASTB, 39). It is clear how much *At Swim-Two-Birds* was designed as an in-joke, casting O’Nolan’s friends in a cod-Joycean epic. These real-life incursions also built on Joyce’s practice of undercutting a revivalist appeal to a mythological past with a touch of dingy realism. Eimar O’Duffy employed the same trick in *King Goshawk and the Birds*, as did Samuel Beckett, desecrating Cuchulain in pantomime fashion in *Murphy*. What is peculiar about how this strategy is adapted in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is that by staging a work in progress, O’Nolan also dramatises the dynamics of an intellectual environment.

The intellectual ethos of UCD in the 1930s reflected its position as the direct descendant of Newman’s Catholic University, founded in 1854 as a rival institution to Trinity College, Dublin and the new Queen’s Colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway. At the inception of the National University of Ireland in 1908, which incorporated the former Queen’s colleges, UCD was expected by many to be the bridgehead of the Catholic, nationalist ethos which some took as shorthand for the national culture. An official history of the NUI published in 1932 echoed the contemporary tendency to identify the national culture exclusively in those terms:

The Catholic University, originating in the face of a long-established Protestant University, and of new Colleges maintained under Government control which took no count of the weight of religious belief or of national history, represented truly the currents of ancestral Catholic and Irish culture. Its existence asserted and fixed

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the principle that the future outlook and organisation of Higher Education should be in conformity with the national tradition.\textsuperscript{15}

As a UCD honours student in Modern Irish, O’Nolan attended courses conducted by the Gaelic scholars Douglas Hyde and Osborn Bergin, neither of whom was in much doubt about the character of ‘the national tradition’.\textsuperscript{16} It was Hyde who famously declared to the Robertson Commission in 1902 that ‘the only hope of a new university doing good to Ireland will be to have it frankly and robustly national, in a spiritual and intellectual sense, from the very outset... We want an intellectual headquarters for Irish Ireland’.\textsuperscript{17} UCD’s identification with Irish Ireland was underlined by its distinguished Faculty of Celtic Studies, and also by its links to the Irish Folklore Commission (James Delargy was at the time a UCD lecturer in Irish Folklore). Nevertheless, there was a certain irony in UCD’s loaded nickname, ‘the National,’ as in its reputation as a flagship of Catholic equality, since the numbers benefiting from higher education in the 1930s were miniscule. In the academic year 1930 to 1931, for example, there were a total of 1,684 students registered in UCD.\textsuperscript{18} As a privileged minority, UCD’s students could be confident of their future success in the Free State and signs of disaffection with the status quo were often quite cosmetic.\textsuperscript{19} It is telling that the NUI constituency returned mostly conservative Cumann na nGaedheal deputies to the Dáil, until university representation in parliament was abolished in 1934.\textsuperscript{20} The student body largely maintained the university’s Catholic and nationalist

\textsuperscript{15} Timothy Corcoran, ed. \textit{The National University Handbook 1908-1932} (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1932), p. 67.


\textsuperscript{18} Corcoran, \textit{The National University Handbook 1908-1932}, p. 107.

\textsuperscript{19} See Cronin, \textit{No Laughing Matter}, pp. 50-52. Indeed, many were enthusiastic supporters of it. One young hellraiser, for example, passionately defended the contentious 1935 Public Dance Halls Act in the college magazine: ‘By eliminating certain types of dances they are removing an immediate cause of the disorders out of which the Act has arisen. The types of dances to which I allude are those wanton orgies which we have eagerly borrowed from debased and bestial peoples.’ Sean D. O Cahtlain, ‘To Hell with the Devil’s Rhythm!’, \textit{The National Student} 13:2 (November 1935), p. 38.

\textsuperscript{20} T.D. Williams, ‘The College and the Nation’, in \textit{Struggle With Fortune}, ed. Michael Tierney (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1954), p. 187. Eamon de Valera was elected chancellor of the university during the Truce, but before the Treaty split. Donal McCartney reports that De Valera’s election to the Presidency in 1959 caused some consternation about his position as Chancellor, but none wanted the latter to revert to the
ethos, indeed, many battles were waged with the university senate during the 1930s in order to ensure 'the National' lived up to its name – one such being the students' pressure to have a monument erected to the republican hero, Kevin Barry.21 A 1934 Comhthrom Féinne editorial complained that the university remained officially non-denominational (more specifically, non-Catholic), despite fourteen years of self-government. Guerrilla action was taken one night in March 1936, when students erected crucifixes on classroom walls. Forced by the college to withdraw them, they retaliated with a highly critical article in The National Student, requiring a further apology to college authorities.22 From its establishment, the non-denominational NUI had been unsatisfactory to the most Catholic (and nationalist) reaches of Irish society, but arguably all made the best of the opportunity presented. It was UCD which pressed for the establishment of Irish as a compulsory matriculation subject in 1909, and the first issue of The National Student in 1910 declared that the NUI’s mission was no less than the regeneration of the country: ‘where else is Ireland to seek her future leaders except in that University?’23 UCD responded to that clarion call by keeping the Censorship Board well-stocked with its academics for the next few decades.24

However, one student’s review of At Swim-Two-Birds for The Irish Times presents an alternative interpretation of the character of UCD:

Archbishop of Dublin: ‘...this possibility, combined with the rumour that Myles na gCopaleen might be nominated to contest the election, convinced many of the doubtful that the President should continue as Chancellor'. The National University and Eamon de Valera (Dublin: University Press of Ireland, 1983), p. 34.

O’Nolan’s first contribution to Comhthrom Féinne was on this subject. Brian Ó Nualláin, ‘Caoimhghín de Barra’, Comhthrom Féinne 2:1 (13 Nov. 1931), p. 77. (The Kevin Barry window was finally erected in 1936.) One Comhthrom Féinne editorial deplored that 'With the death of Fascism politics seem to have dropped almost completely out of College life; while this is to be welcomed in many ways it is yet regrettable that the University bearing the name “National” should be one of the least national institutions in the country... the students of the College have the opportunity of keeping outside all the parties and yet striving for the ideals of a united and free Ireland.' Ibid. 11:1 (April 1935), p. 1.


Prof. Robert Donovan, of UCD’s English Department, was chairman of the 1926 Committee on Evil Literature which ushered in the 1929 Censorship Act. The subsequent Censorship Board had five members, with UCD academics featuring prominently. McCartney, UCD: A National Idea, p. 174.
...It has been the custom for some time now to refer to the “National University tradition”, a thing which most would find much difficulty in defining. It is clearly consoling to be able to proffer as evidence for it something which it is suggested has been produced by it… all who have stood (or swayed) and shouted at the Literary and Historical, or who have read and blushed as they read the National Student (or its predecessor, Comhthrom Féinne, so foully done to death in an anti-Gaelic moment) will recognise the inspiration of Mr Flann O’Brien’s new book, “At Swim-Two-Birds”, and will glory in it...  

The ‘National University tradition’ was something which Niall Sheridan had attempted to define for the jubilee issue of Comhthrom Féinne, if only by concluding that it did not exist. Or at least, he decided that its writers were characterised by their idiosyncracy: ‘There is no well-marked trail on our particular slope of Parnassus, only a number of individual goat-paths’. One thing that is striking about most of the names which Sheridan cites in his article – such as Eimár O’Duffy, Austin Clarke, and James Joyce – is their uniformly critical attitude towards contemporary Ireland. As an institution, UCD could hardly be noted for a culture of dissent. So perhaps the literary heritage which ‘the National’ was developing was evidence of an institution at odds with its own identity. O’Nolan belonged to a self-consciously irreverent sect within the college; as the author of the Times piece above obliquely acknowledged, for a number of years he assumed leadership of the ‘Mob’ which heckled the debates of the famed Literary & Historical society. And, as noted, At Swim-Two-Birds graduated from Comhthrom Féinne, at the time a magazine that was predominantly parodic and satirical in tone, and which was largely controlled by O’Nolan and his circle.

27 A contributor who had earlier clashed swords with O’Nolan in the magazine over his irreverent contributions to L&H debates, pointedly attacked the influence of his circle on the magazine: ‘I have mentioned that everybody expects a certain exuberance of spirit in a college of young people. But it seems to be our misfortune that the antics of this literary menagerie is taken for the attitude of all. Whereas, in fact, the menagerie in question does not represent any section of the students…’. James T. Fitzpatrick, ‘The College Magazine With the Lid off!’, The National Student 13:1 (October 1935), p. 11. (Comhthrom Féinne reverted to the older title of The National Student in 1935.)
28 Niall Sheridan writes that this group “…formed in those years a sort of intellectual Mafia, which strongly influenced the cultural and social life of University College, and controlled – through some rather dubious electoral ruses – most of the College Clubs and Societies concerned with the Arts. The editorship of the magazine was usually passed from one member of the group to another.” ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’ in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, p. 35.
Between 1931 and 1935, he was its most popular and most prolific contributor, with his polymathic alter ego, Brother Barnabas, foreshadowing the eccentric Myles na gCopaleen. The magazine’s appetite for caricature and parody was well served by O’Nolan’s swooning Yeatsian poet, Lionel Prune, and his Syngean playwright, Samuel Hall, who was fascinated by the poetry of life on the bog. And as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, many of O’Nolan’s skits reflected the contemporary preoccupation with the Celtic past; a report on ‘The “L & H” from the Earliest Times’, produced ancient minutes recorded in Ogham script (as well as simian auditors with tails intact).

To complete O’Nolan’s satire of all branches of the Irish literary scene, Brother Barnabas’s return in *Comhthrom Féinne*’s Jubilee issue was made in a Wakean muddle of Middle Irish and Latin: ‘In Brathair Barnapas cct. Tri Filid in Domain Homer O Grecaip, Fergil O Latinnip ocus Paranabas O Gaedelaip.’ But the derisive nature of *Comhthrom Féinne* in O’Nolan’s time was not appreciated by all. Though his intermittent absences were bemoaned by some editors, in May 1935 another complained of the magazine’s low standard of comedy, caused by contributors mistaking personality for humour and facetiousness for wit (and O’Nolan was nothing if not facetious). When the magazine finally reverted to the title of *The National Student* in October 1935 - by which stage Barnabas had finally retired - its editor vowed to maintain a ‘more serious note’ than had been evident in recent years.

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30 The brothers certainly worked the same vein of humour, collaborating on *Blather*. Ciaran even anticipated *At Swim* in an interview with Finn MacCool, who was now living in a Rathmines boarding-house and had an ambition to open a sweetshop in Cabra (like *At Swim*’s ‘villain’, John Furriskey). ‘The Return of Finn’, *Comhthrom Féinne* 11:1 (April 1935), 7-9.

31 Ibid., 1:2 (15 May 1931), 31-32.

32 Ibid., 11:2 (May 1935), p. 25. His absences were noted in *Comhthrom Féinne* 6:2 (November 1933) and 8:1 (April 1934). It was not just O’Nolan’s parodies which anticipated *At Swim*; Brother Barnabas’s contributions also displayed a talent for nonsense that would be exploited in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. On one occasion, for example, he produced farcical biographies of college celebrities. The following concerned Robin Dudley Edwards: ‘Born 1881 in Bostocks Gigantic Circus and Menagerie, while touring in Bohemia. Spent ten years apprenticed to Chief Clown. Ran away 1897, and came to Ireland where he started a Select Grammar School at Sutton, to which students and statesmen flocked from every corner of the continent...’ *Brother Barnabas, ‘Thumbnail Sketches of our Latest Alumni’*, ibid., 2:1 (13 November 1931), p. 78.

33 ‘Any of you who remember the magazine a number of years ago will be struck with the more serious note we maintained in the issues of last year. In the words of a former editorial, we made an effort to make the magazine the organ of student opinion and humour – not forgetting the former or over stressing the latter.’ *The National Student* 13:1 (October 1935), p. 2.
But even in its most facetious incarnation, *Comhthrom Féinne* is interesting not only for the extent to which its humour prefigures *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but also for exposing the various intellectual (and as O’Nolan’s contributions imply, pseudo-intellectual) trends competing for dominance in 1930s UCD. In 1934, for example, O’Nolan mocked fellow students who alternated between playing the Gaelic reviveralist and flaunting their cosmopolitan modernism:

As soon as I arrived in town, I instantly joined the Gaelic League… And just as I had, at an earlier day, publicly thumbed Jolas’ *transition* in London’s fogs to show those cads that the apparent paradox implied in the juxtaposition of the Horizontal Worldview and a bus-ride to Brixton could be reconciled, united, adjusted and dissolved in the micro-universe of my mind… so also I felt bound to mutter Gaelic obscurities on tram-tops to Donnybrook on a wet Thursday to bridge the disparity between a shoddy foreign machined suiting and a Gaelic Ireland, free and united.34

The shabby reality of Gaelic Ireland, free if not united, had tarnished its appeal for O’Nolan’s generation, who matured as the country struggled with the transition from nationalist idealism to the reality of life in a small, economically vulnerable state. Conformity with the Irish Free State’s insular conservatism was unattractive to many, but so too was Joyce’s melodramatic path of rebellion and exile. As the previous chapter suggested, Joyce might have been a talismanic figure for O’Nolan’s circle in UCD, but the admiration which they expressed for him was decidedly ambivalent. Barely a decade after political independence, a more populist (if not obviously reviveralist) aesthetic was proving attractive – perhaps in imitation of the political trend of British literature in the 1930s, but perhaps also because it was more easily assimilated to a nationalist outlook. O’Nolan’s fairly indiscriminate satire of literary fashions in *Comhthrom Féinne* arguably betrayed a certain evasiveness (if not indecisiveness) about such matters on his part. But an article by his contemporary, Charlie Donnelly - a committed socialist who would be killed in the Spanish Civil

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War — shows that even he was warily negotiating a path between an insular nationalism and a vacant internationalism. As he put it, the ‘modern, young Irishman’ tended to be familiar with ‘extra-Irish’ contemporary thought, which had the effect of cutting him off from his ‘emotional environment’. This presented an aesthetic (and emotional) difficulty:

> The modern Irish artist cannot throw over modern thought. Neither can he agree to throw over Ireland. In his consciousness, the two must fuse. Modern Irish art must be in touch with the people... [but] to be of any importance it must be in touch with more than the people.  

It seems curious to hear an echo of Daniel Corkery from such unexpected quarters, even if Donnelly qualifies the assertion in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* that the Irish writer ‘sprung from the people’ simply needed ‘a mental equipment fitted to shape the emotional content that is theirs, as well as the nation’s, into chaste and enduring form’. Donnelly’s reference to an ‘emotional environment’ which the young Irishman would find incompatible with modern thought is telling, articulating a cultural uneasiness felt perhaps by many of his fellow students. It is, at least, repeated in the comic drama between the student and his uncle in *At Swim*, which finally ends with the student’s acknowledgement that this plain Dubliner is ‘Simple, well-intentioned...’ (though he does adds with characteristic superiority, ‘...pathetic in humility’ (*ASTB*, 215)). Despite expressing scorn for the ‘Celtic Twilight people’, Donnelly ends with a dire warning against intellectual seduction by newer trends, by ‘the clever and the facile and the semi-educated, and political and literary charlatanry’. He was not alone in his criticism; the literary charlatans were again in the frame a few months later when a *Comhthrom Féinne* editorial complained of the

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35 Charles Donnelly, ‘Literature in Ireland’, ibid. 5:4 (May 1933), p. 65. The writers to whom Donnelly expressly refers (presumably as exponents of ‘modern thought’) are D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, and John Middleton Murray. It is likely that this issue was edited by O’Nolan. He was named as editor of the February 1933 number, and most editors continued in the post for three or four issues. Those published between February and October of that year certainly have a disproportionate amount of material that is obviously from O’Nolan’s hand. The magazine’s jubilee issue contains a list of past editors, with O’Nolan’s name preceding that of Thomas A. Doyle, first named as editor in the October 1933 issue. Ibid. (June 1935), p. 65.


indolence into which the Gaelic League had fallen, leaving students to trail after fashionable European movements. Considering the climate of the early 1930s, perhaps this suspicion of contemporary European thought was inspired as much by political movements as by literary fashions. (At the time, barely a decade after the civil war, *Comhthrom Féinne* was understandably free of explicit political commentary.) But whether or not this wariness was partly inspired by contemporary European politics, it indicates that even the irreverent literary caste who compiled *Comhthrom Féinne* were not entirely unsympathetic to the biases of the plain people.

It is one of these UCD undergraduates whom O’Nolan sets at the centre of *At Swim*, and the novel which he produces is a glorious jumble of revivalist parodies, modernist aesthetics, popular fiction and the turgid prose excerpts to be found in school readers. Considering the aesthetic challenges which Donnelly foresaw for the ‘modern, young Irishman’—now in possession of an intellectual equipment unsuited to express his own experience—the muddled result is hardly surprising. Flaunting all these disparate elements, *At Swim-Two-Birds* travesties the image of ‘the national tradition’ which was being institutionalised in UCD; tellingly, even O’Nolan’s MA thesis on Irish nature poetry made an explicit attack on the critical values of Irish Ireland. Where Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* located the endpoint of Gaelic civilisation in the *aisling* poetry of the eighteenth century, O’Nolan took this poetry’s political bent (and its nationalist keening) as a sign of the final demise of the genre. (Admittedly, he argued that Irish nature poetry had already reached its peak by the twelfth century.) Aodh de Blácam’s *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*—one of the texts cited in his MA bibliography and also a set text for UCD’s BA course in Modern Irish—neatly

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41 ‘Bhithearr i gcomhnaidhe ag cuioneadh Éireann ar a h-anbhroid agus ar a daoirse... Aon tagairt abhí do’n nádáir ins na h-aislingibh seo, sean-abairtí chriona chaithte abhí ionta, clichés a catheadh isteach ar mhaithe le sean-nós litriochta, gan fuiil gan fuinneamh gan minitá ionnta’ (‘They were always lamenting Ireland’s bondage and oppression... Any allusions to nature in these *aisling* were made with old worn phrases, clichés thrown in for the sake of an old literary tradition, which had no passion or vigour or meaning.’) Brian Ó Nualláin, *Tréchtas ar Nádáir-Fhiliocht na Gaedhilge*, UCD, unpublished MA thesis, 1934, p. 16. My translation. According to O’Nolan, there was not much to be said for the verse of Eoin Rua Ó Súilleabháin as nature poetry, nor as poetry of any other kind.
illustrates the brand of cultural polemics which provoked O’Nolan’s satire. De Blácam was a favourite target of O’Nolan from the early days of Blather to Cruiskeen Lawn, and At Swim’s gleefully anachronistic mayhem pointedly contrasts with fanciful notions of the unchanging Gael like that he presents in Gaelic Literature Surveyed. De Blácam’s sense of Gaelic literature is that it dealt with ‘a continuous historic present’, the peculiarly static Gael showing the same mode of thought in the eighth and the eighteenth century: ‘...the Gael found a way of life long ago, and a religious faith, that satisfied him then and forever, and seemed to offer all that a man can wring from the world’. The irritation of Shanahan and friends at the long-winded talk of Finn MacCool would seem to tell a different story. At Swim debunks the notion of an unchanging (or even continuous) Irish tradition, presenting a moving shot of contemporary Irish writing that jarringly juxtaposes its past, present and future. On the other hand, the nostalgic hankering after tradition that issued from some modernist quarters fared no better. At Swim irreverently fulfills T. S. Eliot’s dictum that:

...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

The novel adheres to the letter, if not the spirit, of Eliot’s theory - this ‘historical sense’ is relegated to farce in the Red Swan Inn where Dermot Trellis houses his characters: ‘There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr McCool, a hero of old Ireland, is on the floor above. The cellar is full of leprechauns’ (ASTB, 35). But it is in the manner of a rather different modernist, James Joyce, that At Swim desecrates the idea of cultural purity which was the hobbyhorse of exclusivist nationalists. It faithfully depicts the multicultural muddle in any reader’s (or writer’s) mind, combining tricks learned from Heinrich Heine and Joyce with excerpts from Suibhne Gelt and

42 University College Dublin, Calendar 1931-32, p. 193.
eighteenth-century English prose. Despite the best efforts of the propounders of clean literature, the Censorship Board, and various other fans of isolationism, O’Nolan’s Ringsend cowboys demonstrate that a national culture is a peculiarly hybrid thing; they may be merely ‘a gang of corner-boys whose horse-play in the streets was the curse of the Ringsend district’ (ASTB, 59), but they are imagined as the cattle-rustling heroes of Táin Bó Cuailgne, or of the American frontier, or as the daredevils of imperial Africa. The Ringsend cowboys are, indeed, ‘the product of a mind which fed upon adventure books of small boys’ (TP, 196) – or a mind fed upon the ‘Cyclops’ episode in Ulysses. While Trellis’s fear of moral and intellectual corruption goes so far that he decides to read only green books (which are, by implication, all reassuringly Irish books), At Swim itself is a model of glorious contagion.

But if O’Nolan’s model for the combination and juxtaposition of many different literary styles is Ulysses, the effect of the technique in At Swim-Two-Birds is far different. Since the novel is structured as a work in progress, and the characters on every plane of the text (from the student’s friends to the Good Fairy) can interrupt and comment on each other’s stories, At Swim does not simply present a clash of literary styles. It also dramatises a battle of wills between some very different branches of the reading public. Stephen Dedalus looked to Aquinas in shaping his own aesthetic theories, but this student gives voice to the demands of the contemporary literary marketplace. So it is not only the rather catholic range of literary influences which At Swim acknowledges that undermines fantasies of a univocal Gaelic culture; O’Nolan’s jarring combination of critical voices, reflecting diverse readerships, implicitly challenges the sense of community so important to the idea of a national culture. As Declan Kiberd sees it, the author of At Swim’s fragmented narratives may be

46 The student cites the work of eighteenth-century poets, William Cowper and William Falconer, and borrows money from his uncle to buy Heine’s Die Harzreise, another comic and ironic work, which was a set text for O’Nolan’s BA course in German.

47 The Ringsend cowboys’ tales are laced with Finn MacCool’s coinages as well as the clichés of imperial adventure stories, see Clissmann, Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction, p. 136. However, the true provenance of these latter-day heroes is more likely to be the Christian Brothers’ paper Our Boys (which adapted the imperial Boy’s Own for the Catholic schoolboy) than the Gaelic tradition. Our Boys was replete with cowboys with names like ‘Sean and Donall, so the wild west could be transported to towns and
'scandalized by the splitting of modern readership into so many discrepant constituencies. His work might be read as an attempt to restore a lost unity or at least to glue all the shattered pieces together as best he can'. But arguably, the student's juxtaposition of discordant styles and genres (themselves punctuated by headings and spaces in the text) only emphasises and exaggerates these divisions. The various authors and storytellers in *At Swim* might espouse the didactic function of literature, like Trellis, or view it as an aesthetic object, like Orlick, or they might simply aim to entertain their audience, like Shanahan. But as the combination shows, for the author of *At Swim* literary value is relative; the text demonstrates that these different authors have little purchase outside their own constituency. And this has repercussions for the student narrator himself - the semi-autobiographical character who functions as O’Nolan’s literary alter ego, in the manner of Stephen Dedalus. *At Swim*’s range of reference might indicate that its ideal reader is the UCD Arts undergraduate circa 1931 (a little specific, in market terms), but O’Nolan’s semi-autobiographical frame narrative relieves the novel of the consequent claustrophobia. In one self-reflexive gesture, he both acknowledges the limits of his intellectual independence, and asserts the critical detachment which makes it possible. Just as Trellis is the fall-guy for the propagators of ‘clean’ literature, and Shanahan’s bloodthirsty tastes impugn the connoisseur of pulp fiction, the student narrator gives O’Nolan ample scope for self-mockery. Tellingly, around the time he began writing *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a rival contributor to *Comhthrom Feinne*, James Fitzpatrick, virulently attacked its small band of modernist poets, Joycean imitators, and self-consciously erudite humorists - in other words, the vein of writing brilliantly cultivated by O’Nolan in the magazine over the previous years.
under attack;Interestingly, the novel also displays all the literary characteristics which a more friendly critic, Donagh MacDonagh (a cohort of O’Nolan and collaborator on *Children of Destiny*), had derided in an earlier issue. MacDonagh had blamed the sterility of contemporary literature (as he saw it) on the baneful influence of modernism. The problem was a ‘facile cleverness which is killing all originality… the more brilliant of my contemporaries… write rather to show their culture and cleverness than to convey any new idea to their reader’. The description fitted O’Nolan well; it fits his fictional alter ego even better. Indeed, the student narrator’s literary manifesto (an essential accessory for any self-consciously modernist author) blatantly eschews any notion of original authorship. It also brazenly flaunts the cultish literary snobbery which Fitzpatrick had found so offensive:

The modern novel should be largely a work of reference… A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (*ASTB*, 25)

The student’s snobbery is, of course, knowingly ironic. The novel he proposes to assemble from ready-made parts owes as much to Henry Ford as it does to the modernist collage. His fragmented text might have a modernist façade, but its eclecticism is deliberately superficial. Showing no literary discrimination (the student drops a betting letter or a snatch of eighteenth-century prose into his text as easily as a Middle Irish lay), he produces a text which is as confused as *Ulysses* - at least as it appears to the unwary reader - but without its underlying structure. With a studied nonchalance, the student implies that his disjointed narrative owes as much to accident as design, or indeed as much to the conventions of the popular serial as to Joyce. Since he is an undergraduate, presumably he is not one of those ‘persons of inferior education’ whom the ‘modern novel’ excludes, but strangely enough, the text he

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52 When the student loses some pages of his manuscript he supplies a ‘Synopsis, being a summary of what has gone before, FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS’ (*ASTB*, 60).
produces is *Ulysses* as re-written by the plain reader. This is a loaded gesture, given that contemporary Irish modernists have been presented as reacting against the ‘narrow, anti-intellectual culture’ of the Free State. But *At Swim*’s treatment of modernist writers, their popular counterparts, and the contemporary critical discourse of the ‘plain reader’ interestingly illuminates how the text engages with both domestic cultural politics *and* the wider literary scene in the 1930s.

‘Tell me this, do you ever open a book at all?: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the Plain People

The conflict of literary values dramatised by *At Swim*’s querulous readers and storytellers – a conflict between a notion of fiction as a popular, marketable commodity, and as something available only to the educated few – betrays the historical context of this 1930s metafiction. Indeed, the disparity between the plain man and a self-professed cultural elite is a recurrent theme in O’Nolan’s comedy; as the previous chapter demonstrates, both were regular targets of the *Irish Times* letters that appeared around the time *At Swim* was published. Comic dialogues between the two would also become a staple of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, whether involving Myles and the Plain People of Ireland, or other erudite and urbane characters forced to tolerate the garrulous ‘Dubbaling man’ (such as the voice who endures stories of the Brother at a myriad of Dublin bus-stops). The same dynamic can be seen in embryo in *At Swim* - in the dialogues between the uncle and the student, or in the contrast between the cowboys’ blunt attempts at fiction and the student’s hyper-literary efforts. Critics have often cast the plain man as the butt of O’Nolan’s humour, but in these scenarios the humour cuts both ways, the Mylesian character typically being too exaggerated to serve merely as a straight man. The student narrator’s intellectual swagger serves the same purpose in *At Swim*, and his characters’ unwitting ripostes to the author of their crazy tale ensure that any scorn is evenly distributed: ‘I like to meet a man that can take in hand to tell a story and not make a balls of it... I like to know where I am, do you know....’ (*ASTB*, 63). On the other hand, the student’s intellectual snobbery

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53 Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s* (Cork: CUP, 1995),
(however ironically delivered) is perversely justified by the narrow-mindedness of Shanahan and friends. Interestingly, Shanahan’s criticism of Orlick’s literary efforts could just as easily come from the hostile reader of *At Swim*: ‘this tack of yours is too high up in the blooming clouds. It’s all right for you, you know, but the rest of us will want a ladder’ (*ASTB*, 168). If Shanahan is voicing the thoughts of an implied reader, then O’Nolan astutely anticipated his book’s reception; the mixed reviews *At Swim* received in 1939 were largely due to the strained, sub-Joycean cleverness that some reviewers ascribed to the novel. However, the self-styled plain reader (or reviewer) might not like the company he is associated with in *At Swim*. It is not Shanahan’s aesthetic taste that is affronted by Orlick’s turgid prose, he simply expects more straightforward and bloodthirsty work from his authors: ‘A nice simple story with plenty of the razor’ (*ASTB*, 169).

Shanahan is a caricature of the modern mass reader, the harried everyman who regularly cropped up in the critical literature of the period, and who in Ireland became the particular focus of the 1920s and 1930s campaigns against British newspapers and other ‘evil literature’. But although he betrays more sympathy for Jem Casey’s doggerel than for the poetry of Buíle Suibhne, when subjected to Finn MacCool’s long-winded tales he maintains a (qualified) respect for ‘the real old stuff of the native land’:

...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 a sheepskin around their man. It’s the stuff that put our country where she stands today, Mr Furriskey, and I’d

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54 Orlick deserves the criticism, but in the passage in question his pompous prose is reminiscent of the student: ‘The refinements of physical agony... are limited by an ingenious arrangement of the cerebral mechanism and the sensory nerves which precludes from registration all emotions, sensations and perceptions abhorrent to the fastidious maintenance by Reason of its discipline and rule over the faculties and the functions of the body...’ (*ASTB*, 168).


56 As Michael Adams reports, in the 1920s the Irish Vigilance Association directed its attention to the policing of newspaper and periodicals rather than books, because it was the ‘mass mind’ which it wished to protect, and the main threat was the cheap press. *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), p. 17. Part of the self-proclaimed remit of a similar association, the Catholic Truth Society, was to
have my tongue out of my head by the bloody roots before I’d be heard saying a word against it. But the man in the street, where does he come in? By God he doesn’t come in at all as far as I can see (ASTB, 75).

Ironically, the Fianna tales which Shanahan derides were once the staple of a popular oral culture. Though the ‘man in the street’ in 1930s Ireland hypocritically praises the Gaelic culture in which he has little interest, the student’s uncle and Mr. Corcoran (whose committee debates the propriety of jazz music and the foreign waltz) indicate that the revival is very much a middle-class activity. Further up the social scale, the snobbish Good Fairy expresses an equally hollow appreciation of modernist literature: ‘I always make a point of following the works of Mr Eliot and Mr Lewis and Mr Devlin. A good pome is a tonic’ (ASTB, 120). O’Nolan’s derision of the reading public - and its cultural class divisions - seems fairly equally distributed. But if the intermittent commentary on Joyce in Cruiskeen Lawn is to be trusted, then O’Nolan’s ambivalent attitude to Ulysses (whose innovations At Swim emulates and rejects all at once) concerns not Joyce’s literary skill, but rather the unreasonable demands he makes of the reader:

Joyce has been reported as saying that he asked of his readers nothing but that they should devote their lives to reading his works. Such a method of spending a lifetime would be likely to endow the party concerned with quite a unique psychic apparatus of his own. I cannot recommend it.58

'combat the pernicious influence of infidel and immoral publications by the circulation of good, cheap and popular Catholic literature’, p. 19 (my italics).

57 It is interesting that O’Nolan parodies the Fianna tales rather than Cuchulain’s Red Branch Cycle. Certainly Fionn Mac Cumhail did not carry the nationalist, revivalist associations that the figure of Cuchulain did, but the Fianna stories were also more often subject to popular reinvention - according to de Blácaim, these stories were produced to entertain, rather than for a literary caste. Gaelic Literature Surveyed, p. 57. Passing into folklore, the Fiannaíocht were remade from within, incremental changes in the stories marking developments in popular taste. Douglas Hyde attributes the more frequent appearance of Fianna stories in folklore to their humorous, trivial qualities, perhaps another attraction for O’Nolan. A Literary History of Ireland (London: Ernest Benn, 1899, 1967), p. 374.

58 CL (20 December 1957); cited in David Powell, ‘An Annotated Bibliography of Myles na Gopaleen’s (Flann O’Brien’s) “Cruiskeen Lawn” Commentaries on James Joyce’, p. 58.
Tellingly, a contemporary critical handbook on Joyce (‘dedicated without malice to
the plain reader’), literally anticipated Shanahan’s complaint on behalf of the man in
the street: ‘...the plain reader may ask, “But where do I come in?... why should I risk
cramps in the cranium by worrying about Joyce?”’. The contemporary trend to target
‘the plain reader’ with books offering to decipher modernist literature is turned on its
head by *At Swim*; O’Nolan lays bare the construction of his own quasi-modernist text
and gives the plain reader (embodied in Shanahan, Furriskey, and company) the power
to re-write the story as he sees fit. So it is not only the power structure between author
and character that *At Swim* inverts, but that between writer and reader. O’Nolan
reverses the question which esoteric modernist texts implicitly pose to the reader -
here it is the plain man who interrogates the author: ‘Tell me this, do you ever open a
book at all?’ (*ASTB*, 10).

The derisive voice off-stage – as exemplified by *At Swim*’s unruly characters - was a
congenial form to O’Nolan; he had honed his talents in this line when leading the mob
of hecklers at UCD’s L&H debates. His comic incursions earned him the society’s
silver medal in the 1931-32 session, but they were not uniformly appreciated, and
when James Fizpatrick called for the extermination of these obstructive ‘pests’ in
*Comhthrom Féinne*, O’Nolan made a revealing defence:

> Let me enlighten Mr. Fitzpatrick as to the first principle of public speaking. It is to
compel the attention of your audience. Regard the “sane” 10 per cent. as
superfluous pests. They will listen in any case. The 90 per cent. is your audience.
Do not address dock labourers on Canon Law, and if you must, speak to them in
their own language... the successful speaker must know and understand his
audience of plain people.

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60 Ibid., p. 20.
61 Brian Ó Nualláin, ‘What is Wrong With The L. and H.?’, *Comhthrom Féinne* 10:3 (March 1935), 58-59.
Frequent satire of literary pretension was a feature of O’Nolan’s humour from the earliest days of his
career. A Brother Barnabas review of ‘My Best Poems, by Donough Coffey’ (an amalgam of the student
poets Donagh MacDonagh and Brian Coffey) anticipates Myles na gCopaleen’s treatment of *The Bell*: ‘It is
many years since we have seen anything so fine, so delicately wrought, so apparently aetherial yet actually

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Perhaps, he might have added, the successful writer must do the same. Cronin argues that O’Nolan nursed an ambition to produce a best-seller, one which he hoped that *At Swim-Two-Birds* would fulfill. As it was, the public’s initial indifference to the novel was sealed when Longman’s remaining stock was destroyed in an air-raid just over a year after publication. Given the hyper-literary nature of *At Swim*, O’Nolan’s ambition was a little unrealistic. But if O’Nolan conceived himself primarily as an entertainer, perhaps such a goal should not be so surprising; after all, the literary skills he practised in *Comhthrom Féinne* were those of a performer (as he developed the talent for extemporising which would serve him well in *The Irish Times*). Interestingly, while a complimentary copy of *At Swim* found its way to Joyce, via Niall Sheridan, O’Nolan also dispatched a copy to the popular novelist, Ethel Mannin. In the accompanying letter, he described the novel as ‘a belly-laugh or high-class literary pretentious slush, depending on how you look at it’. She chose the latter option, which prompted the following reply:

> It is not a pale-faced sincere attempt to hold the mirror up and has nothing in the world to do with James Joyce. It is supposed to be a lot of belching, thumb-nosing and belly-laughing and I honestly believe that it is funny in parts. It is also by way of being a sneer at all the slush which has been unloaded from this country on the credulous English... I’m negotiating at present for a contract to write 6 Sexton Blake stories (25 to 30,000 words for £25 a time, so please do not send me any more sneers at my art). Sorry, Art.

It is strange to think what O’Nolan actually expected from Mannin, aside from sneers at his ‘Art’. Perhaps he really did believe that *At Swim* could attract a popular

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62 Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p. 95. A letter O’Nolan sent to William Saroyan about this time betrays a similar desire for popular appeal: ‘...I’m beginning to think that I can’t write at all – I mean, write something that will appeal to people everywhere because they’re people, the way you do it... I’ve just finished another bum book [The Third Policeman]. I don’t think it is much good...’ (14 February 1940), SIUC.

63 Cronin notes that by the autumn of 1940, *At Swim* had sold only 244 copies. *No Laughing Matter*, p. 99.

64 Brian O’Nolan to Ethel Mannin (10 July 1939), SIUC.

65 Brian O’Nolan to Ethel Mannin (14 July 1939), SIUC. In fact, in 1955 O’Nolan approach the publishers of the Sexton Blake series offering his services and proposing to sketch an outline for a book, but there is no further correspondence on the matter. Brian O’Nolan to Mr. Hale (16 October 1955), SIUC.
readership, and that such a well-connected personality (who was also a familiar and trusted figure to the ‘plain reader’) was well placed to help it on its way. But interestingly, Mannin had recently turned up as something of a literary villain in Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public*, in her capacity as a promoter of the Book Guild. Only founded in 1930, the Book Guild promised to guide its subscribers through the morass of contemporary fiction and ‘pernicious’ literary criticism to find the all-elusive entertaining read. Mannin proudly asserted that the Guild’s book selections catered ‘for the ordinary intelligent reader, not for the highbrows... providing something for everybody...’.

Ironically, she also declared that:

> One of its chief aims is to avoid indulging in the deplorable affectation of recommending as a work of ‘genius’ the sort of thing which is dubbed clever simply because it is mainly unintelligible and written in an obscure manner, or boosting some foreign work simply because it is foreign, and the author’s name difficult to pronounce.

*At Swim* certainly provides something for everybody (even those nostalgic for the Christian Brothers’ *Higher Literary Reader* (ASTB, 21-22)), but happily its range of literary influences also extends to the kind of obscure and deplorably foreign works that Mannin found so offensive. Discounting any mischievous intent on O’Nolan’s part, it may be that he solicited Mannin’s opinion in the belief that *At Swim*’s fairly domesticated brand of modernism made his novel palatable to the ‘ordinary intelligent reader’, who was these days beginning to feel a little disenfranchised. Certainly, his emphatic denial of having any ambition to produce ‘Art’ is interesting, as if she could hardly have issued a greater insult.

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66 José Lanters argues that O’Nolan may have sent Mannin a copy because of her notoriety as a best-selling author banned in Ireland (interestingly, Mannin herself declared that she had fought against the censorship of books such as *Ulysses*). *Unauthorized Versions*, pp. 196-197.


68 And insult she did: ‘...with the best will in the world I find I cannot read those Birds... I don’t understand this wilful obscurity, & am baffled by GG’s [Graham Greene’s] enthusiasm for something so obscure... why not leave it that Joyce has done *this* sort of thing before? Its [sic] not very difficult to imitate the obscurantists, but not at all easy to imitate shall we say Shakespeare, who was not above making
However, this is not to imply that *At Swim* itself betrays an inherent sympathy for the plight of the plain man, whatever O’Nolan’s posturing. The ambiguous nature of its comedy frustrates any such interpretation; the orotund prose that Orlick produces might be kept in check by the lively interruptions of the Dublin cowboys, but on the other hand, *At Swim* juxtaposes its eloquent Middle Irish bard with a modern balladeer whose prime achievement is ‘A Pint of Plain is Your Only Man’. The battles waged in the 1930s on behalf of the apocryphal plain reader surely did inform O’Nolan’s literary farce, but *At Swim*’s cynicism also echoes the mood in more fashionable quarters of the British literary scene. And its student narrator is not simply a comic alter ego to Stephen Dedalus, the fruit of a quarrel between one Irish writer and another. He also draws freely on a more widespread malaise in contemporary fiction; the ‘long line of bad books’ (as Cyril Connolly described them) charting the progress of the ‘Clever Young Man’:

...the novels of adolescence, autobiographical, romantic... [which] squandered the vocabulary of love and literary appreciation and played into the hands of the Levellers and Literary Puritans.

Among these ‘Levellers and Literary Puritans’, no doubt, would be counted Ethel Mannin and the plain-speaking souls of the Book Guild. In *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly declares Aldous Huxley to be typical of the present ironic, disenchanted generation ‘in his promise, his erudition, his cynicism and in his peculiar brand of prolific sterility’. The portrait could stand for O’Nolan himself, as it could for the

his meaning clear...’. Ethel Mannin to Brian O’Nolan (13 July 1939), SIUC. Graham Greene was the reader for Longman’s who recommended that they publish *At Swim*.

69 Niall Sheridan’s description of the idea behind *Children of Destiny* makes this blatantly clear: ‘A vast market was ready and waiting. Compulsory education had produced millions of semi-literates who were partial to ‘a good read’. So it must be a big book, weighing at least two-and-a-half pounds. We must give them length without depth, splendour without style. Existing works would be plundered wholesale for material, and the ingredients of the saga would be mainly violence, patriotism, sex, religion, politics and the pursuit of money and power’. ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan*, p. 42.

70 Writing on British fiction of the 1930s, William H. Pritchard notes that Wyndham Lewis argued ‘...that any ‘fictionist’ of intelligence, contemplating the disasters of peace as viewed from England circa 1934, had no choice but to write satire... looking back on the 1930s in England, it now seems plain, or at least plausibly arguable, that its best novels did indeed demonstrate the futility and absurdity of human life.’ *Seeing Through Everything: English Writers 1918-1940* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 178.


72 Ibid., p. 33.
generation of writers who came to maturity in the Irish Free State. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* is one of the literary forefathers of *At Swim*, and he is also one of the few writers explicitly cited in the text (along with fellow ironists, Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Heinrich Heine). But whether or not O’Nolan styled himself after this fashion (consciously or unconsciously), his generation in Ireland was far differently situated to the London men of letters. At the turn of the century, Lionel Johnson had condemned the influence which the populist, political ethos of Young Ireland exerted on Irish writing, and his complaint could hold true for the critical mood of the 1930s:

Against any living Irish poet, who writes in any style uncultivated then, is brought the dreadful charge of being artistic: and sometimes, if it be a very flagrant case, the unspeakable accusation of being English.73

At the time, Daniel Corkery was busy popularising the same prejudices. The passage from *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* quoted earlier is the most glaring of its type. He admits the brilliance of many Anglo-Irish writers only by arguing that their writing showed a ‘disparity between intellect and emotion’, making them far inferior to the Irish writer of the people, who required simply ‘a mental equipment fitted to shape the emotional content that is theirs, as well as the nation’s, into chaste and enduring form’.74 Corkery’s choice of words is interesting; his image of a simple and chaste folk literature is juxtaposed with an Anglo-Irish tradition fascinated with ‘the freakish, the fanciful, the perverse’.75 In *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*, de Blácam had similarly praised the Irish people’s simplicity: ‘Ireland still is little troubled by the complexities of the study’.76 The contemporary respect for folk culture resulted in the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935, but these critics’ application of nineteenth-century *narodnik* aesthetics to literary studies had less positive consequences.

74 Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, p. 16.
75 Ibid., p. 18.
76 De Blácam, *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*, p. xii.
Whatever value it had in generating respect for the Irish heritage, the argument was too often used to justify a narrow-minded populism.

*At Swim*'s brand of cynical erudition is surely a response to this, but the text also betrays a suspiciously 'plain' resistance to the notion that a novel should have any aesthetic pretensions. *At Swim*'s student accommodates his cleverness to his environment - being careless of his literary ambition in an acceptably ironic manner - and O’Nolan effectively does the same. In *At Swim*, aesthetic pretensions seem allied to social pretensions; Orlick’s literary gifts are discovered by the appearance of 'some pages of manuscript of a high-class story in which the names of painters and French wines are used with knowledge and authority' (*ASTB*, 164). And tellingly, for all its irreverent comedy, O’Nolan was very careful to ensure that his novel did not in any way subvert or offend public taste. The letters which he exchanged with Longman’s prior to publication show him to be wary of flouting public sensibilities. Their judgement that particular sections of the novel showed an unnecessary ‘coarseness’ produced an immediate and unqualified undertaking to remove anything of the kind.77

When his responsibility for the book was indicated in ‘a London literary paper’ shortly before publication, O’Nolan requested Longman’s to act swiftly:

> I am really very anxious for reasons that have nothing to do with modesty, to have nothing that is not thoroughly orthodox in literature attributed to me and I would ask you to change the name of the book accordingly.78

His position in the civil service might have been the source of his anxiety, but Longman’s response was mercilessly pragmatic: ‘we are really doubtful whether this can now be achieved, for surely if there are people in Ireland who wish to connect you

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77 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to A. M. Heath (25 September 1938), SIUC. O’Nolan expressed a similar prudence in correspondence with Hugh Leonard on his stage adaptation of *The Dalkey Archive*. He suggested that Leonard should omit references to ‘the Holy Ghost’ and John the Baptist, rather than provide its critics with ready ammunition (14 August 1965). Leonard was unapologetic: ‘One thing about your letter strikes me as ominous, and that is your reference to taking out “objectionable” material at later date. The word in quotes makes you sound like John Charles McQuaid. By all means let us have out any material that is tiresome, repetitive or simply doesn’t work... but let us not use any of those adjectives as a pretext for a spot of self-censorship’ (17 August 1965), SIUC.

78 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Longman’s (15 January 1939), SIUC.
with “At Swim-Two-Birds” it will be almost impossible to prevent them’. As it happened, since the novel made little impact, any repeat of a Lennox Robinson-style controversy was unlikely. In any case, given that O’Nolan’s immediate superior in the Department of Local Government and Public Health was the Joyce critic, John Garvin (who provided At Swim’s epigraph), his situation was not obviously precarious. However, no matter how concerned O’Nolan was that his novel (or himself) should not be associated with literary ‘filth’, he just as deliberately avoided any association with literary pretensions. It is almost as if one could be substituted for the other.

The sensation caused by Ulysses certainly implied that the two were indistinguishable, and it is indicative of the level of consensus on these matters in the Irish Free State that there was effectively no necessity to ban Joyce’s work there at all. Though O’Nolan stocked his student’s bookcase with works by Joyce and Huxley (whose Point Counter Point was the first book banned under the 1929 Censorship Act), in later years Myles would criticise the ‘salacities’ of Ulysses. Not that O’Nolan was any fan of the censorious climate in 1930s Ireland; though in Cruiskeen Lawn he mocked the ‘corduroys’ who treated literary censorship as a form of personal persecution, he was also fully alert to the absurdity of the situation. Back in the days of Comhthrom Féinne, Samuel Hall (another alter ego) reported that government censorship had hampered his latest enterprise, University College Ballybrack. UCB’s academic curriculum posed some difficulty for its students:

All the books prescribed are banned in the Irish Free State. Students are advised to spend a fortnight in France reading up the course. We regret to announce that Dr Kahn’s Treatise on Advanced Algebra, prescribed for the degree of B.Sc. is also

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79 Letter from Longman’s to Brian O’Nolan (18 January, 1939), SIUC.
80 'As a man who was undoubtedly high-minded, he shows exceptional lack of moral judgment in imagining that his salacities, many of them intrusive, are therapeutic... The sad thing about the situation is that it has repelled so many people in this country who would, had there been more moderation, have given Joyce’s immense genius recognition at home where... he was almost mortally concerned to have it'. Myles na gCopaleen, review of L. A. G. Strong, The Sacred River: An Approach to James Joyce, in Irish Writing 10 (January 1950), pp. 70-71; cited in Lanters, Unauthorized Versions, p. 195. Ironically, the novels O’Nolan published in the 1960s were not short of a few salacities themselves, perhaps reflecting a more tolerant climate than 1930s Ireland.
banned, strong exception having been taken to some of the Surds in Part II of the work...\textsuperscript{81}

But while O’Nolan presents the Free State’s practice of censorship as nothing less than farce, his own writing usually displays none of the ‘salacities’ he later criticised in Joyce. Perhaps this was merely a sign of caution on his part; when O’Nolan did succumb to the odd bout of scatological comedy (albeit very rarely), he buried his double entendres extremely well. Donohue identifies such an example in Finn MacCool’s praise of birdsong, in which he refers repeatedly to spurious variations of the ‘pilibeen’, or plover – a word which Dinneen also translates as ‘pedant’ and ‘penis’.\textsuperscript{82} Though the wordplay is mischievous, arguably its obscurity defuses the subversive nature of the gesture; as Hopper argues, his ‘clever manipulation of language evades censorship, but tacitly affirms it by that very cleverness’.\textsuperscript{83}

Admittedly, the Finn MacCool passage is purportedly one of the student’s literary efforts, and he is a character who takes a pragmatic attitude to his own rebellious instincts; when his uncle arrives home unexpectedly in the midst of his ‘spare-time literary activities’ (\textit{ASTB}, 9), he covers hastily ‘such sheets as contained reference to the forbidden question of the sexual relations’ (\textit{ASTB}, 91-92). Lanters points out that\textit{At Swim’s} satire of de Valera’s Ireland (represented by the uncle and his friends) is similarly closeted, though given its indirect references to birth control, abortion or rape: ‘even if O’Brien’s attitude is not overtly critical, the very act of including so many references to forbidden topics is subversive and indicative of the extent of his

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{81} ‘Academic Enterprise at Ballybrack’, \textit{Comhthrom Féinne} 5:2 (February 1933), pp. 28-29; reprinted in \textit{MBM}, pp. 43-47. Donagh MacDonagh’s contribution in this line was an Anti-Censor Ship, which, under the captnacy of Brian Ó Nualláin, peddled proscribed books and films off the Irish coast. Donagh MacDonagh, ‘Legal Illegality: Amazing State of Affairs off Irish Coast’, \textit{Comhthrom Féinne} 6:3 (December 1933), 58-60.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{82} Donohue, \textit{The Irish Anatomist}, p. 38. He argues that in light of this, the rest of the passage takes on a different connotation: ‘I am friend to the pilibeen, the red-neck chough, the parsnip land-rail, the pilibeen mona, the bottle-tailed tit...’ (\textit{ASTB}, 14). Sheridan reports a similar outbreak of ‘bawdy humour’ when he requested O’Nolan to write a kind of Dublin Decameron for \textit{Comhthrom Féinne} and he did so, in Old Irish: ‘...I soon found myself summoned before the then President... on the rather unusual charge of publishing obscene matter, written in Old Irish, in the semi-official University organ’. ‘Brian, Flann and Myles’, \textit{Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan}, p. 37. There is no such article in \textit{Comhthrom Féinne}, though Cronin suggests it could have been removed at proof stage. \textit{No Laughing Matter}, pp. 54-55.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{83} Hopper, \textit{Flann O’Brien}, p. 81. He argues, indeed, that O’Nolan was certainly complicit with the sexual and moral codes of the Free State: ‘...there were certainly very stringent codes of censorship imposed on the author in 1939 which inhibited frankness, but his evasion also stems from a cloistered male attitude
involvement with the censorship issue.' But it is not only these kind of issues which
inspire such coyness; as she notes, Shanahan spells out ‘bee-double-o-kay-ess’ (ASTB, 168) as if it were a dirty word - only ‘pee-eye-ell-ee-ess’ (ASTB, 160) is granted the
same distinction. Since practically all contemporary literary fiction had to be
obtained under the counter in 1930s Ireland, perhaps any literature could not escape
seeming faintly scurrilous. The censorship legislation originally designed to block
pornography, and any material on birth control or abortion, was now notoriously
exploited for other ends. This points to a contemporary puritanism that was not merely
sexual, but also intellectual. The contrast between the original (relatively limited)
remit of the legislation, and the manner in which it was actually implemented – being
used to exclude contemporary literary fiction - blurred sexual modesty with
intellectual modesty.*^ Though Shanahan’s coyness (or even that of the student)
cannot be confused with Brian O’Nolan’s, it is ambiguously presented; the novel’s
see-saw between the perspective of writers and readers blurs the edges of its satire. No
wonder O’Nolan denied Mannin’s charge of aesthetic ambition in At Swim; what
respectable Irishman of the 1930s would be caught writing ‘bee-double-o-kay-ess’,
especially of the brazenly literary variety?

Not even Ireland’s most liberal critics, bred in a period of social and political
upheaval, had a great deal of time for self-regarding intellectual pursuits. In 1929,
Seán O’Faoláin concluded an acerbic letter to the Irish Statesman on Joyce’s Anna

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84 Lanter, Unauthorized Versions, p. 193. She provides a startling list of topics turning up in At Swim that were disdained by the Irish Vigilance Association and the Catholic Truth Society: ‘... “private acts” in lavatories, piss, excrement and vomit, male and female underwear... bodily functions and body parts (including buttocks, testicles and pubic hair), condoms, suicide, homosexuality, rape, incest, prostitution and abortion, artificial insemination, obscenities, expletives and dirty jokes, and graphic violence. Because of the book’s indirect method, however, the effect is not nearly as shocking as this list might suggest...’, p. 203.

85 Ibid., p. 190.

86 O’Nolan wryly suggested such an attitude when reflecting on At Swim in 1959: ‘It had been widely put about that the book was “very dirty”... maybe it was, but the point is scarcely material: having the reputation of being a pornographer, literary pimp and muck-raker is what matters in Dublin, let one’s wares be as clean as the blue sky’. ‘The Poultry Business’, BC.

87 In October 1940, the controversialist Flann O’Brien was invited to intervene in a battle in the correspondence page of The Irish Press on ‘The Literary Conscience’ (or rather, censorship). He derided ‘...our notorious national rule of thumb which identifies obscurity with obscenity. If he [Mr. Murphy, another correspondent] was told that incunabula had been discovered in his cellar, he would probably give orders for the place to be fumigated.’ (16 October 1940).
Livia Plurabelle by conceding him a place in a venerable tradition of distracted Irish visionaries:

...is he not of the clan of Brendan who sailed for Ui Bhreasail, Bran who sailed for the Land of Heart's Desire, Ossian searching for the Land of the Ever Young... Sweeney who lived in the tops of the trees that he might be like a bird, Cuirthir who would go in passion beyond Hell or Paradise, dreamers of the unattainable all.88

Joyce is gifted, O'Faoláin implies, but also unhinged. Of course, the idea of the writer as madman returns in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the title itself referring to the story of mad King Sweeny.89 But it is interesting that when Sweeny appears in this quasi-Joycean novel, it is not as O'Faoláin's visionary chasing an unattainable ideal, but in his original guise as a wretch driven to madness for offending a cleric. While it is possible to argue that Sweeny represents the plight of the contemporary Irish writer in contention with the power of the Catholic Church (and many have), Sweeny also merely demonstrates that the writer's lot is a curse.90 His is not the only mind unbalanced by its intellectual pursuits; it is suggested at the conclusion of *At Swim* that Trellis's unusual literary activities are in fact the symptom of a mania:

The eyes of the mad king upon the branch are upturned, whiter eyeballs in a white face, upturned in fear and supplication. His mind is but a shell. Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? It is extremely hard to say. Was he a victim of hard-to-explain hallucinations? Nobody knows... It is of importance the most inestimable... that

89 But the title of *At Swim* should not be assigned too much significance. When O’Nolan feared he might be revealed as its author, he suggested alternative titles to Longman’s – ‘Sweeny in the Trees’ certainly maintained the original focus, but certainly not ‘The Next Market Day’ (‘Everything of every conceivable kind is packed into the cart when going to market.’) O’Nolan to Longman’s (15 January 1939), SIUC. Other suggestions were ‘Sweet-Scented Manuscript’, ‘Truth is an Odd Number’, ‘Task-Master’s Eye’ and ‘Through an Angel’s eye-lid’, ‘and dozens of others’. O’Nolan to A. M. Heath (3 October 1938),  
90 O’Nolan later described *At Swim* as a tale of ‘medieval psychosis and magic’. 'The Poultry Business', BC. Curiously, one of the lays from *Buile Suibhne* which is omitted in *At Swim* is that in which Sweeny is reconciled to the Catholic Church in Snámh-Dá-Éan (Swim-Two-Birds). Jay Giebus has provided the most ingenious interpretation of this anomaly, ignoring the implication that *At Swim* preserves Sweeny as an unrepentant dissenter. Giebus argues that O’Nolan really disapproves of the student’s relativism, his inability to ‘...establish certain truths about the validity of literary forms in representing reality...’, ‘Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Studies, 80:317 (Spring 1991), p. 73. In contrast, ‘...Sweeny’s faith abides in the end, the day of judgement when, like the synopsis of a novel, the plot of life will unfold...’, p. 71.
for mental health there should be walking and not overmuch of the bedchamber.

(ASTB, 217)

If that were the case, the student's mental health cannot be much more robust than that of Trellis. By examining the two manuscript versions of At Swim, Sue Asbee has identified how a theme of madness in fact became obscured as the novel developed.91 For example, in the earlier version, the first extract from Dr Beatty's memoir ("found on examination to be singularly referable to the life of Trellis") is on his wife's insanity; the following piece (preserved in At Swim) is the physical description of Beatty which is used to portray Trellis. His letter to the Duchess of Gordon on his son's 'nervous atrophy' and death from a disease of the lungs follows (the concern about 'pulmonary health' survives in the student's sections (ASTB, 44)), together with a letter to Sir William Forbes on the death of his second son, in which the two characters are conflated:

Such an effect had this fresh calamity on the intellectual powers of Trellis, that a few days after Montagu's death, he experienced a temporary but almost utter loss of memory respecting him. Having searched every room in the house, he would say to his niece, Mrs. Glennie; You may think it strange, but I must ask you if I have a son, and where is he? She then felt herself under the painful necessity of calling to his recollection the sufferings of Montagu, the mention of which never failed to restore him to reason.93

91 Sue Asbee, Flann O'Brien (Boston: Twayne, 1991). The two manuscripts are held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, and were consulted on microfilm in SIUC. The first is a draft with revisions and marginalia, the second is the finished typescript which was sent to Longman's. The references here are to the first manuscript.
92 Ms of At Swim-Two-Birds, pp. 53-54. It is interesting that the passage on alcohol which At Swim condensed from the Christian Brothers' Higher Reader omits a section about its effect on mental health: 'But of all the evil effects of this deadly poison, there is one far more remarkable and deplorable than all the rest, and that is the direct assault alcohol makes upon the brain. Whenever the brain is too much excited by the continuous use of alcohol, disorder of the mind follows. While insanity does not always result, some form of mental weakness is caused by the habit. The memory fails, the imagination becomes dull, the judgment becomes weakened, and the mind is kept fretful, irritable, and dissatisfied.' Rev. W. Mulcahy, 'Alcohol and Health – II', in The Christian Brothers, The Higher Literary Reader (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1925), pp. 89-90. This could be compared to the omission of Sweeney’s adventures at Snámh-Dá-Eán.
93 At Swim-Two-Birds ms, pp. 62-63.
Trellis’s mental oddity is further underlined in other excised passages; one sets out his youthful habit of securing nine seats at the theatre, where he would ‘sit alone attired in a black cloak in the centre seat of his square, being at all times separated by at least the thickness of a seat from all others’. The likelihood is that these passages were removed since they made a little too much sense of At Swim; the following excised conversation between Brinsley and the student is an instance of this:

- There are too many planes and dimensions in this work of yours. This author invents people who in turn invent other people, and so on ad infinitum. The half of the characters are writing books. Nobody could be expected to follow that sort of thing.
- There is no necessity for them to follow it, I answered. The man that starts all the trouble is Trellis, who is stated to be eccentric. It is quite possible for a man who is half-crazy to be obsessed with and bullied by his characters.

As well as eliminating such passages in the final manuscript, O’Nolan re-arranged the opening sections of the novel so that they had a more disorientating effect on the reader. With these revisions, the conclusion which foregrounds the writer-as-madman thesis seems incongruous (and suitably allows O’Nolan to neglect tying up any of his loose ends). At Swim may have had more coherence in its first manuscript draft, but the revisions - which contribute to the novel’s pattern of estrangement - preserve it from the trite neatness which marrs his short stories. But whether explicitly or implicitly conveyed, the madness theme underlines the way in which At Swim

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94 Ibid., p. 64.
95 Ibid., p. 221. There is yet another reference to madness and literary composition in an excerpt from the thirty-first volume of the Conspectus: ‘To Mr Hall, at whose expense it was originally printed, Markland dedicated his treatise De Graecorum Quinta Dedinatione Imperisy Uabica. Hall frequented Tom’s Coffee-house in Devereux Court (Nichols’s Lit. An. iv. 327), where perhaps A. became acquainted of him. He fell into a wretched state of idiocy and died a maniac at Bath in 1766...’; after which follows the offer of a poem, and At Swim’s extract about Falconer’s ‘The Shipwreck’. Ibid., p. 287.
96 The original ending, ‘Mail from M. Byrne’, was equally idiosyncratic, but effectively explained away the structure of the novel: ‘Brinsley was here and told me about the book, it will be very good if you can bring out the idea that Trellis is neurotic and may be imagining all the queer grotesque stuff and that he is not above going out in the street in his night-shirt. Just suggest it very subtly and leave them all to draw their own conclusions – was Hamlet really mad and so on. It would not do to present him as an ordinary lunatic struggling against creatures of his own imagination, that is too worn out, like then he woke up as an explanation for some otherwise inexplicable situation...’ (MBM, 184).
97 O’Nolan’s short stories are effectively extended gags, all supplied with a punchline, such as ‘The Martyr’s Crown’, Envoy 1:3 (February 1950), 57-62, on the man who was born for Ireland.
represents the author class as a band of unfortunate individuals, an image which is far from the heroic figures of romanticism or modernism. Even when not obviously misguided or deranged, O’Nolan’s storytellers have more in common with the derivative hack than with the divinely-inspired author of romantic legend. And it is notable that his small band of contemporary writers - William Tracy (the author of westerns and a part-time eugenist who devises ‘aestho-autogamy’98), Dermot Trellis and Jem Casey – are all didacts of one kind or another. O’Nolan’s satire of the political writers of the 1930s is fairly evenly distributed along the political spectrum. The conservative Trellis is given a suitably prurient obsession with sexual morality (which is transformed into downright deviance in the hands of Orlick and company (ASTB, 170-171)) and given his punishment, he provides a cautionary tale of the writer who despotically passes judgement on society’s ills.99 At the other end of the political spectrum is Jem Casey, ‘a poet of the people’ (ASTB, 73) and friend of the working man. Jem might escape more lightly (though his verse does not), but in imitation of his kind, the student’s literary manifesto ironically substitutes political theory for aesthetics:

The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic... a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living.... (ASTB, 25).

It is quite an achievement to travesty experimental modernism and the politically-engaged realism of the 1930s all at once, but the student’s manifesto manages just that. Whether the storytellers of At Swim are didacts or madmen (or at the very least, endowed with an eccentric mental disposition), they are all presented as slightly shady

98 ‘Many social problems of contemporary interest, he wrote in 1909, could be readily resolved if issue could be born already matured, teethed, reared, educated, and ready to essay those competitive plums which make the Civil Service and the Banks so attractive to the younger breadwinners of today’ (ASTB, 41).
99 Interestingly, a student critic identified O’Nolan’s apolitical nature as a defining characteristic of his humour: ‘Denis Devlin says Brian O’Nuallain is a better man than “A.E.”. He has a satirical manner that would tear the bowels out of Demeter. A wide lack of propaganda in his writings makes him better than any
characters. O’Nolan’s comic irreverence towards writers of all kinds is given added point by its contemporary context; the idea that the writer was necessarily a dubious individual was popularised by the censorship authorities, who assumed that the Irish public required protection from their work.

The ambiguous nature of *At Swim’s* comedy can make it difficult to determine O’Nolan’s perspective on the position of the writer in contemporary Ireland. It is interesting that in 1920, Luigi Pirandello (one influence on O’Nolan) identified a certain doubleness as being central to ‘the humoristic disposition’. He contended that humour arose out of a state of mind, a psychological process, in which the humorist was engaged in perpetual self-parody. According to Pirandello, a habitual self-consciousness meant that every feeling, accompanied by reflection, was shadowed by its opposite: ‘Every genuine humorist is not only a poet, he is a critic as well’. It is a theory which could have been designed with the self-reflexive student narrator of *At Swim* in mind. The double-edged nature of *At Swim’s* comedy can be seen in the student’s attitude to authorship - while his manuscript purports to strip the despotic author of all his power, and allows the reader to ‘regulate at will the degree of his credulity’ (*ASTB*, 25), the student’s interruptions and directions also emphasise his ultimate control over the text. But on the other hand, irony and parody are so pervasive in *At Swim* that the author’s position is effectively undermined because the text has no anchoring point of authority. The ubiquity of parody in the novel is telling; a sense of conflict or ambivalence is inseparable from such a technique, which both subverts and reinforces the authority of its target text. This paradox is neatly

Reference:


100 There may be pathos in Sweeny’s story, since O’Nolan translates many of the lays in which he bemoans his fate, but Cathal Ó Háinle downplays his significance as a central figure: ‘In the text as a whole the use of the various kinds of linguistic register and stylistic detail is utterly haphazard, or so it is made to appear, and it is precisely this unpredictability which renders the Suibhne story as narrated in *At Swim-Two-Birds* so completely outre’. ‘Fionn and Suibhne in *At Swim-Two-Birds*’, in *Conjuring Complexities*, p. 34.


demonstrated by \textit{At Swim}'s use of the Fianna stories O'Neill gleaned from Standish Hayes O'Grady's \textit{Silva Gadelica}. While \textit{At Swim} comically exaggerates the alliterative runs and gigantism of the original stories, as well as O'Grady's idiosyncratic translations, O'Neill's lively parodies themselves are a form of tribute. Indeed, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of O'Grady's death, O'Neill quite clearly expressed his admiration for the latter's 'profound learning... humour and imagination' in an \textit{Irish Times} article. O'Grady's translations, he wrote, devised a 'curious and charming English... in an effort to render to the student the last glint of colour in any Irish word'\textsuperscript{104} The sincerity of the tribute is indicated by O'Neill's own prose, which shows that he himself valued the curious and idiosyncratic turn of phrase. As with \textit{At Swim}'s use of Joyce, its parody of O'Grady betrays as much a desire to emulate his work as to scorn it.\textsuperscript{105} Such ambivalence in the novel's comedy ensures that O'Neill remains 'a malevolent subverter of any secure authorial authority'.\textsuperscript{106} So while \textit{At Swim}'s various authors and storytellers are certainly voluble and intrusive (though not even the student addresses the reader as bluntly as Sterne's Tristram Shandy), the text's comic ambiguity ironically allows its actual author to remain scrupulously enigmatic. In this context, it is interesting that O'Neill's MA thesis, 'Trachtas ar Ndubh-fhiliocht na Gaedhilge', praised Old Irish nature poetry primarily for its \textit{impersonal} quality. In his introduction to the thesis, he divides Irish nature poetry into two types - that which solely concerns the natural world, rather than the poet himself, and a later (inferior) poetry in which nature imagery is used to mirror the state of the poet's mind.\textsuperscript{107} Declan Kiberd argues that O'Neill's thesis

\textsuperscript{104} O'Neill even claimed that O'Grady's translations could be better than the original: 'Occasionally the English seems to acquire a peculiar luminance of its own, casting a ghostly charm over passages which read pedestrian enough in the Irish'. He sketches a man of formidable scholarship, but with a lively and mischievous character, and given to wry, entertaining footnotes. In O'Neill's hands, O'Grady acquires shades of Myles: 'He seems to have had brushes with the staider servants of his day owing to his weakness for erudite multilingual puns and jokes, which were rarely construed in the manner intended by those to whom they were addressed.' Flann O'Brien, 'Standish Hayes O'Grady', \textit{The Irish Times} (16 October 1940), p. 3.


\textsuperscript{106} Neil Corcoran, \textit{After Yeats and Joyce} (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 23.

\textsuperscript{107} O'Neill approvingly quotes Ruskin on Walter Scott: 'He conquers all tendencies to the 'pathetic fallacy' and instead of making Nature anywise subservient to himself, he makes himself subservient to
...applies the fashionable modernist ideas of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in a
collection of the ‘impersonality’ of the lyrics treated... and it is telling that At
Swim maintains this idea of authorial impersonality though ostensibly turning the
notion on its head. The student’s frame narrative, for instance, inverts Flaubert’s
proposition that ‘the writer in his work should be like God in the universe, everywhere
present but nowhere visible’, yet his ironic posturing still creates a certain authorial
distance (and ambiguity). So it is not simply the superficial structure (or lack of
structure) of At Swim that is difficult to unravel; its double-edged comedy, built on
paradox and contradiction, is similarly tricky to pin down on any point. It is typical of
O’Nolan that he also casts an ironic eye on the student’s supposed carelessness; there
is more of a structure to At Swim than there should be, given the student’s boasts about
his disregard for his manuscript. In a similarly ambivalent move, O’Nolan’s discreet
mention of unmentionable matters (as discussed above) wavers somewhere between
criticism of the Free State’s censorship culture and a certain complicity with it. At
Swim even contradicts itself as a metafiction, safely containing the characters’
insurrection within a realist frame narrative. Such contradictions in the text lead some
critics to read it as an indeterminate menippean satire.

Lanters also interprets Mervyn Wall’s The Unfortunate Fursey in this vein (more particularly as a
carnivalised allegory of Emergency Ireland), and it is interesting that in a 1982
interview, Wall denied any real critical or satirical intent in the book. In the course of
the interview, he expressed a relatively cavalier attitude to its composition:

When the reviews came out, I was astonished to read that I had employed irony and
that I wrote sardonically. That hadn’t been my intention. I just wrote it for fun. The
thing just flowed out.

Nature... and appears therefore at first shallower than other poets, being in reality wider and healthier.’

‘...L’auteur, dans son oeuvre, doit être comme Dieu dans l’univers, présent partout, et visible nulle part.’
Gustave Flaubert, Correspondance. Troisième Série (1852-1854) (Paris: Louis Conard, Libraire-Editeur,
1902), pp. 61-62.

See Lanters, Unauthorized Versions, Donohue, The Irish Anatomist and M. Keith Booker, Flann
O’Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire.

Wall’s concession to his critics was to admit that ‘one writes instinctively... [and] one writes first for oneself’. Without wandering into the territory of intentional fallacy, it is worth taking him at his word – if only because what he says seems so peculiarly at odds with *Fursey’s* satire of a puritan, almost theocratic State. If Wall was indeed writing ‘instinctively’, it is interesting that he turned to comedy, like so many of his contemporaries in Ireland. All the more so, because the comic text allows this kind of doublethink, a means of assertion and retraction all at once. At a time when realist writers like Seán O’Faoláin were beginning to define the role of the Irish writer as a dissident voice in a conservative society, the comic mode offered a more ambiguous (and more cautious) way of expressing dissatisfaction with the status quo.

The following chapter more fully discusses the implications of this by examining the nonsense techniques of *The Third Policeman*, a novel purportedly set in hell yet which presents a curiously estranged version of Ireland. Interestingly, one thing *At Swim* certainly has in common with nonsense texts (which typically promise meaning but never quite deliver it) is its lack of resolution. Though the novel ends with the incineration of Trellis’s characters and a kind of reconciliation between the student and his uncle, its ultimate ‘conclusion’ is nothing of the sort. In its bizarre ending, *At Swim* stays true to its episodic nature, anticipating *The Third Policeman*’s dictum that a question is always better than an answer: ‘Answers do not matter so much as questions... There is no answer at all to a very good question’ (*ASTB*, 201). *At Swim*’s insistence on creative possibility might illuminate the enigmatic statement that ‘Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop’ (*ASTB*, 216). Nevertheless, the novel’s lack of resolution reinforces the air of provisionality that marks this whole work in progress. It is ultimately the form of *At Swim-Two-Birds* which frustrates its satire of cultural nationalists, high-handed modernists and the plain reader alike. As a metafiction which habitually turns back on itself, *At Swim* continually demolishes its own intellectual premises. This is also the nature of its comedy; the satiric elements of

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112 Ibid., p. 7.
113 It is strange that comedy is so prevalent in modern Irish writing, though it is not a question often addressed. Among their contemporaries, or near contemporaries, are James Joyce, Seán O’Casey, Austin Clarke, Frank O’Connor, and Samuel Beckett. And a slightly earlier generation showed the same
At Swim are generally undermined at one point or another by the novel’s contradictory nature. The result is that amidst all the novel’s layers of parody and all its competing voices, it is difficult to identify the voice of O’Nolan himself. But since At Swim’s semi-autobiographical frame narrative firmly roots this work in progress in 1930s UCD, it suggests a tantalising correspondence between O’Nolan’s ambivalent, non-committal comedy and the paradoxes of the college’s intellectual life at the time. By the 1930s, an institution whose history cast it as the intellectual headquarters of Catholic, nationalist Ireland, was developing a literary history that was beginning to tell a different story. In the years after independence, the national culture may have been conceived in very absolute terms, but with time it was becoming only too obvious that it was founded on a series of false antitheses – between an Irish, Catholic nation and its suspect minorities, between the merits of folklore and the dangers of modern popular culture, or indeed, between the purity of Irish culture and the depravity of European modernism. For those who now had to negotiate a period of transition in cultural nationalism, At Swim’s erudite comedy was conveniently ambiguous - not only mocking earnest cultural nationalists (the puritan plain people), but also their self-consciously intellectual antagonists. At Swim-Two-Birds is not simply a text that marked a period of change, casting a cold eye on nationalist politics, revivalist aesthetics, the literary marketplace, and the experimental modernist novel; it is also a paradoxical comedy caught up in that point of transition.

inclinations, such as Oscar Wilde, G. B. Shaw, George Moore, James Stephens and J. M. Synge, not forgetting popular humorists like George A. Birmingham, Donn Byrne or Lynn C. Doyle.
Chapter Three

‘Nonsense is a new sense’: The Third Policeman in 1939

Although first published in 1967, The Third Policeman had been composed in the shadow of war. O’Nolan began work on the novel less than six months after the publication of At Swim-Two-Birds. In October 1939, he informed his agents that ‘I started another story (very different indeed) about August last but gave it up owing to the threatened disintegration of the universe. I cannot see any use in this writing at the moment’. Their response was drily encouraging, assuring him that literary London was proceeding as normal, and the hiatus was short-lived. By January 1940, the completed manuscript was with O’Nolan’s agents and had embarked on a round of rejections from British and American publishers. Embarrassed by his failure to find a publisher, O’Nolan notoriously spread fanciful stories about losing the manuscript – one had it blowing out of the boot of his car on a drive through Donegal. After this disappointment, his literary activities were confined to the letters page of The Irish Times until Smyllie commissioned the Cruiskeen Lawn column, which first appeared in October 1940. The manuscript of The Third Policeman did not resurface until O’Nolan’s death in 1966, and there is no evidence that he had made any further attempts to have the novel published. After he lost his civil service post in 1953, during which time he was producing syndicated columns for regional newspapers as well as Cruiskeen Lawn, writing scripts for RTÉ television, and working on Sweepstake and Guinness advertisements, The Third Policeman was not offered to

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1 Letter to Patience Ross of A.M. Heath (10 October 1939), SIUC.
2 ‘I understand your feeling about writing, but I wish you could go on with your work; this standstill business is not doing any good. Actually, London publishing seems active, and many firms report good business. At the beginning, we had a great dearth of manuscripts, but they’re coming in again now.’ Patience Ross to Brian O’Nolan (11 October 1939), SIUC.
3 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 102. O’Nolan’s stories were perhaps inspired by the fact that his American agents lost their copy of the manuscript in early 1941. Letter from Harold Matson to Brian O’Nolan (27 March 1941), SIUC.
4 O’Nolan possibly considered adapting the manuscript for a play, as William Saroyan advised. Letter from Saroyan to O’Nolan (9 June 1940), BC. Mervyn Wall reports that O’Nolan dismissively showed the manuscript of The Third Policeman to some friends in 1959, but guesses that he ‘apparently worked on it, disciplining and improving it beyond all measure’ and that it was this revised version which was published in 1967. If that was the case, it is curious that O’Nolan did not attempt to have it published after the successful re-issue of At Swim-Two-Birds in 1960, and instead pillaged the manuscript for The Dalkey Archive. Mervyn Wall, ‘A Nightmare of Humour and Horror’, Hibernia (September 1967), p. 22, cited in Lanters, Unauthorized Versions, p. 206.
any publisher. Instead, the manuscript was plundered for *The Dalkey Archive*, published in 1964, in which another De Selby has possession of Policeman Fox’s omnium, now no longer a vague source of omnipotence, but an item with a destructive potential that rivals the post-war atomic bomb. Though the composition of *The Third Policeman* coincided with the outbreak of war, it is only *The Dalkey Archive* which shows any overt traces of that conflict. Tellingly, the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had left its mark on *Cruiskeen Lawn* in 1945:

What shall I say of the atomic grenade lately perfected in America and subsequently exported to Japan, duty free? It is an astonishing achievement, not so much in physics as in the more familiar sphere of human folly. I am aware that for humans there has been a long-standing arrangement whereby they can be absolutely sure of one thing, each for himself, i.e. death. There is no case on record of the pledge given to man that he will die having been broken. Yet scientists and governments are very worried about the possibility that people may not die, or may not expire in sufficiently gigantic numbers, and, in order to make sure, have devoted much thought and treasure to research on this subject... I do not find that the quest for it is an adult performance.\(^5\)

O’Nolan’s distrust of politicians who offered safe guardianship of the atomic bomb finds its way into the depiction of *The Dalkey Archive*’s Mick Shaughnessy, whose original plans to save the world by stealing De Selby’s omnium lead to delusions of becoming a new Messiah. However, in adapting the earlier novel, O’Nolan belatedly heeded Longman’s injunction in 1940 that he should have made his new book ‘less fantastic’\(^6\) than *At Swim-Two-Birds*. For all its colloquys under the sea, *The Dalkey Archive* is certainly the less ‘fantastic’ book, both in style and substance. Its realist narrative defuses the metaphysical threat of De Selby’s experiments with life and death;\(^7\) its humour mainly relies on the incongruity of the resurrected St. Augustine

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\(^5\) *CL* (20 August 1945); reprinted in *FW*, p. 172.

\(^6\) Letter from Patience Ross, A. M. Heath (11 March 1940), SIUC.

\(^7\) In *The Dalkey Archive*, the fantastic is contained within a reassuringly mundane universe, unlike *The Third Policeman*. However, both novels rely on a deadpan humour; describing *The Dalkey Archive* to the publisher Cecil Scott, O’Nolan remarked that ‘...I do feel that I have succeeded in my plan of producing a genuinely comic book, not by way of stringing together Bob Hope wisecracks, but achieving the effect obliquely by applying day-to-day logic to preposterous characters, in preposterous situations...’ (11
and the jibes at the Jesuit order which O’Nolan continued from *The Hard Life* (published in 1961). The familiar conceits which he wheels out in *The Dalkey Archive* are presented with far less subtlety than before – his customary association of the artist with the madman is this time solidified in the figures of James Joyce and De Selby. Compared to the satirical bent of *The Dalkey Archive*, *The Third Policeman* is more of a fable, a parable of a soul in purgatory. Though it shares something of the later novel’s episodic structure, it is essentially a story with a single brilliant idea at its core. But while the self-referential nature of *The Third Policeman*’s humour would seem to distance it more from current affairs, contemporary anxieties nevertheless seem to underly the nonsense tale O’Nolan composed in the winter of 1939. *The Third Policeman*’s humour depends for its effect on the narrator’s pained reasonableness in the face of an incomprehensible world. It invites the reader’s identification with the confusion of an innocent man, but one who is ‘a heel and a killer’ too, a murderer like so many of the novel’s characters. If *The Third Policeman* is a parable, it is a curiously topical one.

A few months after finishing *The Third Policeman*, while the manuscript was still travelling from publisher to publisher, O’Nolan was back in the letters page of *The Irish Times*. On this occasion, he was defending his new Irish-language *Cruiskeen Lawn* column from outraged patriots (some of his alter egos among them), and he contributed the following to the debate under one of his usual pseudonyms, Oscar Love:

> The decay of humour in Eire is largely due to the spread of patriotism, for the patriot cannot appreciate his neighbours, but he worships himself.

> Ireland cannot produce a Lear, a Lewis Carroll, or a W. S. Gilbert, because the Irish have not discovered that nonsense is a new sense. This sense is unknown to...

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*Letter from Brian O’Nolan to William Saroyan (14 February 1940); reprinted in *TP*, p. 207.*
dictators. If present-day dictators possessed a sense of nonsense the world might be rocked with laughter instead of shocked with bombs.9

As a resolutely apolitical piece of nonsense, *The Third Policeman* might be precisely what O’Nolan had in mind as he wrote. The whimsical element in this novel has much in common with the *Cruiskeen Lawn* of the early war years - or at least with that aspect of the column characterised by the Keats and Chapman stories, the farcical Myles na gCopaleen Research Bureau and the absurdities of the Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction. However if, as Oscar Love remarked, ‘nonsense is a new sense’,10 then O’Nolan’s nonsense writing is much more than whimsical escapism. For one thing, the creation of the farcical and ambivalent Myles na gCopaleen persona was a deliberate move at a time when, as O’Nolan complained, there were self-appointed pedagogues on every Dublin street corner, a ‘vast number of individuals and organisations who are profoundly dissatisfied with the people here and who issue instructions to them as to how they should behave’.11 Making nonsense of such shrill demagogues was the business of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, released in 1940, and though Chaplin’s General Hynkel punctured Hitler’s arrogance in just the manner Oscar Love had prescribed, Myles complained that his closing speech to camera was ‘the end of what is possible in the sphere of human degradation. I remember blushing.’12 Chaplin, the archetypal comic, was now apparently taking himself far too seriously, a dupe of the same sycophantic critics who had flattered Walt Disney into producing the recent *Fantasia*, in which ‘Mr Michael Mouse... becomes, as *The Bell* would say, something taut, alert, an intimate thing in aesthetic experience. And his father, poor Mr Disney, begins to neglect his dress, try to look a bit wild-eyed and go for long walks in the rain.’13 As Myles had it, both entertainers were casualties of precious critics who failed to take comedy on its own terms. Topsy-

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10 Ibid.
11 *CL* (15 March 1944); reprinted in *BM*, p. 248.
12 *CL* (8 May 1942); *BM*, p. 230. While it was banned in Ireland under the Emergency censorship, O’Nolan would have been able to view the film at a private club screening. The censor was similarly sensitive to the film’s political satire, defending his decision to ban the film by asserting: ‘If that picture had been shown in this country… it would have meant riots and bloodshed. I’m ab-sol-u-ly convinced of that.’ The Bellman, ‘Meet Dr. Hayes: or The Genial Censor,’ *The Bell* 3:2 (November 1941), p. 109.
13 *CL* (8 May 1942); *BM*, p. 231.
turveydom had surrendered itself to the world it should parody: Disney’s ‘Silly Symphonies’ were now abandoned in favour of their respectable counterparts and Chaplin’s slapstick had finally given way to straightforward political rhetoric. Whether or not O’Nolan’s criticism was wholly deserved, it explains a little why *The Third Policeman* is apparently less topical – or rather, less rooted in contemporary Ireland - than any of his other novels.\(^{14}\) If nonsense was an *alternative* mode of making sense, a ‘new sense’ insofar as it was a self-reflexive and self-critical mode, then it was better protection against the arrogance of the patriot or the demagogue than any earnest satire or polemic. It also served as a defence against any charge of serious aesthetic ambition, while still allowing for full display of literary pyrotechnics. As O’Nolan assured his agents, *The Third Policeman* was simply ‘a funny murder or mystery story and cannot be said to be a lot of highbrow guff like the last book’.\(^{15}\)

The day before the first *Cruiskeen Lawn* was published in *The Irish Times* in October 1940, Oscar Love attacked a virulent critic of a recent *Times* editorial which had questioned the merits of the Irish language revival: ‘Science may soon produce a serum to kill prejudice and provinciality. An advance order for the serum would not come amiss’.\(^{16}\) This antidote to Irish provincialism and self-conceit was to be provided in the irreverent nonsense of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, which undercut the rhetoric of the newspaper columnist as much as it mocked the foibles of the Plain People of Ireland. It would be curious if *The Third Policeman*, composed throughout the autumn and winter of 1939, was not similarly marked by those first apprehensive months of war. Indeed, Anthony Cronin sees a Manichaean perspective informing this novel, the idea that ‘the balance of good and evil in the universe as we know it had been disturbed in favour of evil. This world was perhaps hell, or part of its empire’.\(^{17}\) It is

\(^{14}\) *The Hard Life* is unusual among these in being set in Dublin at the turn of the century, perhaps significantly the period most associated with Joyce’s fiction. See Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 183. However, in writing this novel O’Nolan claimed to be trying to provoke the Censorship Board into banning the book at which point he would sue them. Letter to Timothy O’Keeffe (1 September 1961), SIUC. Hence the creation of the Jesuit priest, Fr. Kurt Kahrt, S.J. and his long conversations with Collopy on corruption in Church history and the salacious deeds of Catholic saints. See Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, pp. 213-14.

\(^{15}\) To Patience Ross, A. M. Heath (24 January 1940), SIUC. Once it was rejected by Longman’s (who thought otherwise), he suggested they offer it to a publisher of mystery novels. To Patience Ross (16 March 1940), SIUC.

\(^{16}\) Oscar Love, *The Irish Times* (3 October 1940).

\(^{17}\) Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p. 104.
little wonder then, that the crime for which the narrator of *The Third Policeman* is being punished is arrogance, an assumption that the end justifies the means. It is his intellectual pride, his desire to compile the definitive ‘De Selby Index’, which Divney manipulates in order to persuade him to murder Mathers. All the characters of *The Third Policeman* exist in a similarly lop-sided private universe, a fact which the narrator is forced to recognise when he collides with the logic of the policemen. (Like de Selby, the policemen are equal to any perplexity. In Pluck’s jurisdiction, the question ‘Is it about a bicycle?’ (*TP*, 57) has only one answer.) Unfortunately for the narrator, he is subject to the absurd workings of their jurisdiction; when it is convenient to have him hanged, they are happy to do so. *The Third Policeman* exaggerates the contingent nature of common sense; in its strange world, there is (very pointedly) nothing natural under the sun.

In this novel, even the narrator’s descriptions of the natural environment tend to be strangely schematic: ‘the trees and the tall hills and the fine views of bogland had been arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made when looked at from the road’ (*TP*, 39). This topsy-turvey universe, where what is most natural is also most artificial, is of course simply a product of Policeman Fox’s design. However, the characters themselves are dimly aware that they are inhabiting a strangely circumscribed world, one more orderly than most. Most characters’ confidence in their ability to classify everything around them reflects the eccentric ambitions of de Selby. Pluck is endlessly frustrated by the narrator’s nameless condition, sure that he must be Mick Barry or Charlemagne O’Keeffe, Kimberley or Joseph Poe or Nolan (*TP*, 104-5) - in the latter guesses getting unnervingly close to the mark. However, in the policemen’s limited jurisdiction it may well be that one nameless stranger is most likely related to another (*TP*, 59), and Pluck’s belief in the order of everything around him serves as an effective counterpoint to the narrator’s disorientation. What is curious is that the narrator himself shares Pluck’s confidence that the answers to most enquiries lie in a finite range of possibilities:

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18 ‘I cannot recount the tricks and wiles he used to win me to his side. It is sufficient to say that he read portions of my ‘De Selby Index’ (or pretended to) and discussed with me afterwards the serious
‘I do not desire to be inquisitive, sir,’ I said, ‘but would it be true to mention that you are a bird-catcher?’

‘Not a bird-catcher,’ he answered.

‘A tinker?’

‘Not that.’

…‘Or a man out after rabbits?’ I asked.

‘Not that. Not that.’

‘A travelling man with a job of journey-work?’

‘No.’

‘Driving a steam-thrashing mill?’

‘Not for certain.’

‘Tin-plates?’

‘No.’

‘A town clerk?’

‘No.’ (TP, 46-7)

The narrator’s trust that everything in the world is knowable is constantly undermined throughout The Third Policeman, only to be horribly reinforced at the end. The journey he takes is, of course, ‘the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered’, a cycle which he has (presumably) gone through many times before. While his intimation that this universe has an overriding structure is imperative to the reader of a mystery novel - organised around a key or code which must be deciphered - The Third Policeman turns the genre inside out. Not only does it reveal the identity of the killer in the very first sentence: ‘Not everybody knows how I killed old Phillip Mathers’, it also reveals the murder weapon: ‘smashing his jaw in with my spade’ (TP, 7). However, in a semantic twist typical of O’Nolan, his novel nevertheless obeys the conventions of the genre to the letter by never naming Mathers’s killer. This play with genre, together with the casting of the narrator as interpreter of the narrative’s mysteries and the scattered clues that he is, if not a character in a novel, then at least a pawn in someone's responsibility of any person who declined by mere reason of personal whim to give the ‘Index’ to the world’ (TP, 16).

19 Author’s note on The Third Policeman (TP, 20).
else’s play, prompt Keith Hopper to read *The Third Policeman* as a metafictional counterpart to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, for the sake of coherence, his argument is forced into some odd conclusions: equating pumps with pens, ‘omnium’ with omniscience (and by association, with the ‘author-god’) and reading the house as metonymic for the book. O’Nolan’s imagination is never so tidy, his self-reflexive play with order and structure being unbalanced by the chaotic excess of the final product.

In contrast to Hopper, Wim Tigges and José Lanters have both drawn attention to the features which *The Third Policeman* shares with nonsense writing, which shows a fascination with its own structure and procedures similar to that of metafiction. Their definition of the genre is based on the work of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, with Tigges identifying the four basic elements of nonsense as ‘an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature’. The false syllogisms and absurd logic of *The Third Policeman*; its narrative arbitrariness, fondness for lists, repetition and circularity, and its rearrangements of time and space are all cited in their readings as classic nonsense devices. Tigges in particular focuses on a number of nonsense traits which seem characteristic of O’Nolan’s writing in general: wordplay, violence, emotional detachment, a fascination with the instability of identity, and play with serialism and infinity. Most importantly, the oscillation between order and disorder which critics associate with the nonsense text, its careful unpicking and re-making of authority, well illustrates the peculiar courses of O’Nolan’s comedy. The advent of Myles na gCopaleen in late 1940, just when the manuscript of *The Third Policeman* was being

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20 Hopper, *Flann O’Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*. In Hopper’s reading, the narrator represents the reader in the text, and Policeman Fox the ‘author-god’.


23 These devices are also shown to be characteristic of nonsense writing in Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Interextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins, 1979).
consigned to a drawer, was not a bolt from the blue. Myles’s peculiar brand of pedantic chaos was already present in the abandoned manuscript.

Lost in Wonderland: Nonsense Features of The Third Policeman

Like the Victorian nonsense writers, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, O’Nolan exploited a marginal position in relation to canonical literature. The Alice books neatly fuse popular culture and high literature, with Carroll’s caustic observations belying their status as mere children’s books. Furnished with nursery rhymes as well as parodies of Tennyson and Wordsworth, they anticipate similar combinations in At Swim and The Third Policeman, where Standish O’Grady consorts with the cowboy western, and O’Nolan in a sense rewrites the murder mystery back-to-front. Modernist texts such as Ulysses might have made similar combinations, but they did not risk confusion with marginal forms, such as children’s books or pulp fiction. In contrast, At Swim-Two-Birds blithely travestied the experimental modernist novel. And as in At Swim, there is a large element of nonsensical arbitrariness in The Third Policeman, which resists being taken too seriously; it would be an odd (or ingenious) interpretive schema which could account for Mathers’s dying words: ‘something like ‘I do not care for celery’ or ‘I left my glasses in the scullery’…’ (TP, 16). However, O’Nolan’s critics have been quick to make sense of such whimsical elements. Mary Power divines arcane references in the narrative to the revivalist fascination with magic and the occult, arguing that Mathers is derived from MacGregor Mathers, a leading theoretician of the Order of the Golden Dawn. J. M. Silverthorne makes a similar association, noting that Mathers’s talk ‘is full of the distinctions and subtleties that characterize the ancient literature of Ireland’. Mathers’s theory of the coloured

24 The manuscript was returned to O’Nolan by A. M. Heath two weeks after Cruskeen Lawn first appeared. Letter to Brian O’Nolan from Patience Ross (1 November 1940), SIUC.
25 Interestingly, his brother Ciarán was at work on an Irish-language detective novel while O’Nolan was writing At Swim. Oíche i nGleann na nGealt was published by An Gúm in 1939.
26 Mary Power, ‘The Figure of the Magician in The Third Policeman and The Hard Life’, Canadian Journal of Irish Studies 8:1 (June 1982), p. 56. Power traces de Selby’s theory that night is an accumulation of black air to the belief in alchemical circles that ‘the primal substance of the universe was a black substance on which other characteristics could be impressed.’, p. 59.
winds, which doesn’t seem to serve any great narrative purpose (other than to anticipate de Selby’s speculations), might be traced to Des Esseintes’s colour theory in J. K. Huysmans’s Against Nature, to an old Irish epic, Saltair na Rann, or even to Swift’s A Tale of a Tub. On the other hand, it serves equally well as an example of nonsense arbitrariness in narrative construction. Like Carroll’s Alice books, critical interpretations of the text (as an allegory, for example) are always under threat from such comic excess. The plot twist O’Nolan employs as a framing device serves a function similar to the student’s narrative in At Swim, which provides a rational explanation for O’Nolan’s wilder inventions. Both frames obey an impulse to order, or simply make sense of, the nonsense narrative. However, the flimsiness of these devices presents O’Nolan’s critics with a difficulty, never wholly fulfilling their function while still suggesting that his fantasies really do present some puzzle to be solved. The result has been a bizarre mix of allegorical interpretations of The Third Policeman, regarding it as anything from a deliberate metafiction to an involved commentary on Einsteinian physics, although such readings have been offered with varying degrees of seriousness. (Most of these critics admit that the perverse ingenuity of de Selby casts a long shadow.) Unfortunately, there is little evidence that O’Nolan constructed his fictional puzzles in a satisfyingly deliberate way. He seems to have always written relatively quickly, making few revisions (the long genesis of At Swim-Two-Birds being an exception), and judging from his correspondence with A. M. Heath, The Third Policeman was written within five months. Given that he was

28 J. C. C. Mays, ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination’ in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, p. 92. Mays identifies de Selby with Huysman’s aesthete, Des Esseintes, who feels that there is a correspondence between the sensual make-up of a person and the colour they respond to most strongly.

29 Hopper notes that this source is cited by Brendan McWilliams in ‘Winds of a Different Hue’, The Irish Times (11 December 1992).

30 Here, Swift records the theory of the Aeolists that ‘...man brings with him into the world a peculiar portion or grain of wind, which may be called a quintessence... This quintessence is of a catholic use upon all emergencies of life, is improveable into all arts and sciences, and may be wonderfully refined as well as enlarged, by certain methods in education.’ A Tale of a Tub (Oxford: OUP, 1986), p. 73. Hence, his recommendation – as a matter of common courtesy - to break wind as often as possible.


32 The novel was begun in August and delivered at the beginning of January: ‘This is meant to be a funny murder or mystery story... Whatever about the writing and the eccentric tone of the conversations, I think the plot is quite new and nowadays that alone is something to be slightly proud of... the whole thing has
working a five-and-a-half day week in the Department of Local Government and
Public Health at the time, this didn’t leave much time to polish the manuscript.
O’Nolan’s tendency to extemporise can only have been exacerbated by the demands
of writing the Cruiskeen Lawn column and by the time he returned to writing fiction
with The Hard Life, he was boasting that ‘I go so far as to believe that any work of
fiction or imagination... is necessarily bad if it took more than six months to write.’

The Third Policeman drops clues to its dénouement along the way, as any good
mystery should, but like At Swim-Two-Birds it has a basically episodic and rather
shaggy structure. As in the case of At Swim, it seems more appropriate to examine
the style of O’Nolan’s writing and the manner in which his comedy operates, than to
analyse his fiction in structural terms which are better suited to the careful and
conscientious modernist writers whom he usually parodied.

At the same time, O’Nolan’s pedantic brand of comedy is typical of nonsense
precisely because of its self-reflexive fascination with its own procedures. The Third
Policeman, with its sense of a hidden and inexplicable order, its satire of scholarly and
legal pedantry, falls within a tradition of nonsense writing that is highly conscious
(and highly suspicious) of procedure and ritual. To a large extent, The Third
Policeman replicates At Swim’s fascination with form, but here reality – not art – is
recessive, and life is a matter of technique. The irony is that the narrator can obviously
never master his situation, since this whole universe has been contrived to manipulate
him. Though he reduces the social world to an intellectual problem, as his hero de

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been done rather hastily. I have another copy which I will go over slowly and see what improvements can
be made...‘. Letter to Patience Ross of A. M. Heath (24 January 1940), SIUC.
33 Letter to A.M.Heath, no date (probably October 1962), SIUC.
34 Due to At Swim’s chinese-box structure, there are many echoes between the levels of the novel. However,
there is also much in At Swim which seems thrown in merely to accentuate its piecemeal construction. This
becomes more obvious in The Third Policeman, where there is no rationale given for narrative untidiness.
This gives a sometimes arbitrary air to the narrative which is typical of nonsense literature. See Tigges, An
Anatomy of Literary Nonsense, p. 55.
35 Susan Stewart points to the proliferation of legal trials in nonsense, citing both Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s
Adventures in Wonderland and the closing trial of At Swim-Two-Birds: ‘In nonsense the law becomes a
procedure without content, the systematic and arbitrary application of rule without regard to context.’
Nonsense, p. 192. While At Swim is not consistently a nonsense novel, having a stronger elements of satire
and parody, it does veer into nonsense at such moments. The comic potential of the legal system is plumbed
again in Myles na gCopaleen’s District Court and The Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction in
Cruiskeen Lawn. Myles’s attraction to legal arcana is analysed at length by Joseph Brooker in ‘Estopped by
15-37.
Selby might do, it is not one that he is in any way equipped to solve. This is a reader embedded in the text who, like Alice in wonderland, is held subject to its puzzles and riddles. (Interestingly, as a figure with whom the reader is invited to identify, he is not all that flattering; he may supply the sole rational voice in the novel, but he is also a monomaniac and a murderer.) *The Third Policeman* might play on the surreal quality of normality, making strange the everyday world and its conventions, but this estrangement extends to the portrayal of its protagonist, the figure who embodies both narrator and reader. His privileged position as narrator is revealed to be wholly illusory, in fact, it is far from the omniscient voice the opening promises (‘Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers’ (*TP*, 7)) since he is nothing more than a pawn in a perplexing mystery. Rather pointedly, it was intellectual arrogance which inspired him to commit murder, a quality still in evidence when he eventually retrieves the black box from Policeman Fox:

I could not help smiling at him, not, indeed, without some pity. It was clear that he was not the sort of person to be entrusted with the contents of the black box. His oafish underground invention was the product of a mind which fed upon adventure books of small boys, books in which every extravagance was mechanical and lethal and solely concerned with bringing about somebody’s death in the most elaborate way imaginable... (*TP*, 196)

If the narrator had been a more assiduous reader of pulp fiction, he might have realised what kind of adventure he was in. As protagonist, thinker, or reader, it is his innocent assumption of intellectual superiority (or more accurately, intellectual independence) – a quality that mirrors de Selby’s outrages against common sense - which facilitates this tale of retribution. Whether read in a theological or metafictional sense, if he suspected some design to the universe, then he would be some way to escaping his fate. After all, the very same humility paradoxically enables the

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36 It is interesting that Alice is also literally trapped at the end of her story, put on trial by the wonderland characters and left wholly at the mercy of the Queen of Hearts’s wilfulness.

37 Again, as for Alice, the narrator’s childhood is a perplexing period: ‘a certain year came about the Christmas-time and when the year was gone my father and mother were gone also… I was young and foolish at the time and did not know properly why these people had all left me, where they had gone and why they did not give explanations beforehand’ (*TP*, 8).
characters’ revolt in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Tellingly, when the nameless narrator muses over the corporeality of his conscience (otherwise known as Joe), his train of thought turns upon a motif familiar to readers of *At Swim*:

> What if he *had* a body? A body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of an onion, receding to some unimaginable ultimum? Was I in turn merely a link in a vast sequence of imponderable beings, the world I knew merely the interior of the being whose inner voice I myself was?... (*TP*, 123)

This image of infinite regression appears throughout the novel, an inner signature of the narrator’s circular and interminable hell – for example, in de Selby’s experiment with mirrors which allowed him to observe a younger self in ‘an infinity of reflections’ (*TP*, 67)\(^38\) or in the police station which is nested inside the walls of Mathers’s house (*TP*, 188). The most striking instance is the description of Mathers’s eyes as:

> ...mechanical dummies animated by electricity or the like, with a tiny pinhole in the centre of the ‘pupil’ through which the real eye gazed out secretively and with great coldness... possibly behind thousands of these absurd disguises... through a barrel of serried peep-holes. (*TP*, 26)

As Keith Hopper notes, this Chinese-box pattern, the image of a serial observer or a self-conscious narrator ‘is an image for determinism’,\(^39\) one which he astutely identifies in the work of de Selby, who:

> ...likens the position of a human on the earth to that of a man on a tight-wire who must continue walking along the wire or perish, being, however, free in all other respects. Movement in this restricted orbit results in the permanent hallucination

\(^{38}\)Theoretically, de Selby’s experiment is sound, and according to Charles Kemnitz, it bears comparison with an experiment on the speed of light carried out with mirrors in the mid-1930s. Einstein hypothesized that if a man could stare in a mirror long enough for light to travel to the limit of the universe and back, he could watch the hair on the back of his head grow. ‘Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions’ (1985), p. 68.

\(^{39}\)Hopper, *Flann O’Brian*, p. 113.
known conventionally as ‘life’ with its innumerable concomitant limitations, afflictions and anomalies. If a way can be found, says de Selby, of discovering the ‘second direction’, i.e., along the ‘barrel’ of the sausage, a world of entirely new sensation and experience will be open to humanity... (TP, 98)

There is a hint of this paranoid sense of entrapment in *At Swim*, its self-reflexivity serving as a comic reaction against the forces of cultural determinism. However, the theme is replayed in a darker guise in *The Third Policeman*, where the nonsense fascination with order and disorder, rules and procedures, is inflected with a strange foreboding.

In a place where losing an argument can mean hanging, the intellectual games typical of nonsense literature are hardly inconsequential and an ability to conform to arbitrary rules (however bizarre) is invaluable. The eccentricity of *The Third Policeman* is that of the familiar world gone only slightly awry; Pluck’s unearthly jargon is mostly composed of legal malapropisms, while the narrator’s scholarly footnotes only just veer off into absurdity. The repetitive interrogations in which the characters engage give a similarly systematic air to their conversations. As Seamus Deane suggests, the civil service questionnaire haunts the narrator’s grilling of Martin Finnucane, and Pluck’s clumsy officialese could easily be ascribed to the same source. But the most telling aspect of the quizzes (which are, after all, the narrator’s only means of getting a hold on his irrational world) is that they always fail him. Pluck at least can satisfy himself that the narrator is not nameless and unidentifiable, an unknown quantity in his jurisdiction, but must be related to the last nameless man (the narrator himself?) who passed through his police station. Pluck’s capacity for logic unhindered by common sense far outstrips the narrator’s, to the point where he can justify stringing the other up on the scaffold. However, the operative difference between the two characters is the relative power of their positions; in these kind of games, the house always wins. Like Carroll’s Alice, O’Nolan’s narrator is adrift in a world whose rules he can’t fathom, but which retain a relentless logic. Alice is permanently frustrated in

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decoding the conventions of her dream-world; no matter how cleverly she conducts her verbal battles with disgruntled wonderland characters (generally a more gruff species than O’Nolan’s), the cards are stacked in their favour. Both novels employ a style of comedy which is as much marked by the proper observance of convention as it is by a willful absurdity; it is only unfortunate for their protagonists that no one informed them of the rules of the game. Similarly, Edward Lear’s limericks are full of eccentric characters who are policed and mistreated by an unknown ‘they’: ‘There was an Old Man of Whitehaven,/ Who danced a quadrille with a Raven;/ But they said – ‘It’s absurd, to encourage this bird!’/ So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven’.  

The sense of inhabiting a bizarre, and slightly sinister, system is common in Victorian nonsense literature; such systems might be legal, social, bureaucratic, or even linguistic - the one constant is their tendency to force the protagonists into a bewildered passivity.

This was an aspect of Victorian nonsense which Louis Aragon seized upon when adopting Lewis Carroll as a proto-surrealist writer in 1931. Pointing out that Carroll was writing in an age also dominated by a deference to scientific rationalism (rather than Romantic individualism), he even managed to accommodate the conservative Charles Dodgson to his revolutionary rhetoric. Aragon contrived to draw political conclusions from the estrangement of Victorian society in Alice’s childlike distortions:

...in those shameful days of massacre in Ireland, of nameless oppression in the mills – where was now established the ironic accountancy of pain and pleasure recommended by Bentham – when, from Manchester there rose like a challenge the theory of ‘Free Trade’ (‘when I use a word,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘it means exactly what I want it to mean, neither more nor less’) human liberty lay wholly in the frail hands of Alice, where it had been placed by this curious man, whom no one suspected because he had never said anything irreverent except about chess Queens, and because he showed to children the absurdity of a world which is only the other side of the looking-glass.  

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42 Louis Aragon, ‘Lewis Carroll. En 1931’, Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution (1931), p. 25. The translation quoted here is Philip Thody’s, from his article: ‘Lewis Carroll and the Surrealists’, Twentieth-
Most critics of nonsense do not accept the surrealists’ identification with Carroll, given that their attempt to suspend the conscious mind was antithetical to the hyper-rationality of nonsense literature. Ironically, Michael Holquist also associates Victorian nonsense with modernism, but for the opposite reasons to Aragon - precisely because he feels that it says nothing about anything but chess queens. He argues that ‘The Hunting of the Snark’ exemplified ‘the most distinctive feature of modern literature’ because:

...it best dramatized the attempt of an author to insure through the structure of his work that the work could be perceived only as what it was, and not some other thing; the attempt to create an immaculate fiction...

Like Aragon, Holquist reads Victorian nonsense as a reaction against its period’s positivism, but sees modernism – its descendant - as a literary redoubt against Marxist or Freudian attempts to interpret art as an expression of economic or psychological forces. Conceived as ‘immaculate fiction’, nonsense would be impermeable to any interpretation that strays beyond its literary or linguistic play; it would be, to a large extent, only fiction about fiction. Arguably, The Third Policeman does not belong easily to either camp. Its tale of an individual trapped in an inscrutable wonderland desperately trying to learn the rules of the game does have a sinister quality, and is certainly open to a reading as a satire of scientific rationalism. Nevertheless, this is

\[\text{Century} \ (\text{May 1958}), \ p. \ 429. \text{André Breton also included Carroll in his \textit{Anthologie de l’humour noir} (1939), while Aragon translated ‘The Hunting of the Snark’ in 1929. Michael Holquist, ‘What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism’, \textit{Yale French Studies} 43 (1969), 145-164.\]

\[\text{Elizabeth Sewell protests that the surrealists’ attempt to suppress any conscious rule of the mind’s images is an abdication of control wholly uncharacteristic of the nonsense writer. \textit{The Field of Nonsense} (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 5. Tigges concurs, finding that the absence of emotion in nonsense also sharply distinguishes it from surrealism. \textit{An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense}, p. 119.}\]

\[\text{Holquist, ‘What is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism’, p. 147.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p. 164. Holquist’s reading of modernism is questionable, but the ease with which nonsense texts can be appropriated to support his argument is interesting.}\]

\[\text{However, quite apart from Aragon’s claims for the political subversiveness of surrealism, there is an element of surrealist nightmare about \textit{The Third Policeman}: the pump which Divney uses to kill Mathers undergoes a dream-like transformation, echoed in the policemen’s obsession with bicycles. The narrator’s state of mind at stressful points also evokes disturbingly surrealistic images, like the oil lamp in Mathers’s house which has ‘a glass bowl with the wick dimly visible inside it, curling in convolutions like an intestine’ (TP, 25) or the metamorphosis of Pluck’s pipe when he proposes a hanging: ‘when he stuck it in his face it looked like a great hatchet’ (TP, 102) - the latter image recalls his own murder of Mathers with a spade.}\]
still a text enamoured of its own self-reflexive playfulness, one that is ultimately centred on a pun (as it turns out, everything is about a (bi)cycle). The contradictory approaches to nonsense on the part of Aragon and Holquist might be attributed to a central paradox of the genre: that it is inescapably bound up with what it seeks to avoid, it has the anarchist’s obsession with the law. Just as parody inadvertently reinforces the authority of its target texts, nonsense reinforces the supremacy of common sense and the material world, its escapist impulse being continually frustrated by what it apparently subverts. In turn, this escapist impulse itself begs a cultural or historical reading of the genre.

Conservative Subversives: Cultural Readings of Nonsense

It is interesting, given Oscar Love’s proposal of nonsense (‘a new sense’) as a means of countering the absurdities of contemporary politics, that Roger Henkle characterises it as a strangely evasive, yet simultaneously engaged, mode of writing:

...ambivalence and indirect attack, angst and muted self-assertion are beautifully accommodated in nonsense. The virtue of nonsense is its obliqueness; it is ideally suited to criticism from the ‘inside’ of a class or society by one too wracked by self-doubt to engage in open assault.47

It is precisely these qualities which underpin the nonsense of The Third Policeman, just as they do the ambiguities of At Swim-Two-Birds and the contradictory postures of Myles na gCopaleen. The Irish wonderland in The Third Policeman (or to be more accurate, this peculiarly Irish corner of hell) bears analysis in terms of its contemporary context just as much as O’Nolan’s other self-reflexive novels. The cultural confusion that inspired the patchwork structure of At Swim, or which created the ‘West-Briton-Nationalist’48 who condemned Myles’s irreverence towards the Irish language in the liberal, Ascendancy Irish Times, surely contributed to the circuitous nonsense of The Third Policeman. Far from being unmoored from the everyday world,

48 See the letter from ‘A West-Briton-Nationalist’ to The Irish Times (17 October 1940).
nonsense writing is entirely bound up with it. As Stewart succinctly puts it: ‘[our] ways of making nonsense... depend upon our ways of making common sense’; the transgressive strangeness of nonsense continually exposes the cultural and ideological bases of common sense. Preoccupied with verbal and social rituals (just as Myles na gCopaleen’s Catechism of Cliché), it presents an estranged version of the everyday world. This is particularly true of Victorian nonsense; the politely bizarre conversations between Carroll’s Alice and sundry wonderland characters are only distorted reflections of the bizarrely polite encounters of the Victorian middle class. The easy familiarity of the policemen in O’Nolan’s novel, maintained even when they decide to hang the narrator as a matter of personal convenience, bears similar comparison to the social mores of contemporary Ireland.

In examining the rise of the nonsense genre in Victorian England, Tigges argues that nonsense literature tends to emerge in periods of relative tranquillity, in particular, when a period of political stability is combined with a fairly rigid social system. The pattern he discerns may be identified (in a variant form) in the latter years of the Irish Free State - its political life stable in comparison with earlier years, and its society characterised by a restrictive puritan ethos. Though the nonsense writer is easily cast as a whimsical escapist, in such an orderly (yet slightly oppressive) environment, nonsense by its very nature is subversive. However, its subversive potential is fairly qualified, couched as it is in a form which begs not to be taken too seriously. As Tigges presents it, the Romantic individualism suppressed in the Victorian era broke out in its nonsense literature, but not in an overtly challenging fashion:

In this post-Romantic period, the incompatibility of certain individuals from the intelligentsia with the type of society they had to live in could no longer be

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50 Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 230. Though he closes his study with a brief overview of the ‘historical, cultural and psychological backgrounds of nonsense’, he draws a distinction between nonsense as a ‘perennial phenomenon’ and the literary genre dating from Edward Lear’s 1846 *Book of Nonsense*. (Throughout the book, his analyses are based on a formalist methodology similar to Stewart’s.) Sketching the variable fortunes of nonsense, he notes that ‘...there are “peak” periods (noticeably 1862-77 in England, corresponding to the crest of the economic wave, which turned in 1873; the turn of the twentieth century in Germany and France, concurrent with a prewar boom; the Interbellum; and the postwar
expressed in a manner which was strongly antagonistic to that society; such a policy would have led to social ostracism... But in any case, the dissatisfaction they [Lear and Carroll] felt was not so much with their society as with their own role and identity in it. Nonsense... perfectly expresses this emotional dissatisfaction, as well as endearing the authors to children and adults alike in a way that would be impossible to the satirical or social rebel.  

It is hard to imagine Brian O’Nolan being much concerned with ‘endearing’ himself to the general public, but neither did he outrage the public sensibilities of 1930s Ireland. As noted in the previous chapter, for all its playful humour At Swim cautiously remained on the right side of the censors; indeed throughout his career O’Nolan easily agreed to requests from editors or publishers to omit any questionable material from his work. And he never did rail unambiguously against the evils of nationality, language and religion, instead he cynically dismissed the Romantic arrogance of Stephen Dedalus’s ambitions (conflating the character with Joyce). O’Nolan’s combination of his civil service duties with his more eccentric ‘spare-time literary activities’ (ASTB, 9) was more in the line of the equally conventional, and equally eccentric, Charles Dodgson. It is a telling coincidence that the Victorian nonsense writers also arrived in the aftermath of a Romantic (and even revolutionary) era - the pragmatic preoccupations of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Britain framing their weird inventions, just as the solid character of the Irish Free State and its successor framed O’Nolan’s.

This is the ‘little world’ depicted by Seamus Deane in Strange Country, one which succeeded the wild rhetoric of the revival and the subsequent years of political upheaval: ‘a world that has lost faith in the heroic consciousness of the heroic individual and has replaced it by the unheroic consciousness of the ordinary, of the Plain People of Ireland’.  

The revolutionary rhetoric was swapped, he implies, for ‘ready-made language, cliché, consensus’, and the revival’s fantasy and escapism for a

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Welfare period of 1950-77) and “lows” (1877-95, a period of economic decline in Europe; 1940-50; perhaps the last decade [1980s], which has not seen much original work)...’, p. 232.

51 Ibid., p. 247.

52 Deane, Strange Country, p. 162.
more rational disenchantment - one which had its attractions for O’Nolan. The deadpan manner of *The Third Policeman’s* anti-hero is certainly of a piece with this world, as is the garbled officialese of the eccentric policemen. Indeed, *The Third Policeman* is suffused with this rationalism; nonsense itself is logic run riot. It is no accident that parody, a deeply ambivalent mode, is a dominant feature of *At Swim*, and through its nonsense manoeuvres *The Third Policeman* is itself implicated in the ‘little world’ which the novel turns on its head. As Jean Jacques Lecercle argues, the predominance of ‘clichés, idées reçues, preconstructed thoughts’ in Victorian nonsense makes it a vector of Victorian ideology, though not itself being overtly ideological. A similar ventriloquism is visible in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, or in the Myles na gCopaileen Catechism of Cliché, the Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction or Myles’s catalogue of Bores, and it carries similar implications. But Lecercle presses his point even further, describing Victorian nonsense as a ‘conservative-revolutionary genre… deeply respectful of authority in all its forms: rules of grammar, maxims of conversation and of politeness, the authority of the canonical author of the parodied text’. Hence it might be said that nonsense texts combine a fantasy of creativity with a self-conscious awareness of the power of convention; ironically, their fantasies only emphasise the limits (and perhaps the impossibility) of originality. This gives them a paradoxical quality which Lecercle illustrates with Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ song, whose nonsense coinages obey the rules of English grammar. The result is a precarious balance between sense and nonsense, an interdependence of conservative and subversive elements. As argued in the previous chapter, this kind of balance is maintained in *At Swim*, and not simply in its incessant parody of various literary styles. Not only does O’Nolan prevent his metafiction from imploding on itself by containing it within a realist frame narrative, but the contradictory nature of the novel renders his satire (of contemporary literature, or even contemporary Dublin) peculiarly ambiguous. Tellingly, in *The Third Policeman*, *At Swim’s* equation of the

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54 Ibid., pp. 2-3. Admittedly, Lecercle’s main point of reference in discussing Victorian nonsense is Lewis Carroll, whose clash between personality and literary persona perfectly exemplifies the theory.
55 Ibid., p. 25.
56 One of the characteristics which Tigges finds indispensible to nonsense is ‘an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning’. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 55.
artist with the madman is continued in the eccentric characters of de Selby and MacCruiskeen, but the novel also replicates *At Swim*’s ambivalence on a more fundamental level. While (as the following section argues) *The Third Policeman*’s pattern of estrangement exposes the disturbing nature of the ‘ordinary’ world, the text’s eccentricities also exploit a powerful sense of convention. This precarious balance between subversive and conformist impulses is maintained throughout the novel, its attacks on the status quo typically being oblique and non-committal. Thus, while Keith Hopper discerns a buried ‘metonymic discourse’ about sexuality in *At Swim* and *The Third Policeman*, he can decode this as ‘a reflection of the transitional Irish Free State and the tragedy of Irish male attitudes to sexuality’ (in other words, as being predictably misogynistic and homophobic, as well as sexually ambivalent). But O’Nolan does not simply inscribe this into his humour; his double-edged comedy resists such reduction, perhaps even working against its author’s prejudices. In relating O’Nolan’s invention of ‘aestho-autogamy’ in *At Swim* to the ‘celibate utopia’ implicit in contemporary Irish culture, Hopper argues that O’Nolan is aware of such absurdities, but unable to move beyond them. True, his humour plays within the rules of contemporary Catholic Ireland by treating the whole matter as a ‘dirty’ subject, but contrary to Hopper’s argument, he does not show an ‘innate inability’ to deal with the subject at all. There is arguably as much resentment of contemporary sexual mores in these novels as there is confirmation of them. In *The Third Policeman*, it is generally the narrator’s conscience, Joe, who voices the standard line, fulfilling a function similar to the aggravating Good Fairy in *At Swim*. When Mathers makes enigmatic allusions to the sins of his youth (a weakness for ‘Number One’ and

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57 Hopper, *Flann O’Brien*, p. 78. In contrast, Susan Stewart argues that nonsense manages ‘an exposure of metonymic relationships as purely systematic, as having no context outside of their own conventions’, *Nonsense*, p. 33. Arguably, ‘metonymic discourse’ is often so exaggerated and bizarre in *The Third Policeman* that it follows the pattern outlined by Stewart.


59 Andrea Bobotis turns this reading on its head, arguing that the *The Third Policeman*’s ‘anti-teleological agenda challenges normative notions of gender and sexuality, and, in turn, the narrative’s conspicuous misogyny.’ ‘Queering Knowledge in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*’, *Irish University Review* 32:2 (Autumn/Winter 2002), p. 245. According to Bobotis, there is no good reason for assuming that Pluck’s bicycle is female, it is just as likely to be a cross-dresser, p. 249.

60 Hopper, *Flann O’Brien*, p. 82. O’Nolan cutely gets to the heart of the matter – the economic imperative which encouraged the development of this puritanical culture in Ireland. Aestho-autogamy would ‘straightaway result in finished breadwinners or marriageable daughters’ (*ASTB*, 41).

involvement in an artificial manure-ring), Joe is quick to intervene: ‘No need to ask him what Number One is, we do not want lurid descriptions of vice or anything at all in that line. Use your imagination...’ (TP, 30). A more Catholic sophistry emerges in response to Pluck’s story about the female teacher riding around on a ‘male’ bicycle: ‘Of course the teacher was blameless, she did not take pleasure and did not know...’ (TP, 92). O’Nolan’s sexual pun is blatant enough in itself, but it is dragged to a nonsensical conclusion in the narrator’s dalliance with Pluck’s bicycle. The result is an odd couple worthy of Edward Lear and more reminiscent of nonsense literature, which generally only accommodates love and sex in peculiar Owl-and-Pussycat combinations, than it is of strategies of self-censorship. Hopper points out that this boy-meets-bicycle affair is conducted in ‘the language of male domination and female submission’, but the nonsensical coupling itself subverts this discourse. O’Nolan’s ambiguous comedy is reminiscent of Lecercle’s argument that Victorian nonsense is ‘one of the vectors of Victorian ideology’ while still having a non-committal, politically indeterminate quality. The confluence of Joyce, Beckett and Brian O’Nolan in early twentieth-century Ireland (a trio as fond of riddles as Policeman MacCruiskeen and friends) is a curiosity comparable to the appearance of nonsense writing in Victorian England. In O’Nolan’s case, the social and psychological profile of the Victorian nonsense writer fits curiously well (as far as these things do); the more pertinent question is whether his own form of nonsense bears an analogous relationship to Irish culture.

The Irish Circle of Hell

Admittedly, it should be hoped that The Third Policeman is not set in Ireland, since its narrator is set wandering through an eerie afterlife. However, the novel’s structure gave O’Nolan plenty of scope to create an uncanny but familiar landscape (which a student of German like himself might have considered unheimlich), an estranged and slightly surreal version of Ireland. Noting the ‘same unchanging sameness’ (TP, 163)

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62 Interestingly, Tigges notes that sexual matters are generally absent from nonsense literature. An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense, p. 98.
65 Hopper, Flann O’Brien, p. 96.
of the landscape in *The Third Policeman*, Anthony Cronin posits that O’Nolan’s hell ‘is situated somewhere near Tullamore’\(^64\) where he spent some years as a child. Its landscape is recognisably Irish, almost farcically so, dotted as it is with turfcutters and tinkers:

> 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 yellow-brown-yellow water. Far away near the sky tiny people were stooped at their turfwork, cutting out precisely-shaped sods with their patent spades and building them into a tall memorial twice the height of a horse and cart. (*TP*, 88)

As in the passage quoted earlier, O’Nolan draws attention to the contrived nature of the scene, adding a house with ‘a canopy of lazy smoke... erected over the chimney to indicate that people were within’. At this point in the narrative, Sergeant Pluck has been disturbing the narrator with his atomic theory, and the latter admits that though ‘The scene was real and incontrovertible and at variance with the talk of the Sergeant... I knew that the Sergeant was talking the truth and if it was a question of taking my choice, it was possible that I would have to forego the reality of all the simple things my eyes were looking at’ (*TP*, 89). The irony is that his curiously stilted description has already undermined the reality of this scene, with or without conscious intent. Many critics have noted how such passages operate metafictionally, drawing attention both to the fact that this is a place contrived for the narrator’s punishment and to its status as a fictional text.\(^65\) (The former might be the more convincing interpretation, given that the description of turf-cutting reads more like grave-digging, with the sods being stacked into ‘a tall memorial’.) However, such passages also anticipate the artificiality and predictability of the landscape in *An Béal Bocht*, where an unseen hand is responsible for the unhappy situation of the Gaels:

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\(^64\) Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p. 105.

We lived in a small, lime-white, unhealthy house, situated in a corner of the glen on the right-hand side as you go eastwards along the road. Doubtless, neither my father nor any of his people before him built the house and placed it there... If there were a hundred corners in all that glen, there was a small lime-white cabin nestling in each one and no one knows who built any of them either. It has always been the destiny of the true Gaels (if the books be credible) to live in a small, lime-white house in the corner of the glen as you go eastwards along the road and that must be the explanation... (PM, 16-18).

In parodying Tomás Ó Críomhthainn’s *An t-Oileánach* and other tales of the Gaeltacht marketed for their authenticity, O’Nolan wrote a book which presents Irishness on stilts. Bónáptár Ó Cúnasa is the wholly artificial product of the ‘good Gaelic books’ (PM, 16) of Irish life, which themselves had become formulaic. *The Third Policeman* inches towards the technique of *An Béal Bocht*, presenting an Ireland which has already become estranged to itself. This never develops into a consistently satirical or parodic mode – the digressive and aimless nature of its nonsense narrative ensures that much – but it is a significant force behind O’Nolan’s self-reflexive nonsense method. The self-consciousness of *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be largely attributed to a revivalist literary culture which had spent too long deliberating over the premises of Irish literature (so that writing an Irish novel now meant writing an ‘Irish’ novel). *The Third Policeman* does not engage with the question to the same degree, but it carefully inserts those quotation marks.

Compared to much contemporary Irish fiction, such as the short stories of rural life which were being published by O’Faoláin, O’Connor and O’Flaherty, *The Third Policeman*’s ‘Irishness’ is relatively low key, almost incidental. There are no comic rural dialects; the narrator’s speech has only a subtle touch of local flavour:

‘Now look here till I tell you... robbery and murder are against the law and furthermore my life would add little to your own because I have a disorder in my chest and I am sure to be dead in six months. As well as that, there was a question of a dark funeral in my teacup on Tuesday. Wait till you hear a cough.’ *(TP, 48-9)*
It might be argued that O’Nolan was simply more familiar with the cadences of the Dublin man than with those of the comic culchie, but even broad comic characters like the policemen escape the usual clichés. Instead, *The Third Policeman* replaces conventional stage-Irishness with the clockwork diction of a Free State civil servant, though that clockwork has gone wildly astray: “‘A constituent man,” said the Sergeant, “largely instrumental but volubly fervous’” (*TP*, 84). Pluck’s admiration for MacCruiskeen can find no higher expression than to describe him as ‘a comical man... a walking emporium, you’d think he was on wires and worked with steam’ (*TP*, 78), while the narrator admits, following his surprise meeting with Mathers, that ‘Words spilled out of me as if they were produced by machinery...’ (*TP*, 27). Certainly, both policemen embody Bergson’s theory that speech and actions are comical to the degree that they are mechanical and automatic, but they are also state functionaries gone haywire. This is Chaplin’s *Modern Times* transplanted to a rural Irish parish, where an abstract concept like eternity is really a contraption worked by a machine. While O’Nolan’s mechanical fantasies seem incongruous in the Irish context, they prevent *The Third Policeman* from simply regurgitating clichés about rural eccentricity and are another reminder that the sources of O’Nolan’s inspiration were rarely confined to 1930s Ireland. The intertextual traces of *The Third Policeman* bear the marks of O’Nolan’s characteristic eclecticism, but while it is not a deliberately Irish novel in any conventional sense (and the words are well chosen), interestingly it exploits the same incongruity between the fantasies of a well-stocked mind and day-to-day banality that marks *At Swim-Two-Birds*. But in *The Third Policeman*, it is the ‘ordinary’ world which is made strange, to the point where it has become alienating (and was perhaps always so); the eeriness of the policemen’s station depends on a sense that we have not strayed very far from home.

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67 Seamus Deane finds a similar quality in *Cruiskeen Lawn* characters like Keats and Chapman and *The Plain People of Ireland*: ‘It is the predictability and the strangeness of their discourse that make it both
What is terrifying in O’Nolan’s novel is not the murder which sets the plot into action (Mathers’s demise is coldly and meaninglessly comic), but the surreal ordinariness of what follows. The narrator may be horrified by Mathers’s eccentric ghost, but ironically Mathers poses no threat. Only as he penetrates farther into this picture-perfect landscape, to a rural police station where there is little more than bicycle theft to preoccupy the local bobbies, is the narrator’s deadpan delivery strained to its limits. ‘Hugh Maxton’ has compared the chilling terseness of Daniil Kharms’s absurd sketches to *The Third Policeman*’s impersonal prose: ‘In terms of grammar, the passive voice can rarely if ever have been used to such a violent effect, sublimated into a coerced ‘normalcy’ though that effect might be’. Nonsense texts are adept at evoking a sense of coercion in normality, as if their derangement was a side-effect of the psychological violence in making sense, and given the unnatural quality of the policemen’s parish - the fact that it is a mechanical dystopia contrived by Policeman Fox – the touches of naturalism make the setting all the more disturbing. Aside from the metaphorical function of bicycles in the text, the policemen’s preoccupation with them is not that odd, given that they were the main mode of transport in rural Ireland – neither is Pluck’s frustration with the county council or the paternal attitude he assumes towards his tiny community. When the narrator is pushed to express suitable concern at the destruction wreaked by the atomic theory, his reflex response is nicely judged: ‘Would it be advisable... that it should be taken in hand by the Dispensary Doctor or by the National Teachers or do you think it is a matter for the head of the family?’ (*TP*, 85). His pained civility in the face of a delicate matter is all the more convincing for its conventional deference to the local hierarchy. At times like this, the narrator’s voice shades into parody worthy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Given his predecessor in *At Swim*, it should be no surprise that the vague and naive tone which he adopts in the opening chapter carries echoes of a sheaf of *faux naïf* literary accounts of Irish childhoods, ranging from the Blasket autobiographies to Joyce’s *A Portrait*. With regard to the latter, it is perhaps significant that the little the narrator familiar and alienated. In the pervasive banality that suffuse all, the surreal lurks...’. *Strange Country*, p. 160.


69 O’Nolan must have liked the joke since he retained it verbatim in *The Dalkey Archive* (DA, 75).
says about his father includes an observation that ‘on Saturdays... he would mention Parnell with the customers and say that Ireland was a queer country’ (TP, 7). If the country that disgraced Parnell is a strange one (assuming the father’s sympathies are those of Simon Dedalus), then the oddity of *The Third Policeman* truly represents it in all its peculiarity. It does this in a curiously thorough fashion, however. Like the *Alice* books, *The Third Policeman* turns the rational world upside down, but in a way that only exposes its logical patterns all the more. The narrator’s sanity depends on his ability to realise that what passes for common sense in this parallel Ireland is only a raving logic shared by a whole community; the challenge he sets himself in attempting to outwit the policemen is simply to manipulate a new set of absurd social mores. The narrator even learns to abandon any notion of an empirical, objective reality (as de Selby might advise, given that life is an hallucination (*TP*, 5)). Here, as Joe observes, everything is a matter of convention: ‘*Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed*’ (*TP*, 88).

Although the novel is set at a vague point in time, it is likely that it inhabits the same period as Joyce’s early work: post-Parnell but pre-Independence. The action of the narrative could arguably be based on 1930s Ireland if the narrator’s youth coincided with that of O’Nolan (born in 1911), but this would not explain why Pluck would refer to parliament, rather than to the Dáil (*TP*, 80), or why he is a policeman rather than a guard or garda. Pluck’s story about Quigley, the man who sailed away in a balloon and whose neighbours interrogated him with pokers and shotguns, further suggests a setting earlier than the Free State: ‘That is a nice piece of law and order for you, a terrific indictment of democratic self-government, a beautiful commentary on Home Rule’ (*TP*, 165). If *The Third Policeman* belongs to the twilight years of pre-independence Ireland, then Anthony Cronin is surely right in his suggestion that its monotonous hell lies somewhere near Tullamore, as O’Nolan’s family were in the midlands at that time. Arguably, however, the novel’s atmosphere is closer to that of the Free State; the historical vagueness of the policemen’s country is appropriately disorientating, exaggerating the sense that wherever we are, it is not quite home. It is the balance of strangeness and familiarity in the environment described that is so
disquieting, the more so since *The Third Policeman* implies that rural Ireland is a convincing substitute for hell. Admittedly, this particular circle or cycle of hell is tailored to the narrator’s personal circumstances; since his crime was committed in the grand name of intellectual inquiry, he is stranded in a hell stuffed with imponderables. But it is a curious coincidence that *The Third Policeman* was written around the same time that Sartre and Camus were publishing their first novels, so even this simple conceit had an odd topicality about it. A decade later, this idiosyncratic version of a psychological hell resurfaced in Myles na gCopaleen’s contribution to existentialist thought, ‘Mylesexistentialism’, which he conceived as a counterpoint to all utopian philosophies: ‘I want to upset once for all this luciferian aberration and state boldly that we are all in hell, or in something so near it as makes no matter’. Perhaps that remark betrays the voice of the depressive alcoholic more than anything else. But whatever about the indeterminate setting of *The Third Policeman*, this apocalyptic gloominess might be regarded as wholly of its time in late 1939, when the novel was being written.

**Modern Times: Men, Machines and Mad Scientists**

There is a strange parallel between the timing of *The Third Policeman* and Beckett’s *Watt*, composed in wartime France but also set at some indistinct period, in some place near Dublin. The following could easily have been written of O’Nolan’s novel:

> …this is a country and a capital seen from a long way off, and seen both as existing a long time ago, long before this war with its terrors and violent upheavals, and yet also belonging to a set of conditions which can be said to belong to no particular time or place at all. These conditions are the ones which Beckett made his own territory, the world of the mind confronted with an irrational universe, a world of horror as disturbing in its way as the real world in which the writer was living.

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70 Jean-Paul Sartre *La Nausée* (1938) and Albert Camus *L’Étranger* (1942). As Tigges notes: ‘the “peaks” of nonsense writing and these other types of literature in the twentieth century can be seen to be complementary…’. *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, p. 236.

71 *CL* (22 December 1950); cited in Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 151.

Admittedly, the irrational universe depicted in *The Third Policeman* is hardly ‘a world of horror’ to rival the tortures Beckett concocts for characters and readers alike. Indeed, Joyce declared *Murphy* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which were published within a year of each other, to be as alike as ‘the devil and holy water’. In another bout of antithetical neatness, he characterised them as ‘Jean qui pleure’ and ‘Jean qui rit’, but there is a certain kinship between Beckett and O’Nolan, if only one that serves to reveal each writer more distinctly. The correspondences between nonsense and the absurd have been noted by various critics; the distinction Tigges draws between the two is that in nonsense ‘language creates a reality, in the absurd, language represents a senseless reality’. In his words, the absurd conveys meaninglessness, where nonsense avoids a total absence of meaning; it admits anguish, where nonsense is resolutely unemotional.

Keith Hopper finds common ground between *Watt* and *The Third Policeman* in their metafictional aspects and ‘shared concepts of relativity and language’. However, he regards their ‘solipsist protagonists’ as being on a journey that takes them from Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian thought and a God-centred universe towards post-modernist relativity. The correspondences between Beckett’s and O’Nolan’s fiction are certainly suggestive, if a little more superficial than this. They share protagonists who are distinguished by their helpless passivity,* Murphy’s flight to an asylum compares to the latent fascination with the themes of madness and withdrawal in *At Swim*, the cyclical futility played out in *Watt* and *Waiting for Godot* is anticipated in a more genially comic form in *The Third Policeman* and *An Béal Se*. 

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76 Ibid., p. 130.  
78 Ibid., p. 264.  
79 George O’Brien sketches O’Nolan’s breed well: ‘The typical O’Brien protagonist allows experience to occur, rather than canvass the occurrence, and he has no ‘idea’ of what experience ‘means’. He is simplicity itself and the equal of whatever comes his way... He is nothing more than his presence, which gives him an air of placidity and desirelessness. He is able to stare at the hollowness formulaic thinking leaves in its wake, without formulating it. And the worst thing he can do is pursue knowledge.’ ‘Flann O’Brien’, *Cambridge Quarterly* 7:1 (1976), p. 88.
Bocht (where Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa, who miserably fulfills the literary destiny of the Gael, ends up replacing his father in prison). As Wim Tigges argues:

That *The Third Policeman* is... a nonsense is partly because no clear “message”... is explicitly conveyed, but mainly because in the whole of the novel a constant shifting and reshifting of perspectives takes place, and a balance between various polarities is kept up. Because the world is circular, cyclic, all the hopes and fears, the beauties and the cruelties, being and non-being, men and bicycles, remain in a perennially static balance.\(^{80}\)

A similarly precarious balance is maintained in Beckett’s fiction, one that is almost set into play with the see-saw of Murphy’s rocking-chair. A self-reflexive attention to language and logic, a preoccupation with inertia and indecision is common to both writers, who repeatedly produced texts that turned back on themselves. However, while the allusive and philosophical nature of Beckett’s early novels begs elucidation, O’Nolan’s comedies play on the surface of things. Contrasting Beckett with a fellow comic modernist, Wyndham Lewis, Hugh Kenner suggested that ‘the great Irish writers... have always been able to regard a human dilemma as essentially an epistemological, not an ethical, comedy’.\(^{81}\) It is debatable whether this is even true of *Ulysses*, but nevertheless it has a certain validity for *The Third Policeman*. The novel is – if only superficially - an epistemological comedy; its ordering principle not the bitter ethical laugh, but perhaps the hollow intellectual laugh, the kind which ‘laughs at that which is not true’.\(^{82}\) But *The Third Policeman* is not (or not consciously) as intellectually playful and self-aware as *Watt*; whatever O’Nolan’s prodigious talents, he was no philosophical Beckett.\(^{83}\) It is more likely that the strange parallels between such different texts is a consequence of their emergence from a particular historical and intellectual environment, to which they responded in very different ways.\(^{84}\) It

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\(^{80}\) Tigges, ‘Ireland in Wonderland’ in *The Clash of Ireland*, p. 208.


\(^{83}\) As he was quite ready to admit. In a letter to Con Leventhal he growled that: 'I sent a copy of *The Dalkey Archive* to Beckett but heard nothing from him. This bugger thinks he's a saint now, or something.' (22 March 1965), SIUC.

\(^{84}\) O’Nolan’s friend, Niall Montgomery, wrote of *Watt* that ‘...the dialogue of the railway officials at the end of the book is accurate Dublin, as first noted by Joyce, and subsequently orchestrated, in *At Swim-Two-
would be tempting, but facile, to lump the recursive *Watt* and *The Third Policeman* together as symptoms of the infamous cultural inertia of the Free State (as reductive as to equate *Murphy* with *At Swim-Two-Birds*, simply for its satire of revivalism). The common elements between the novels are more likely to have arisen from the strange conglomeration of modernism, philosophical pessimism, the 'new physics' and the looming presence of war which were all part of the intellectual currency of the 1930s. As Lois Gordon notes, among the most hotly-debated publications in Dublin while Beckett was in Trinity College were those on the new science of relativity: 'An enormous amount of work in the new mathematics and quantum physics was being published and publicized at the same time that science was being reevaluated as an instrument of human destruction'. In satirising contemporary hypotheses about the nature of space and time, both spurious and otherwise, *The Third Policeman* shows a predictable defensiveness towards such disturbing speculation. Admittedly, de Selby fits the pattern of relatively harmlessly eccentrics that O’Nolan had established with Brother Barnabas and Dermot Trellis; it is not until the post-war *Dalkey Archive* that the mad scientist is identified with mass destruction. But the original de Selby represents a more insidious threat, one which the moral structure of *The Third Policeman* is poised to defuse.

It is telling that *The Dalkey Archive* twins the evil genius, De Selby with James Joyce; in his 1951 *Envoy* essay on Joyce, O’Nolan had contrived a comparison between his predecessor and another ambitious over-reacher:

> Both had other names, the one Stephen Dedalus, the other Lucifer... Both started off very well under unfaultable teachers, both had a fall. But they differed on one big, critical issue. Satan never denied the existence of the Almighty; indeed he


86 The most disturbing aspect of Trellis’s character is his rape of Sheila Lamont, but it is debatable how seriously this is presented in the novel; the information is related with a throwaway air and it is, at least, perfectly designed to undercut his status as propounder of clean literature.
acknowledged it by challenging merely His primacy. Joyce said there was no God, proving this by uttering various blasphemies and obscenities and not being instantly struck dead.87

To the contemporary Catholic, like O’Nolan himself, the modern physicist arguably did nothing less. But in O’Nolan’s eyes, Joyce was still a Catholic writer (albeit with the Jesuit strain injected the wrong way), one who used humour ‘to attenuate the fear of those who have belief and who genuinely think that they will be in hell or in heaven shortly, and possibly very shortly. With laughs he palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic’.88 This same deterministic doom is at the heart of The Third Policeman’s satire of the follies of scientists and philosophers. Anthony Cronin describes O’Nolan, like most contemporary Irish Catholics, as being ‘a medieval Thomist in his attitude to many things, including scientific speculation and discovery’:

For the Thomist all the great questions have been settled and the purpose of existence is clear. There is only one good, the salvation of the individual soul; and only one final catastrophe, damnation… Thus, all secular knowledge is largely a joke. And science and philosophy are even more of a joke inasmuch as they pretend to hold out a hope that the end result of their enquiries will be to reveal something about the mystery of existence or to affect the balance of good and evil. All scientists are, to some extent, mad scientists…89

Arguably, the popular image of the (mad) scientist as a wild-haired Einstein shows that such reservations were not peculiar to the mid-century Irish Catholic. Nevertheless, it is interesting how O’Nolan inflects modern science in The Third Policeman in a manner that ultimately re-establishes the traditional universe. Charles Kemnitz has argued that the novel stages a conflict between Newtonian physics and

88 Ibid., p. 20.
89 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, pp. 104-105. Interestingly, among O’Nolan’s library (now held in Boston College) is Roland Knox’s God and the Atom (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), a book that sought to reconcile contemporary science with Christianity.
the science of relativity, but little is ever so clear and deliberate in O’Nolan’s fiction. However, *The Third Policeman* certainly makes strategic use of J. W. Dunne’s idiosyncratic physics in *The Serial Universe*, the book - along with *An Experiment With Time* - that provided the means by which contemporary science was disseminated to O’Nolan’s circle. In *The Serial Universe* - which for example, describes atoms as ‘little round things like billiard balls’ - Dunne manages a scientific explanation for nothing less than eternal life. The key, he indicates, is to admit that a rational science must factor the observer into the phenomena observed.

The regression then implied by a self-conscious observer means that ‘we are faced with what is, for all empirical purposes, a serial world.’ Viewing experience through time allows a suitably regressive mode of description, but:

> All talk about ‘death’ or ‘immortality’ has reference to time, and is meaningless in any other connection. But a time-system is a regressive system, and it is only in the lop-sided first term of that regress that death makes its appearance... in second-term time (which gives the key to the whole series) we individuals have curious – very curious – beginnings, but no ends.

For Dunne, immortality exists in ‘second-term time’ since it is only in the second term of a simple series in which the series itself is revealed. And this infinite time regression exists in a fourth dimension, which is presumably where souls and places like Pluck’s police station are given a home. In this way, Dunne neutralises...
contemporary science for the Christian believer, appropriating it to prove the existence of a God and an afterlife. These contortions are replicated in *The Third Policeman*; though littered with images of serialism and regression (such as MacCruiskeen’s chests), and generally adopting the amoral and inconsequential progression of the nonsense text, it also adapts Dunne’s fairly dubious science to a Christian morality tale.95

As a nonsense novel, *The Third Policeman* is as far from a conventional murder mystery as it is from a mystery play, but the narrator is in one sense the unenlightened everyman, his worldly greed (expressed in the drive to find the black box) distracting him from his true spiritual condition. Indeed, the setting of the novel combines the Catholic purgatory with a Dantesque hell, a place where ‘The dead and the damned are doomed to go round and round, never remembering precisely who they are and why they are there.’96 But the novel is also a paranoiac’s dream (or nightmare), with its narrator as the victim of hidden maleficent forces. Ironically, Hugh Kenner has suggested an analogy between the narrator’s adventures in wonderland and the experiences of the contemporary Irish Catholic whose Church was:

...a hidden order you can view as malign or beneficent but certainly as arbitrary, indeed machine-like; with a sort of bureaucracy, a loose division of functions, a mysterious busy-ness, a tradition of arcane logic, and an odd way of spoiling itself on human contact.97

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95 Interestingly, in *Cruiskeen Lawn* O’Nolan exhibited a characteristic scepticism towards contemporary science, though one that betrayed his own religious orthodoxy: ‘The ’science of theoretical physics’ is not a science but a department of speculation... Insofar as it purports to be concerned with investigating the causation of life according to rational criteria, it is sinful’ (FC, 98).

96 Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 66.

97 Hugh Kenner, ‘The Fourth Policeman’ in *Conjuring Complexities*, p. 70. However, he does admit ‘...the absurdity of any attempt to interpret’ the text in allegorical terms, p. 69. In contrast, Cronin argues that, as a successor to *At Swim*, this novel betrayed ‘an anxiety on its author’s part to show that he could write a work which contained an important inner meaning, which was in fact “profound”’. The usual device of those who wish to do that is allegory. ‘Flann O'Brien: The Flawed Achievement’, in *Heritage Now* (Dingle: Brandon, 1982), p. 210. But he considers it a failure as an allegory, littered with ‘a Faustian theme’, ‘an exploration of guilt and retribution’ and possibly ‘an allegory about man and the machine’ - in other words, it was still impossible to say exactly what *The Third Policeman* might mean.
Admittedly, this 'hidden order' could be as easily identified with the legal system, or the civil bureaucracy, or any number of contemporary institutions. The narrator is not only the victim of an unfathomable bureaucracy, in the style of Kafka's Josef K.; the frequent allusions to invisible mechanics throughout the text ('the earth was agog with invisible industry' (TP, 129)) imply that he is only a cog in a pitiless machine. Whether or not O’Nolan was aware of it, this brand of modernist pessimism sits a little uneasily with the conventional Christian morality of The Third Policeman, although the clash is well illustrated in the notion of setting a mechanical dystopia in a rural Irish parish.

However, O’Nolan’s species of existential angst is rather superficial. Anne Clissmann notes some cosmetic similarities between The Third Policeman and the theatre of the absurd, in particular a common motif of circularity, but she attributes O’Nolan’s source for this to Celtic tales of the otherworld. Certainly, O’Nolan’s summary of The Third Policeman as ‘Hell goes round and round’ is closer to the cycles of death and rebirth in the Celtic tradition (its art laden with spirals and cycles as images of eternity) than to Catholic doctrine. In the otherworld stories which O’Nolan studied in UCD, a journey is commonly used to symbolise the life of the soul. The passage where the narrator is guided to eternity by Pluck most clearly illustrates how O’Nolan combined all these elements in a contemporary morality tale. It is wholly within the tradition of otherworld stories that he should place the entrance to eternity down a country lane, accessible to any traveller. Equally, it is typical of his incongruous combinations – in this case, of pagan and Christian concepts of the afterlife - that the actual entrance seems to be through a church:

The structure looked exactly like the porch of a small country church. The darkness and the confusion of the branches made it hard for me to see whether there was a

99 Author's note, reprinted in TP, p. 207.
101 Keith Hopper draws parallels between The Third Policeman and the medieval epic Imran Maile Duin/ The Voyage of Maeldoon. Flann O'Brien, p. 235. The Voyage of Maeldoon inspired the sequence in Hunger-stack mountain in An Béal Bocht.
102 ‘At times the otherworld is conceptualized as coterminous with the world of experience, as existing parallel to the Ireland known to mortals, but in another plane; the two worlds are permeable at special locations and special times.’ Maria Tymoczko, The Irish Ulysses (California: Berkeley, 1994), pp. 180-181.
larger building at the rear... The door was an old brown door with ecclesiastical hinges and ornamental ironwork... This was the entrance to eternity. (TP, 132)

And just to confuse matters, once the narrator enters eternity (through a kind of elevator) it is revealed to be no more than a mechanical device – a physicist’s fantasy worthy of de Selby, perhaps even the apocryphal machine of perpetual motion. In effect, O’Nolan’s eclecticism allows three worlds to collide in The Third Policeman: Celtic paganism, Christianity, and their latest rival, secular science.

Nevertheless, like At Swim-Two-Birds, this novel exposes an omnipotent character behind the scenes pulling the strings (so perhaps this is a theocratic universe). But At Swim’s student narrator is as hollow a creator as his protegé, Dermot Trellis, assembling his novel from odds and ends of other works. Individuality is rendered as questionable a notion as originality in a novel where ‘aestho-autogamy’ (the reproductive process which immediately results in ‘finished breadwinners’ (ASTB, 41)) anticipates the assembly-line fate of the student narrator and his friends. The Third Policeman treads over the same ground, although here the narrator (also nameless) is confronted with an unintelligible universe that is immune to romantic or religious notions of the worth of the individual.¹⁰³ Both At Swim and The Third Policeman are vast jokes on mass-produced fiction - and mass-produced men. While it is no compliment to observe that Irish art is the ‘cracked lookingglass of a servant’,¹⁰⁴ it is worse to then add, as At Swim’s Brinsley did, that ‘Slaveys... were the Ford cars of humanity; they were created to a standard pattern by the hundred thousand’ (ASTB, 32). Just to press the point home, the sight of the servant’s mass-produced corset which inspired this reflection causes Trellis to pun at the close of the novel that ‘Ars est celare artem’ (ASTB, 216), advice which the student narrator has, of course, sedulously ignored. The undercurrent of mechanical reproduction in At Swim (which has its linguistic equivalent in the cliché, so abused in Cruiskeen Lawn), is carried

¹⁰³ Or so it seems - this is part of the contradictory nature of the text. As it turns out, this whole universe has been concocted for the narrator’s benefit.
through to the weirdly mechanical universe of *The Third Policeman*, where as the molecule theory proves, men are mostly half machine.

Indeed, there is nothing specifically Catholic or Christian in the fear of ignorance which the novel exploits, a horror of an almost *lethal* lack of self-awareness. While *The Third Policeman* might be read as a moral fable of crime and punishment, it also plays off more particularly modern(ist) anxieties about the power and position of the individual. It is hard not to hear the god-like satisfaction of the clerk in Pluck’s voice when he demolishes the narrator’s defence against a charge of murder. The latter protests that he cannot be prosecuted since he does not have a name:

‘For that reason alone,’ said the Sergeant, ‘we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at the best) only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralized and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of the spinal string...’ *(TP, 105)*

O’Nolan has mischievously hidden the novel’s central truth in Pluck’s sophistry - since the narrator is literally ‘a piece of negative nullity’, he’s not worth hanging. And in a fashion typical of nonsense texts, *The Third Policeman* allows legal fictions a literal truth; the narrator’s lack of a legal personality betrays the fact that he doesn’t exist at all. Like the characters of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he can easily be written out of existence: ‘If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on you although they look as if they were from where I am sitting...’ *(TP, 64)*. While this notion may be attributed to long familiarity with civil service bureaucracy, ultimately a contextual reading of *The Third Policeman* - one that inches it towards satire - cannot wholly account for the formalist tendency of its comedy, in other words, for its nonsense preoccupation with logic and its own nature as a literary text. For example, while the footnotes on de Selby’s life and work also satirise scientific and academic discourse, in the end they self-reflexively emphasise the unreliability of the *literary* text. Tracking the main narrative in all chapters except
one, six and ten, the footnotes usurp it altogether in chapters eight, nine and eleven, transforming a minor textual distraction into a major textual disruption. Though these digressions are initially inspired by events in the main narrative, in the latter chapters the narrative impetus shifts in the opposite direction, with ominous implications for the narrator. An early cautionary tale of textual unreliability is de Selby’s discovery of some absent-minded doodles, which he interprets as intricate plans he once had for ‘roofless “houses” and “houses” without walls’ (TP, 22). Further on, the battle over de Selby’s Codex, an apocryphal manuscript of indeterminate meaning that attracts shadowy critics who may or may not exist, threatens to expose the true status of the narrator’s character. The Codex is in one sense only a parody of Joycean texts and their critics; one commentator reads it as ‘a penetrating treatise on old age’, another divines in the same passage ‘a not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm’ (TP, 150), and yet another dismisses the lot as ‘a repository of obscene conundrums, accounts of amorous adventures and erotic speculation’ (TP, 151). The critical discrepancies might be accounted for by the fact that none are working from the same (illegible) text, the Codex having a history as embattled as that of Ulysses:

…it is not likely that time or research will throw any fresh light on a document which cannot be read and of which four copies at least, all equally meaningless, exist in the name of being the genuine original. (TP, 151)

If this is to signify anything at all – aside from satirising Joyce and his critics - it is as an argument against interpretation. However, the battle over the Codex continues on into more curious territory. The debate between de Selbians over the status of the Codex escalates into armed warfare between critics who doubt that their adversaries really exist at all, each suspecting that the other is fuelling the critical industry by writing under a number of pseudonyms. O’Nolan converts the scholarly footnote (which typically supports the main text with citations or empirical data) into a

105 De Selby’s The Layman’s Atlas is also noted to have a spurious history (TP, 96). Lanters also draws a telling parallel between the Codex and Finnegans Wake. Unauthorized Verions, p. 226. Ironically, the resistance of the Codex to hermeneutics makes it an exemplary nonsense text.
nonsense counterpart whose digressions not only compete with the main narrative, but also indiscreetly question the very authority of authorship. Hence, this satire of academia also turns back on itself; after all, 'Flann O'Brien' is no more substantial (or trustworthy) an individual than de Selby and his cohorts. Whatever may be inferred from the characteristically eclectic elements that go to make up *The Third Policeman* – Einstein, Dunne and Bergson; Manichaean Catholicism and Charlie Chaplin, war and the atom – the novel's self-reflexive nonsense style ultimately protects it from too deliberate an interpretation. Up to a point, the novel may be read as a contemporary satire: it presents an estranged (yet recognisable) version of Ireland, an oddly monotonous hell where authority is wielded in a capricious fashion. However, its satire is relatively oblique and suggestive; the recursive nature of the nonsense text, its whimsical and arbitrary elements, ultimately unseat such neat readings. Perhaps the attraction for O’Nolan in creating de Selby was that the sage always proved an enigma to his critics. Indeed, *The Third Policeman* is a conundrum worthy of Policeman MacCruiskeen, as might be inferred by the degree - and variety - of criticism which the text has attracted, much like the nonsense genre itself. Nonsense, after all, is an impeccably evasive form; one which must be anathema to satirists, demagogues, and soap-box orators of all types. As Pluck advises the nameless narrator: ‘The first beginnings of wisdom... is to ask questions but never to answer any’ (*TP*, 62).
Chapter Four

Myles on the Irish Language: Cruiskeen Lawn and An Béal Bocht

In 1962, Vivian Mercier’s *The Irish Comic Tradition* announced itself as ‘the first sustained attempt to show that an unbroken comic tradition may be traced in Irish literature from approximately the ninth century down to the present day’.¹ Brian O’Nolan only just made it into this comic tradition (predominantly by virtue of *At Swim-Two-Birds*), since Mercier focused primarily on Irish texts less familiar to the contemporary reader, giving more cursory attention to ‘Anglo-Irish’ writing. However, of all his contemporaries, it is O’Nolan whose writing most clearly demands to be read in both contexts. Despite the example set by Mercier’s comparative study, O’Nolan’s writing in Irish has been largely ignored by his critics. What criticism there is of the Irish period of *Cruiskeen Lawn* or of *An Béal Bocht* (rather than its translation, *The Poor Mouth*) is mostly confined to an Irish-language readership.² But from 1940 to 1943, *Cruiskeen Lawn* was published predominantly in Irish, with English and Irish columns alternating from September 1941 to late 1943.³ O’Nolan’s satire of contemporary language politics (both in the column and *An Béal Bocht*), which challenged the image of the Irish language as the dead or dying repository of a rural folk culture, made an immediate impact. But despite its success, after 1943 O’Nolan rarely wrote in his first language. This chapter explores his neglected satire in Irish, examining how the language politics of the early 1940s complicated his relationship to the language. It would be misleading to cast O’Nolan as a writer who

³ No Irish material is mentioned in the few articles published on *Cruiskeen Lawn*: Miles Orvell and D. Powell, ‘Myles na Gopaleen: Mystic, Horse-doctor, Hackney Journalist and Ideological Catalyst,’ *Éire-Ireland* 10:2 (Summer 1975), 44-72; Steven Curran, ‘‘No, this is not from *The Bell*’’, *Éire-Ireland* 32:2-3 (1997), 78-92; Steven Curran, ‘Could Paddy leave off from copying just for five minutes: Brian O’Nolan’s 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* Anthology,’ *Éire-Ireland* 31:2 (Autumn/Winter 2001), 353-75. The degree to which the Irish material had been overlooked was betrayed by Steven Young when he asserted that ‘...the most significant change between the production of the 1940-45 columns and those after was Myles’s decision in 1946 to cut back from a daily column to one every other day...’ the change into another language apparently not being that important. ‘Fact/ Fiction: Cruiskeen Lawn, 1940-66,’ in *Conjuring Complexities*, p. 112.
effortlessly moved between two languages and two literatures; reading through the Irish period of *Cruiskeen Lawn* highlights his frustration with contemporary Irish writing and with attitudes to the Irish language (both on the part of committed revivalists and their detractors) which were wholly incompatible with his own conception of it as a modern, European language.

In the early 1940s, the image of the Irish language had already hardened into caricature: resented as something the state forced on its citizens, indelibly associated with nationalism, and regarded, by its supporters and detractors alike, to be in its death throes. Given that so much of O’Nolan’s comedy (both in the fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn*) played with parody and pastiche, mocking stereotypes and caricatures, it is curious that O’Nolan himself has sometimes been accused of perpetuating a negative image of the language. In 1989, Michael Cronin wrote that the ‘totemic image of the imaginary Gaeilgeoir’ born of ‘critiques of the unholy triad of nationalism, ruralism and Catholicism’ still haunted Irish speakers. More accurately, it still haunted the English speaker who associated the language with the ‘Irish Dark Ages’ (post-Free State and pre-Whitaker). This emblem, he pointedly remarked, had found its most trenchant expression in *An Béal Bocht*. In 1991, Myles na gCopaleen was again dragged into the fray when Éamon Ó Ciosáin challenged a new study of the language revival, pessimistically entitled *The Death of the Irish Language*. Its author, Reg Hindley, had argued that the principle factors in the decline of Irish in the nineteenth century were economic rather than political, and he drew attention to the cynicism that a largely middle-class enthusiasm for language revival generated in economically-depressed Gaeltacht communities. Ó Ciosáin accused him of reiterating a ‘conservative consensus’ which presented colonial oppression as liberal economics, casting the (doomed) language as a natural casualty of modernisation:

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4 Michael Cronin, ‘The Imaginary Gaeilgeoir,’ *Graph* 6 (Summer 1989), p. 16.
5 Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 212-213. Ó Ciosáin argued that Hindley’s image of middle-class language enthusiasts invading a working-class Gaeltacht was too simplistic, pointing to class differences within the Gaeltacht itself and considerable support for the Irish language in urban, working-class areas. Hindley’s revivalists are idle dreamers, Ó Ciosáin’s are pragmatists, sensitive to the economic situation of the Gaeltacht. *Buried Alive: A Reply to The Death of the Irish Language* (Baile Átha Cliath: Dáil Uí Cadhain, 1991), pp. 9-11.
Hindley can... be classified in another conservative consensus – that of stereotyped versions of the Irish language movement itself. He casts the movement as it has traditionally been depicted by Myles na Gopaleen, laying stress on nationality, spirituality, folklore and other considerations which were and are far from feeding the people of the Gaeltacht.⁶

So, far from liberating Irish from its association with the ‘baby-brained dawnburst brigade’,⁷ as O’Nolan periodically claimed to have done, in some eyes his satire contributed to the woolly-jumpered caricature of the Irish language which arguably maintains today. However, as numerous correspondents to The Irish Times pointed out in the 1940s, the attractions of O’Nolan’s writing provided a natural incentive for learning Irish which the state-sponsored revival never achieved. Perhaps it should be no surprise that his writing produced such contradictory effects, casting him both as a progressive champion of the language and as its conservative foe. It is worth remembering that while O’Nolan deplored the appropriation of Irish to a nationalist agenda, he was equally scathing about those who dismissed the language on the grounds of its political or cultural associations:

It is common knowledge that certain categories of Irish speakers are boors. They (being men) have nun’s faces, wear bicycle clips continuously, talk in Irish only about ceist na teangan and have undue confidence in Irish dancing as a general national prophylactic... Hence, some self-consciously intellectual citizens are anxious to avoid being suspected of knowing Irish owing to the danger of being lumped with the boors. There is, however, a non-sequitur there. A knowledge of Irish does not necessarily connote adherence to the social, cultural or political philosophies of any other Irish speaker.⁸

O’Nolan did not single-handedly create this caricature of the Irish speaker, but he was certainly one of its more successful proponents. However, as this passage shows, Cruiskeen Lawn also maintained that ‘the Irish speaker’ was not a species unto itself.

⁷ Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Seán O’Casey (13 April 1942), SIUC.
⁸ CL (23 April 1940), cited in Ó Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p. 81.
O’Nolan’s satire may have brilliantly encapsulated the conservative, ruralist bias of the language revival, but *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *An Béal Bocht* also proved that the Irish language movement had an alternative future.

Indeed, O’Nolan’s upbringing gave him an insider’s view of the language movement in the early years of the century. Though Irish was his first language, neither of his parents were native speakers. His father, Michael Nolan, was a part-time teacher for the Gaelic League whose brother, Fr Gearóid Ó Nualláin, was Professor of Irish in Maynooth. The family moved frequently throughout O’Nolan’s childhood, though never living in a Gaeltacht area, and yet Irish was maintained as the language of the household. English was used with their mother’s family, the Gormleys, and otherwise only with neighbours and strangers. Family holidays were spent in the Donegal Gaeltacht, but it is curious that though O’Nolan and his siblings were fluent in Irish, this fluency had its provenance in a *learned* language and it was not largely supported by contact with native speakers. When recalling his days as a student of modern Irish in UCD, O’Nolan claimed to have been surprised at the generally low standard of Irish spoken in the university, particularly by its most famous advocate, Douglas Hyde. Although some reviewers of *An Béal Bocht* levied similar criticisms at Myles na gCopaleen himself, though admittedly it was practically impossible at the time to produce a book in Irish without provoking one or another faction of the revival’s self-appointed grammarians. Ironically, the pedantry with which Myles na gCopaleen upbraided the English language and its abusers in *Cruiskeen Lawn* unconsciously echoed the rebarbative habits of the language revival’s literary critics. His multilingual wordplay, his attention to the perils of translation and his diatribes on the proper and precise use of language might be the preoccupations of a writer conscious of his craft. However, it is telling that the qualities which O’Nolan praised in Irish – its precision, flexibility and elegance – are noticeably aesthetic, serving to counterpoint the political or cultural virtues which were more usually associated with the language.

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It was in 1931 that O’Nolan began his literary career, and he did so as a bilingual writer. In the same year that he made his first (English) contributions to *Comhthrom Féinne*, he also produced the first of twenty Irish sketches which would appear intermittently in *The Irish Press* and *The Evening Telegraph and Evening Press* until the end of 1932.11 (Still at university, O’Nolan published more than half of these between June and August 1932.) While the comic strategies which he uses in these stories may anticipate the style of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the differences between them are also telling. Some of these sketches parody the style of the *Fiannaíocht* tales, as *At Swim-Two-Birds* would do, or create a nonsensical, topsy-turvey world where Irish is the common language of the country and English is in danger of extinction.12 However, overall they lack the satirical bite of *Cruiskeen Lawn* – perhaps when writing for Fianna Fáil’s *Irish Press*, O’Nolan was less inclined to attack the language revival and the Gaelic League than when he was with *The Irish Times*. On the other hand, these pieces are unusual among O’Nolan’s work since they are not written in the guise of any dramatic persona; no Myles assumes responsibility for them, or even a Brother Barnabas, but plain Brian Ó Nualláin.13 But already O’Nolan was playing with the form of the newspaper, as in ‘Mion-Tuairimi ár Sinnsir’, which is a report of some ancient manuscripts found in the National Library during re-building, and comprising a serious of polite but petty letters sent by outraged citizens (such as ‘Fionn Mac Cumhaill Mac A. Isl.’) to an ancient Gaelic newspaper.”* In ‘Teacht agus Imtheacht Shéadhin Bhuidhe’, a parody of a Fianna story is given a personal twist.15 As the Gaels attempt to prove the excellence of their literature to a Saxon visitor, they list

11 The first appeared on 10 November 1931. Five of these articles of these are reproduced in translation in MBM.
12 In ‘Díoltas ar Ghallaibh sa Bhliain 2032!’ (Revenge on an Englishman in 2032), *Irish Press* (18 January 1932), an English tourist of the future is left at the mercy of a vengeful translator in an Irish-speaking Ireland. The same joke appears in ‘Madraí an Gaedealtaítha’ (The dogs of the Gaeltacht), *Blather* 1:4 (Christmas 1934), 78, 83, in which English is said to have once been the common language of Ireland.
13 This was the only period in O’Nolan’s career when he consistently signed his own name, although he made two contributions to *Envoy* in the 1950s as ‘Brian Nolan’.
14 Brian ‘Léigheannta’ Ó Nualláin, ‘The Little Opinions of our Ancestors’, *Irish Press* (29 September 1932), 4. Another correspondent, ‘Anti-umbug’, protests against the compulsory teaching of English to children, since everyone knows it will be of no use when they leave the country.
masterpieces which sound as if they might have come from a student's copybook: ‘Yesterday and Today’, ‘Old and New’, ‘Night and Day’. The second of those titles, Sean agus Nua, was a bilingual short story collection produced by O’Nolan’s uncles. Apart from these articles, he also intermittently published Irish pieces in Comhthrom Féinne in the early 1930s. (One of these, ‘Glór an tStóraíocht’, employs his typical comic trick of inverting the positions of English and Irish, with Fionn MacCumhail claiming that English was the ancient language of the Gaels.) But in this early period, the story which most obviously anticipates the later work is ‘Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh’, published in March 1933 in Inisfáil, a short-lived London publication aimed at Irish emigrants. The story is a succinct parody of Gaeltacht autobiographies, almost a copy of An Béal Bocht in miniature. But in this version, the hero becomes so frustrated with his life on the bog that he asks his priest who created ‘an tir ocrach seo’ (this hungry land). Not God, the priest replies, but two Dublin writers. After Peadar dispatches the two with his double-barrelled shotgun, life on the bog becomes much more pleasant: ‘tá siopáil ar an phortach anois, agus tá bus-ticket agus cigarette agus daily mail le fagháil ann’ (‘now there are shops on the bog, where you can get bus tickets, and cigarettes, and the daily mail’). As the tale shows, in the early 1930s many of O’Nolan’s comic staples were already in place. And interestingly, whether or not it was written explicitly for Inisfáil, the story nicely dovetailed with the frustrations of its emigrant readership; in contrast, there is more playfulness than satire in the earlier Irish Press stories. When O’Nolan next returned to Irish with

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16 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 5.
18 Brian Ua Nualláin, ‘Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh’ (Peadar Dubh’s Journey), Inisfáil, 1:1 (March 1933), 63-64.
19 Ibid., p. 64. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified, and I am grateful to Mary and Gráinne English for checking their accuracy. Given that Peadar was born in a small, white-washed house in the corner of the glen (like An Béal Bocht’s Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa), it is ironic that the cover of Inisfáil itself drew on the same hackneyed imagery, its illustration showing a deserted west of Ireland landscape with a small, white-washed cottage in the corner of a glen.
20 Published in London ‘to maintain a sympathetic contact between Irishmen living abroad’, Inisfáil was a generous production of over a hundred pages, illustrated with colour plates of works by William Orpen, John Lavery and Paul Henry. The title recalled a Conradh na Gaeltige monthly which was published for Irish emigrants from 1904 to 1910. Where this gave accounts of League lectures and notices of its meetings, 1933’s Inisfáil was less concerned with organisation than with advertising the cultural health of the Free State. The twenty-one year old Brian Ó Nualláin was in good company; fellow contributors included L.A.G. Strong, Francis Stuart, Shan Bullock, Desmond Ryan, Leon Ó Broin, Stephen Gwynn and Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh.
Cruiskeen Lawn, his satire of the revival and its literature would gain more point from the context in which it was published – in a newspaper traditionally associated with an Anglo-Irish ethos.

It is arguable that in 1940, when O’Nolan began writing his irreverent Irish column, the language movement was on the brink of a minor renaissance that reflected a new attitude among his generation. This decade was marked by a number of initiatives among Irish speakers to modernise attitudes to the Irish language and to distance it from the conservatism represented by the Gaelic League. Breandán Ó Conaire argues that O’Nolan’s cynicism towards the old guard of the revival movement was quite representative of the time, pointing to the anti-fior Ghael tenor of Comhthrom Féinne in O’Nolan’s time, and to a surge of new Irish associations and periodicals in the 1940s which wrested dominance from the moribund Gaelic League. New journals such as Comhar, Feasta, Éire, Inniu, and An Glór matched publishing initiatives like Sairséal agus Dill and An Club Leabhar, and new organisations like Glun na Buaidhe and Ailteiri na hAiséirí. The movers behind these projects, like the new generation of writers such as Seán Ó Riordáin and Máirtín Ó Direáin, were ‘urban, intellectual to a degree and dissatisfied with what many of them regarded as a generation which was out-of-touch with the reality of modern Ireland’. However true this may be, it did not prevent O’Nolan turning his pen on some of the above. This new generation in the language revival continued the internecine fighting which characterised the older Gaelic League, and O’Nolan’s own contribution to this is detailed later in this chapter. Nevertheless, these revivalists largely recognised that the language revival had engendered an unhealthy amount of navel-gazing among Irish speakers. As Myles na gCopaleen, O’Nolan did more than any other Irish writer to demonstrate that Irish speakers might indeed extend their remit beyond the Irish language (death and revival

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21 By the 1940s, the Gaelic League was long past its peak. In 1922 there were 819 branches nationwide. Two years later, after the chaos of the civil war, only 139 remained. Hindley attributes much of the decline to the institutionalisation of the language revival, making voluntary effort seem less necessary. The Death of the Irish Language, p. 40.

of), even if they were ‘dairíribh i dtaobh na teanga’. O’Nolan refused to be confined in his first language to a ghetto of revivalism and nationalism, and in effect, acted as if the Irish language belonged to the mainstream of Irish life. His critics among revivalists showed more awareness of its vulnerability, but in the face of the regular keening for the language, O’Nolan’s attitude showed an encouraging assumption of its vitality.

His first Cruiskeen Lawn column, published on 4th October 1940, plunged Myles into the midst of Irish language politics, though of course, he immediately proved that he would not be serious about the language at all. The column was responding to a leader in The Irish Times which had questioned the state (and the desirability) of the language revival. Bertie Smyllie had queried the wisdom of the £2 grant, or deontas, which was awarded for each Irish-speaking child in a household since, he claimed, the Irish language was not adequately equipped to deal with modern life. An Irish speaker could not explain the current war to his child; a dinner-table discussion in the Irish language would be reduced to ‘requests for food or drink and other expressions of the elementary wants of life’. Before O’Nolan replied, the Times readers had their say on this provocation. One, taking ‘the patriotic view’, argued that the language was a necessity in Ireland, otherwise the Irish people would merely be an imitation of their neighbours. More alarmingly, to ensure the success of the revival, he proposed that Irish be made truly compulsory in all areas of Irish life. As earlier noted, Oscar Love appeared the following day, and showed a more acute understanding of what this position implied:

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23 The habitual anxiety expressed in Irish journals about whether the government was really ‘serious about the language’ was a favourite cliché of O’Nolan’s. One Cruiskeen Lawn took issue with the comical Irish in a Gaelic League notice: ‘Ní díoigh liom go bhfuil Comhradh na Gaedhilge dairíribh i dtaobh na Gaedhilge agus is eagal liom nach bhfuil an Ghaedhilg dairíribh i dtaobh an chonnartha. Ag maighd fhaoi n-a chéile atáid arəon...’! ‘I doubt whether the Gaelic League is serious about the Irish language and I’m afraid that the Irish language is not serious about the League. They’re making fun of each other...’ CL (18 December 1940).

24 The Irish Times (28 September 1940).

25 Seán Ua Dhuibhne, ibid. (1 October 1940).
I would remind him that patriotism is destroying Europe, and it may yet destroy Ireland... We cannot have faith in the strength and goodness of our own people if we possess no respect for the virtues of our neighbours.²⁶

The letter signalled an attitude which O’Nolan maintained throughout *Cruiskeen Lawn*: the Irish language was a good and necessary thing for Irish people; the political purposes it was often encouraged to serve, on the other hand, were dangerous and destructive. The first *Cruiskeen Lawn* was published the next day and took a more light-hearted approach to the issue. Myles took it upon himself to supply his Irish readers with a glossary of warfare (suggested interpretations of ‘Molotoff bread-basket’ were ‘*Manna Rúiseach*’, ‘*Rúiskeen Lawn*’, ‘*Feirín ó Stailín*’), but he also played the old-style revivalist by indicating that the pure, archaic nature of the language provided a natural barrier to unpleasantly bloodthirsty discussions at the breakfast-table:

If on and after tomorrow the entire *Irish Times* should be printed in Irish, there would not be a word about anything but food and drink. Those who find that they cannot do without ‘incendiary bombs’, ‘decontamination’, and the like, would have to get some other paper to accompany their ghoul’s breakfast. The Irish would be full of *caint na ndaoine... sean-fhocla* and *dánta direacha*, and would embody examples of *béarla féinne* and even *én-béarla* or bird dialect...²⁷

The revivalist argument that the Irish language was a bastion of purity and nationhood which would protect the Irish people from the depravity of modern European or American culture had always been farcical. Now that Ireland’s isolation really had been achieved, not by linguistic fiat but by political machinations in wartime, the aspiration was doubly ironic. After all, the revivalist ambition itself was a product of European romanticism, and as Oscar Love pointed out, there was an ominous similarity between the arguments of exclusivist nationalists and the tenor of contemporary European politics.

²⁶ Oscar Love, ibid. (3 October 1940).
²⁷ *CL* (4 October 1940).
As can be seen from *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O’Nolan’s instincts ran counter to this exclusivist trend. It is interesting that *At Swim* pointedly integrates not only aspects of European modernism and American popular culture, but also Irish-language classics. The novel recognises that the official respect afforded the Irish language (‘the real old stuff of the native land’ (*ASTB*, 75)) only emphasised its marginal position in Irish life and Irish culture. From the outset, O’Nolan distinguished himself from the public face of the language revival movement and for some, his controversial position was exacerbated by the fact that his column appeared in *The Irish Times*. Barely a month into *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s run, *The Standard* published the following ditty:

The Soupers and the Jumpers  
Had done their loathy best,  
With their Lutheran ersatz-bible  
Their Smyllie Homes and the rest,  
Ere a native anti-Irish chick  
Was bred in their Bird’s Nest...  
...A ridiculous little rodenticule,  
A wingless Irish bat,  
A cuckoo-mouse emerged, arrayed  
In Jimmy Agate’s hat  
Squeaking neo-Gaelic through  
The back of its head and that...  

This antagonism is remarkable since *Cruiskeen Lawn* was the first regular Irish column in the paper, at a time when Irish writing in any of the national dailies was

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28 ‘*Vinegar Eel*, *The Standard* (8 November 1940). On November 21th *The Irish Times* reported a debate held in Rathmines on the motion that: ‘the Anglo-Saxon element in Eire is detrimental to its well-being’. The motion was lost, but not without criticism of Myles na gCopaleen’s machinations in that paper: ‘...S. MacCoclainn, who spoke in the affirmative, said that the *Irish Times* had constantly opposed the revival of the Irish language, and the articles that now appeared in its columns in Irish were even more injurious. They constituted a menace and an attack perhaps more sinister than any that had yet appeared. Written in Irish, they were designed to prove the unsuitability, the inadequacy and the impracticality of the Irish language for modern needs. The scurrilous style in which they were written left the reader in no doubt of what was the ultimate object of the writer of those articles...’.
relatively rare. Admittedly, the mixed reception that greeted Cruiskeen Lawn was aggravated by O’Nolan’s surreptitious attempts to whip up a controversy over the column. He contributed under pseudonyms to a debate in the letters page which raged for the whole of October 1940. Oscar Love re-appeared, as did Lir O’Connor, who noted that ‘your little horseman... appears to take for granted the assumption that Irish is neither dying nor dead, but is, in fact, a vigorous, contemporary European language’. Another supporter went by the curious name of ‘Cóilín Ó Cuanaigh’, giving his address as 36 Parnell Square; the name belonged to one of Pádraic Ó Conaire’s characters and the address was that of the Gaelic League’s headquarters.

Cruiskeen Lawn’s critics tended to be sensitive to the vulnerability of the language and its revival; one wrote that an Irish column would be of interest if it ‘were on sensible topics and written by someone obviously not embittered... Fun and humour are to be welcomed in such a column, but there is no fun in hitting below the belt.’

The most vociferous complaint came from a self-styled ‘West-Briton-Nationalist’: ‘I have heard many adverse comments on Irish. But you are spewing on it.’ However, the reception was mostly positive; UCD’s Cumann Liteardha na Gaedhilge congratulated the paper on its venture on 30th October, and another correspondent welcomed it as a respite from the stuff of contemporary Irish literature:

Soon, perhaps, the bovine public will revolt, and shovel the coffins and the cabins, the ‘bad times’ and the ‘throubles’, the culture-market and the (accidentally-irreverent) quasi-devotional claptrap into a huge pile, set on top the tinkers and the maundering crones, holding aloft the weather-forecasts, meteorological inquests, and botanical, geological and astronomical studies which today masquerade as Irish poetry...”

29 Éamon Ó Ciosáin notes that when Coiste Gnótha (a committee of the Gaelic League) learned in 1930 that the Irish Press was to be founded, it demanded that half the paper be published in Irish. De Valera promised one Irish issue per week, which never materialised, but it still published more Irish than any of the other dailies. An t-Éireannach (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhara Tta, 1993), p. 39.
30 Lir O’Connor, The Irish Times (22 October 1940).
31 Ibid. (17 October 1940). See Ó Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p. 50.
34 Alan Malone, ibid. (17 October 1940).
Myles, he remarked, injected badly-needed humour into an Irish literary scene where success was determined by a coterie. (If only for the latter comment alone, the letter is suspiciously reminiscent of O’Nolan.) However, *Cruiskeen Lawn* would not only provide a unique contribution to modern Irish writing, it would also exploit the national language itself as a means of undermining the Irish patriot’s propensity for self-worship. While topical news rarely infiltrated the column, its nonsense was less purely nonsensical than that of *The Third Policeman*, which O’Nolan had completed about ten months earlier. *Cruiskeen Lawn* maintained a more satirical edge, if only (as Myles might argue) because there was more nonsense surrounding the Irish language than any he could devise.

Initially, *Cruiskeen Lawn* was published three times a week in Irish, with a smattering of English and whichever other languages took O’Nolan’s fancy on the day. The column quickly established itself as a singularly irreverent critic of Irish Ireland, though also liberally supplied with nonsense stories and multilingual wordplay. The characters who peppered *Cruiskeen Lawn* in its first couple of years included Taidhghín Slánaíbhaile, a pedant who corrected Myles’s expressions in pidgin Irish, and berated him for lapses into English (being, as Donohue notes, a precursor of the Plain People35); Pangúr Bán, the scribe’s cat (inspired by the medieval lay, ‘Mise agus Pangúr Bán’), and Seán a’ Díomais, his pig, who became a member of Muintir na Tíre and aspired to a seat in the Dáil.36 September 1941 saw the advent of Dioghruagach Ó Maol Blagaide, an eighteenth-century bard who could have stepped from Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland*:

...fíle náisiúnta na hÉireann agus laoch liteardha a fuair gorta agus greadadh mar chúiteamh ar a ndearna sé ar son a thíre agus a theangadh...

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35 Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 90.
36 An ambition which inspired the reflection that: ‘Má chuirtear stop leis an nós so, beidh mo mhuc ar muint na muice…’/ If no one puts a stop to this, my pig will be on the pig’s back. *CL* (28 December 1940).
…the national poet of Ireland and a literary hero who was rewarded for his service to his country and his language with starvation and beating…

The Gaelic League was a regular source of amusement, a typical swipe being O’Nolan’s assertion that ‘fáinne’ derived from ‘phony’, attributing the word’s curious etymology to a story about destitute Gaelic Leaguers selling the gilded rings to London pawnbrokers in the 1900s. The inventiveness of Dinneen’s dictionary was also a regular theme, inspiring Myles to devise some lexicons of his own:

*An t-Iarthar* – the West of Ireland

*Iarthóir* – a West of Ireland man, an applicant for a grant, a chancer

*An Tuaisceart* – the North of Ireland

*Tuísmíthetheoir* – A North of Ireland man, a father of a large family, a populator…

However, his linguistic playfulness was often more pointed. *Cruiskeen Lawn* may have been replete with nonsense etymologies, exploiting comic slippages between one language and another, but Myles could also locate a telling cultural neurosis in the most arcane of linguistic matters. Perusing the forms for the 1943 census, he landed on a strange creation, ‘gnéas’ (sex, or gender), a word that was unaccountably absent from the dictionary of ‘Fra Dinninnico’:

Can it be that the ‘idea’ is.... *neamh-Ghaedhealach*, un-Irish, like Rowan Hamilton’s quaternions? Can it be that this interesting verbum has been coined under the authority of an Emergency Powers Order and minted beyond in Foster Place as a concession to the mad modern world?

*Cruiskeen Lawn* eagerly waded into the oldest of battles over the revival of Irish. An early disagreement over the form of Irish that should be preserved – whether a

37 CL (26 March 1942).
38 CL (15 March 1941).
39 CL (3 November 1940). An ‘iarrthóir’ is a petitioner, and ‘tuísmitheoir’ a parent. The satiric dictionary obviously imitates Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. On Dinneen see also CL (8 February 1944); reprinted in *BM*, pp. 276-78.
40 CL (29 December 1943).
literary, archaic language, or the more idiomatic version which remained in common use (‘caint na ndaoine’/common speech) – had been resolved in favour of the latter. O’Nolan was not impressed with the consequent folk bias of the revival, nor with those who kept an eye on the authenticity of each other’s dialect. In an early Cruiskeen Lawn, a by-passer addresses a bull in Irish, mistaking his nose-ring for a fáinne. The bull responds genially, but with typical pedantry: ‘Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil an focal san ag an athair Peadar...’ (‘I don’t think Father Peadar uses that word...’). Fr. Peadar Ó Laoghaire, the loudest spokesperson for the victorious supporters of caint na ndaoine, proud exponent of the Munster dialect, and author of the first Irish novel, Séadna, would become a regular fall-guy in Cruiskeen Lawn (indeed, the very personification of the unctuous character ‘who spoke Irish at a time when it was neither profitable nor popular’). Ó Laoghaire’s prolific writing career, more devoted to linguistic than to literary concerns - and to the preservation of what O’Nolan termed ‘peasant patois’- is repeatedly cited in Cruiskeen Lawn as a singularly corrupting influence on Irish literature:

An té nach bhfuil ró-láidir ‘san intinne, síleann sé nach bhfuil de dhíoghbháil air le móir-saothar litriúcha Gaedhilge do chumadh acht eolas ar gramadaigh na teangadh agus bhfheidir na corra deasa cainnté atá le fágadh i “Séadna”. Tuigeann sé gramadach an Béarla freisin acht ní scriobhann sé a chuid litriúcha sa teangaídh sin...

The man who is not too strong in the head believes that all that is needed to write a great work of Gaelic literature is to know the grammar of the language and maybe the odd nice phrase like those found in Séadna. He also understands English grammar but he doesn’t write his literature in that language...

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41 CL (23 October 1940).
43 CL (7 June 1945).
44 CL (5 August 1941).
But O’Nolan’s criticism was not based merely on aesthetic grounds, any more than was the advice Ó Laoghaire issued to aspiring Irish writers. At the turn of the century, Ó Laoghaire had declared that ‘real literary intelligence does not exist in the mind of your average English reader’, and warned Irish writers against imitating the English novel, since the astute Irish speaker would dismiss the result as *raiméis*. Interestingly, his comparison of folk Irish to modern English owed much to the Victorian preoccupation with physical and mental degeneration. If the Irish language were used to translate an English novel, it ‘would be like a great, strong-minded, vigorous, muscular man, suddenly become an idiot. The Irish language is essentially strong. The English of the present age is essentially weak’. In comparison to ‘frothy’ English, Ó Laoghaire argued, Irish was an unusually precise language, its lack of abstraction due to the illiteracy of most Irish speakers. The Irish speaker:

...has an exact notion of the meaning of every one of the words in his vocabulary. 
To him all the words represent *Things*, not a certain number of letters representing sounds. His words are the names of his ideas, not of certain black marks on white paper.

This vaunted simplicity was thoroughly decimated in the hyper-literary concoction, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and its linguistic naïveté wholly subverted in *An Béal Bocht*. In the novel, O’Nolan did not simply expose how formulaic and clichéd the style of writing fostered by Ó Laoghaire had become. Parodying the new genre of the Gaeltacht autobiography, *An Béal Bocht* exaggerated its literary conventions and undermined the very notion of authenticity and artlessness which Ó Laoghaire fetishised. In

46 Ibid., p. 5. O’Nolan might have agreed with Ó Laoghaire on the decrepitude of modern English prose - he often dissected the work of his fellow journalists, with unflattering results - but his judgement lacked any of the same xenophobia. It is a sobering fact that Ó Laoghaire was hailed by Osborn Bergin as ‘*an Gaedheal ba Ghaelaithe aigne in nÉirinn*’ ‘the Gael with the most Gaelic mind in Ireland’. *An Branar* (August 1920), cited in Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, p. 41.
48 For example, responding to an observation that while an average English speaker got by on a fund of 400 words, the Irish speaker’s was closer to 4,000, Myles opined that 400,000 was closer to the mark. Furthermore: ‘There is scarcely a single word in the Irish (barring, possibly, *Sasanach*) that is simple and explicit. Apart from words with endless shades of cognate meaning, there are many with so complete a spectrum of graduated ambiguity that each of them can be made to express two directly contrary meanings...’ *CL* (11 November 1941); *BM*, p. 278.
O’Nolan’s hands, Tomás Ó Críomhthainn’s noble islandman is demoted to a ‘whinelandman’, a patchwork of Yeatsian, de Valerian, and Victorian images of the Gael. The ‘authentic’ Gaelic Ireland, *An Béal Bocht* implies, is a chimera; Corca Dhuach’s grotesquely comic poverty, on the other hand, illustrates one consequence of presenting the Irish language as a bulwark against the modern world.

*An Béal Bocht* was published in December 1941, but it had long been anticipated by the parodies of folklore and Gaeltacht literature in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Over the previous decade, the drive to collect folklore had received institutional sanction: the Institute of Irish Folklore was established in 1930, and 1935 saw the foundation of the Irish Folklore Commission and its journal, *Béaloideas* (the latter mutated into ‘Béal-IDIOCY’ in *Cruiskeen Lawn*). The ‘school’s project’ of 1937-38 had engaged children throughout the country in recording local traditions and stories, producing a huge volume of material. Myles, ever the urbane littérature, drily satirised the cultural value attributed to these tales. One day he interrupted himself in the midst of re-telling a story acquired from an old Connemara man:

_Ach fán! Chuimnigh gur bhfuil Instituit Bealoideasa againn! Ná síl gur scéal beag grinn do leanbháí an scéal seo. Píosa seanchas atá ann a tháinig an chugainn ó glún go glún trasna aigean an ama. Léirigh ann sé duinn go grinn dul an daemon gadhealaigh, minigheann sé dearcadh ár sinnsear ar an saoghál…_

But hold on! I remembered that we have an Institute of Folklore! Don’t think that this is a funny little story for children. It is a piece of lore that has come down to us from generation to generation across oceans of time. It illustrates to us clearly the Gaelic daemon, it explains to us our ancestors’ outlook on life…

O’Nolan’s folktale parodies - the ‘Tales from Corkadorky’ - began to appear in February 1941. These tales were the precursor to *An Béal Bocht*, and they celebrated the true misery, stupidity and cupidity of the Gaels. ‘Corkadorky’ recalled Corca

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49 The sub-title of *An Béal Bocht* - omitted from its English translation – is ‘An Milleánach’ (*ABB*, 3). The translation of ‘An Milleánach’ is Brendan Ó Conaire’s.

50 *CL* (8 February 1941).
Dhuibhne, the region of Kerry which incorporates the Blasket Islands, which in the previous two decades had produced the autobiographies of Tomás Ó Criomhthainn, Peig Sayers and Muiris Ó Suilleabháin. While *Cruiskeen Lawn* was generally published in Gaelic type (apart from the clumsy interruptions of Taidhghín Slánabhaile), the Corkadorky tales aggravated their awkward flavour by appearing in Roman type. None of the inhabitants of Corca Dhuicha were any more fortunate than *An Béal Bocht*’s Bónapart Ó Cúnsa: ‘Téig na Gorta’ was so hungry that he tried to sleep all the time; Éamonn a’ Chnuic was so miserable with the wet and rain that he swapped houses with the devil and went to live in hell. The fifth tale from Corkadorky is a senseless, rambling story; an authentic piece of folklore from one of Corkadorky’s elderly inhabitants. Many folktale ingredients are jumbled together - an ancient king’s three sons, a journey to America, a bargain with the devil, and so on – until there is an interruption from an impatient Taidhghín Slánabhaile:

...neel bun naw bawr lesh an skayl. Nee higim kad taw ar shool sa skayl i naykur...

kunahayv an gkirun tú skayl sa pawpeyr naw fwil ayn bree lesh awgus naw tigin tú fayn?

...there’s no top nor bottom to the story. I don’t understand what’s happening in it at all... why are you putting a story in the paper that has no sense in it and which you don’t understand yourself?

Myles’s excuse is that he might get a folklore prize from the *oireachtas*. Though it was revived only in 1939, O’Nolan did not greet its return with any enthusiasm. In fact, he detected a strange similarity between the word ‘oireachtas’ and the word ‘eructation’, which he obligingly defined for his Irish readers as ‘a belching forth’.

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52 Breándán Ó Conaire claims that the style of the ‘Tales from Corkadorky’ is based on Éamonn Ó Tuathail’s *Sgealta Mhuintir Luinigh* (Dublin: Irish Folklore Institute, 1933). *Myles na Gaeilge*, p. 122.

53 These were published respectively in *CL* (18 February 1941) and *CL* (1 March 1941).

54 *CL* (5 June 1941).

55 *CL* (29 October 1942). O’Nolan detected a large degree of phoney in all these endeavours to revive an ‘authentic’ Irish culture: ‘I know of no civilisation to which anything so self-conscious could be
The inhabitants of Corca Dorcha were Frankenstein's monsters, the progeny of the anthropological spirit crossed with romantic nationalism. But there was another element informing these Gaelic grotesques – the colonial image of the Irishman. The catastrophe-ridden landscape of Corca Dorcha is home to a simple but untrustworthy peasantry, perpetually putting on the poor mouth. One of Cruiskeen Lawn's illustrations depicts a top-hatted gentleman circled by beggars; it is the visit of Seán Buidhe to Corca Dorcha:

“Aigh am só soraigh, maigh gúd píopal,” arsa Seán Buidhe, “but Aigh thábh nó téins. Aigh thábh notuig smólar dan a cramh.”

“Má’s seadh,” arsa na Gaoithil d’aon-ghuth go ciocrach, “tabhair dúann a dhuine uasail, fiú radharc ar an gcoróin!”


“Gurameelamahagutaginna-oosal.”

“I am so sorry, my good people,” said Seán Buidhe, “but I have no change. I have nothing smaller than a crown.”

“If that’s so,’ the Gaels said hungrily, in one voice, “give it to us, sir, to have a look at.”

“My goodness,” said John, “how frightfully Irish you all are. Here, feast your eyes on this coin.”

“Thankyouverymuchsir.”

Spelling English as Irish, and vice versa, was a favourite trick of O’Nolan’s, in this case illustrating the Victorian Englishman seen through Irish eyes, so it is no surprise that the Gaels’ servility is presented as a mask for their chicanery. O’Nolan’s tableau depicts the Gael, as seen by the visiting Victorian, but as played by the Corkadorkians, and recorded by Myles na gCopaleen. And to complicate matters further, the latter is himself derived from a notoriously ‘Oirish’ product of the Victorian stage – which

indigenous. Why go to the trouble of proving that you are Irish? Who has questioned this notorious fact? If, after all, you are not Irish, who is? CL (23 October 1944), cited in Ó Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p. 82

56 ‘Fado, Fado’, CL (14 November 1941). Seán Buí is speaking in English, transliterated in Irish (which, in the original, is printed in Gaelic type). The Gaels’ last response does the reverse, in Roman type.
was devised by an Irishman. Tracing the sources of the cultural phenomenon that is Corca Dorcha is not an easy task. Fifteen months into the run of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *An Béal Bocht* would arrive to further muddy the question.

**An Béal Bocht and the Fíor-Ghael**

Although *An Béal Bocht* is evidently founded on parodies of the Gaeltacht autobiographies published in the 1920s and 1930s, its satirical perspective is more complicated than this might suggest. As O’Nolan’s comedy recognises, these autobiographies marked a point of contact between two cultures. Whether directly inspired by a visiting folklorist, or by the writer’s own recognition that a way of life was disappearing from the modern world, they cater for the stranger, and much of *An Béal Bocht*’s humour depends on the perils of this encounter. The Corkadorkians not only play roles for the visiting *gaeilgeoirí*, but for their urban readers. The architects of Corca Dorcha are more plentiful than a handful of Gaeltacht writers, and Breandan Ó Conaire acknowledged the novel’s mixed heritage:

...it is largely the Stage-Mountain/Bog Irishman in the form supplied by various English and Anglo-Irish writers and historians... that Ó Nualláin adopts as the basis for the characters... In any event, Bónapart provides the almost perfect antidote to all the perfect people ever invented by reformers and propagandists...

Corca Dorcha is home to Yeats’s noble savage, Irish Ireland’s historically oppressed but moral Gael and the urban Irishman’s bogtrotter. In O’Nolan’s hands, the conventional tale of hard times on the western seaboard becomes a piece of cultural shorthand for all that was most farcical in the Irish self-image. *An Béal Bocht*’s

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57 Myles-na-Coppaleen originated as a minor character in Gerald Griffin’s *The Collegians* (1829) but came to fame as a lachrymose comedian in Dion Bouicault’s *The Colleen Bawn* (1860).

58 One *Cruiskeen Lawn* took issue with a book Frank O’Connor had produced on his travels around Ireland, called *Irish Miles*. O’Nolan was unimpressed by O’Connor’s attempts to ‘draw out’ the country people he met: ‘He tries to suggest that his relationship with these people is that of a scientist examining his specimens. Personally I am by no means so persuaded. I think the specimens have analytic powers at least as good as Mr O’Connor’s but functioning much more efficiently, since the specimens are at home in their own kitchen... quite at ease and with judgment unimpaired by superciliousness. *What was said after Mr O’Connor left? ... Having read the book, why cannot the reader read the Other Book?’ (FC, 107-108).

59 Ó Conaire, ‘*An Béal Bocht* and Other Irish Matters’, p. 134.
peasant is not as Ó Laoghaire might have seen him, the natural embodiment of authentic Irishness, but a hybrid creation of literary tradition and social prejudice.

While *An Béal Bocht* most famously parodies Ó Criomhthainn's *An tOileánach*, O’Nolan’s respect for his target text is equally well acknowledged. It might be more accurate to say that his novel targets imitations by less able writers, but its satire is more generally directed at the very fashion for the genre itself. Arguably, the significance which Gaeltacht literature acquired in contemporary Ireland was little derived from its literary value, or even from its anthropological interest; the figure of the peasant had become so central to Irish cultural discourse that, as Edward Hirsch has argued: ‘to define an idea of the Irish peasant was to define an idea of Ireland itself’. Since this was a preoccupation of the Anglo-Irish literary revival and Irish Ireland alike, Bónapárt Ó Cúnsa has an unusually mixed ancestry. Authentic Irishness (that of the *fior-Ghael*) was arguably conceived as a foreign quality in twentieth-century Ireland, an unattainable thing exiled to the most remote corners of the country. The difference between O’Nolan’s peasant and most of its other literary manifestations (even Kavanagh’s counter-revivalist image of Patrick Maguire) is that he alone stood outside the discourse of authenticity. He is transparently unnatural, a straw-man made to damn every other straw-man that embodied the Irish national spirit. Synge might not have strained too much for authenticity in his depiction of a west of Ireland peasantry, but as O’Nolan saw it, even the ‘amusing clowns’ which Synge produced were nevertheless accepted as the true article:

...when the counterfeit bauble began to be admired outside Ireland by reason of its oddity and ‘charm’... [we], who knew the whole inside-outs of it, preferred to accept the ignorant valuations of outsiders on things Irish. And now the curse has

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60 ‘...Tomás Ó Criomhthain... wrote in Irish what I seriously say is among the most important life-stories of this century, mainly for its account of custom, isolation, the savagery of island life, the gallantry of the islanders, but, above all, for the astonishing precision and beauty of the Irish itself...’. *CL* (26 November 1962); cited in Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 72.

come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge’s plays.

Hence, the Irishman becomes a parody of himself, the caricature internalised and reproduced - Bónapárt Ó Cúnas is another of these literary Frankensteins, a walking cliché. He soon learns that the ‘good books’ of the Gaels are a near infallible guide to the misfortunes of his own life, from the beating he receives on his first day at school, to his adventures courting in the Rosses and his eventual incarceration. Literary turns of phrase are to be taken as literal precedents in Corea Dorcha. Bónapárt’s mother dirty her hearth in order to ensure that his upbringing is impeccably Gaelic, so that he can truly be (as Séamus Ó Grianna puts it in Caisleáin Óír) ‘i mo thachrán ag imeacht faoin ngríosaigh’ (ABB, 14)/ ‘a child among the ashes’. But it is not simply the people of the Gaeltacht who are responsible for the image of the Gael; the misery, poverty and strangeness of Corea Dorcha is refracted through visitors’ perspectives. There is the visiting government inspector who recoils from the stench of Bónapárt’s hovel and is happy to take a pig’s grunting for English; the scholar who equates the most difficult and inaccessible Irish with the most authentic, and wins university degrees with his exegeses of another pig’s grunts; and the gentlemen from Dublin who break Sitric Ó Sánsa’s water bottle since it marrs the almost perfect picture of abject poverty which he presents. From these men’s point of view, gaelachas is characterised by meanness, ignorance, a primitive way of life, and most of all, by its irredeemably foreign nature.

62 CL (28 August 1942); BM, p. 235.

The account of Bónapárt’s beating in school, when he fails to recognise his English name as ‘Jams O’Donnell’, is from Caisleáin Óír. As ‘Jams O’Donnell’, Bónapárt is a sort of generic Gael to the outsider (all his peers in school are called ‘Jams O’Donnell’, as is the man he replaces in prison), but he has no more individuality among the Gaels. The mark of the Gaels is that they seem to do everything ‘go cneasta’/ ‘meekly’, and a heavy sense of fatality lies over the book. When a Gael is not submitting (go cneasta) to the vicissitudes of fate, he is patiently setting his face towards eternity or dimly cogitating the wonders of the world (‘ag meabhra iontas an tsaoil’ (ABB, 57)).

64 The £2 grant allocated for each English-speaking child is the mirror image of the grant which Thomas Derrig, the Minister for Education, introduced in 1933 to encourage the use of Irish in the home. The inspector’s weak English is a reminder that many inspectors purported to examine children whose Irish was far better than their own. Bónapárt politely calls the inspector ‘sor’, which Patrick Power notes is also the Irish for ‘sow’ (PM, 38).
An Béal Bocht plays in a number of ways on projected images of the Gaelic peasant, the latter being defined (whether in a positive or negative fashion) as everything antithetical to the modern citizen. The Irish Ireland version, as described by Aodh de Blácam, was nothing short of the saviour of civilisation:

Small wonder that the children of such homes are they from whom priests and nuns, scholars, poets and brave soldiers come, all that is most choice in the human race.

...We see the European urban civilisation going down to-day in corruption of body and mind, in merciless warfare, and in unbelief... Only “green” Europe, the peasant lands behind the big cities, promises to live on after the ruin...65

Like Ó Laoghaire before him, de Blácam was an adept in the language of corruption and degeneration. In contrast, O’Nolan’s Seanduine Liath (or Old Grey Fellow) shows the canny nature of the Victorian stage-Irishman.66 His is the strain of Gaeldom which prides itself on shrewd dealings; as he advises Bónapárt: ‘If pennies are falling... see to it that they fall into your own pocket; you won’t sin by covetousness if you have all the money in your own possession’ (PM, 51). But the Seandune Liath aside, it is more often the virtuous and simple Gael beloved of conservative revivalists who is parodied in An Béal Bocht. It is little wonder that Bónapárt queries whether the Gaels are really human (PM, 100), since they are apparently presumed to have an inhuman fortitude:

...it had always been said that accuracy of Gaelic (as well as holiness of spirit) grew in proportion to one’s lack of worldly goods and since we had the choicest poverty and calamity, we did not understand why the scholars were interested in any half-awkward, perverse Gaelic which was audible in other parts... (PM, 49)

The plaint anticipates de Valera’s notorious 1943 St. Patrick’s Day speech, which similarly trusted in the nation’s lack of interest in the material things of life and

66 The Seandune Liath is another descendant of Caisleáin Óir.
envisioned a happy countryside of frugal homesteads. The curious cult of the spiritually satisfied Gael, indifferent to material circumstances had long been alive and well, as Fr. Patrick Dinneen testified:

I claim for the Irish race that throughout their history they have cut down their bodily necessities to the quick, in order to devote time and energy to the pursuit of knowledge; that they have engaged in intellectual pursuits, not infrequently of a high order, on a low basis of material comfort...

O’Nolan targeted both this idealism and the even louder complaints of misery and hardship which answered it. (It is a habit of Corkadorkians to sit about lamenting the evil fate of the Gaels.) O’Nolan’s claim that it was economic opportunism which had prompted nineteenth-century Irish speakers to jettison the language in favour of English sharply contrasts with the fantasies of older revivalists. His own uncle, Fr. Gearóid Ó Nualláin, lauded Irish above the more mercantile languages of Latin, French and (above all) English:

...é láin de bhaistúntacht an nouveau riche agus d’adhraidh an airgid. An Ghaoluinn amháin, is í is Criostamhla agus is spioradáltha agus is Catoilicighe ortha go leir...

...[English] is full of the loutishness of the nouveau riche and the adoration of money. Irish alone is the most Christian, spiritual and Catholic of them all...

However, de Valera’s St. Patrick’s Day speech was partly making a virtue out of necessity and no doubt the mythology of the spiritually-minded Gael had a similar origin. Undoubtedly, it was continuing poverty and isolation which did most to

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69 This point will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, in reference to O’Nolan’s unfinished manuscript on the Irish language revival.
preserve the Gaeltacht areas into the twentieth century. In the intervening years, there was a dramatic reversal in all that their harsh life was taken to signify. The qualities which served as negative indices of Irishness in the nineteenth century, became fetishised by nationalists in the twentieth. In both periods, the true Irishman, or fior-Ghaoil, remained something alien to the majority of Irish people.

As one critic of An Béal Bocht has put it, the gaeilgeoirí's efforts to maintain monolingualism in depressed economic areas left the people of the Gaeltacht stranded as 'exotic linguistic artifacts'. The choice of words is telling: the 'exotic' Gaels being strangers in their own country. Many early language revivalists encouraged this sense of estrangement, proposing Irish as a bulwark against the modern world and the Gaels as a people apart. Cardinal Logue emphasised their unworldliness at the 1899 Oireachtas:

> We never had in Irish that broad and fetid stream of corruption which is flooding the country at the present day through English literature. Wherever the Irish language is spoken, the people are pure and innocent..."}

This purity and innocence is certainly true of the Gaels of An Béal Bocht; not only does Bónapárt not understand the provenance of his son, he is even innocent of the workings of alcohol (though this doesn’t stop him stealing a dead man’s drink at the

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71 O’Nolan satirises those who fetishised the Gaeltacht’s isolation and insularity. An Béal Bocht opens with a map of the world as it appears to the people of Corca Dorcha (this is omitted from the English edition). Ireland, dominated by Corca Dorcha, the western islands and Sligo jail, is sandwiched between ‘de odar saighd’ (money order offices, George Bernard Shaw) and ‘thar lear’ (money order offices, New York, Boston, the sea-divided Gael). All directions on the compass of the facing page point west. The view from Ó Cúnasa’s window makes clear the limits of his world: ‘...there below was the bare hungry countryside of the Rosses and Gweedore; Bloody Foreland yonder and Tory Island far away out.... Looking out of the door, you could see the West of County Galway with a good portion of the rocks of Connemara, Aranmore in the ocean out from you with the small bright houses of Kilronan... From the window on the left you could see the Great Blasket, bare and forbidding... over yonder was Dingle...’ (PM, 21).

72 Donna L. Wong, ‘Following the Law of the Letter: Myles na gCopaleen’s An Béal Bocht,’ New Hibernia Review 4:3 (Autumn 2000), p. 105. ‘The gentlemen had fluent English from birth but they never practised this noble tongue in the presence of the Gaels lest, it seemed, the Gaels might pick up an odd word of it as a protection against the difficulties of life’ (PM, 48). Ironically, the Corkadorkians often piously invoke the Irish language ‘mar dhíon ar dheacracht an tsaoil’ ‘as a defence against the difficulties of life’ (ABB, 25, 40), though it traps them in the misery of Corca Dorcha.

73 Cited in Ó Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p. 21.
Corca Dorcha feis). This exaggerated simplicity parodies the coyness of the Gaelic autobiographies, though it is coupled with a certain precociousness reminiscent of An tOileánach:

‘There’s an awful lot of heat in that fire truly... but look, sir, you called me son for the first time. It may be that you’re my father and that I’m your child, God bless us and save us and far from us be the evil thing!...’

...At that time I was only about in the tenth month of my life... (PM, 15)

However, neither the sexual innocence of An tOileánach nor An Béal Bocht was wholly the work of its author. Both books attracted a degree of censorship prior to publication which in each case was influenced by the received image of the Gael. Ó Criomhthainn’s 1929 Irish text was cut by his English translator, Robin Flower. In O’Nolan’s case, it was his prospective publishers, Browne & Nolan, who raised concern over certain episodes in the novel; in April 1941 he wrote assuring them that he had excluded all references to ‘sexual matter’ from the book (apparently including an episode where Bónapárt follows a woman on the road and incurs the wrath of her husband). They also feared causing offence by the implication that families in the Gaeltacht housed pigs in their kitchens and stole freely from their neighbours. One of the passages excised from Flower’s translation of An tOileánach also dealt with the pig in the house, which interestingly suggests that the comic Irishman was as significant a taboo as ‘sexual matter’. Given that editors meddled with both An tOileánach and An Béal Bocht, it is ironic that the latter itself draws attention to such mediation between the author and the reader. Indeed, An Béal Bocht echoes O’Nolan’s other self-reflexive texts in this respect, with Myles’s editorial function recalling the student narrator of At Swim, or the scholar-murderer of The Third Policeman;

74 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to ‘Peggy’ in Browne & Nolan (16 April 1941), BC. He wrote that the book would now satisfy even the most ‘puritanical objections’, but it was ultimately rejected by them. Ironically, no book in Irish was ever censored. One interesting difference between the 1941 and revised 1964 editions of An Béal Bocht is that only the latter contains exclamations such as ‘God bless us!’.

75 Three editions of An tOileánach have been published in Irish. The first, edited by An Seabhac (Pádraig Ó Siochhradha) in 1929 omits certain episodes and preserves less of Ó Criomhthainn’s idiom than that edited by his grandson, Pádraig Ua Maoileoin, see Máire Cruise O’Brien, ‘An tOileánach’ in John Jordan, ed. The Pleasures of Gaelic Literature (Cork: Mercier, 1977). The latest edition claims to restore the text most fully: Seán Ó Coileáin, ed. An tOileánach (Baile Átha Cliath: Cló Talbóid, 2002).
however, as editor of Bónapárt’s memoirs he is obviously following a precedent set by the Gaeltacht autobiographies. Myles draws attention to the editorial mediation of the outsider, and in the standard fashion, states in his preface that this book is as much a linguistic project and an act of cultural reclamation as anything else. Of course, it is made immediately clear that for all Myles’s assertions to the contrary, the faithfulness and authenticity of Bónapárt’s account might not be wholly trusted: ‘This document is exactly as I received it from the author’s hand except that much of the original matter has been omitted due to [pressure of space and to] the fact that improper subjects were included in it’. Indeed, Myles’s first act as editor is to gloss some of Bónapárt’s muddled anglicisms with their correct Irish equivalent. Already the true Gael is being revised into a more Gaelic version of himself. O’Nolan’s mischievous exposure of such acts of editing means that from the outset, An Béal Bocht signals that it is targeting not merely the literary merits of such texts or their linguistic politics (such as old battles over the status of dialects and the victory of caint na ndaoine). It also cynically exposes how texts like An tOileánach were quietly tailored to serve a particular cultural agenda. While An Béal Bocht, like At Swim, is a virtuoso exercise in parody, both novels also match their self-reflexive literary styles with a self-reflexive attention to their intellectual and cultural contexts. An Béal Bocht highlights a point of mediation between the writer and the reader, though here the mediation is obviously not just on a textual, but on a cultural level – the encounters between the hapless inhabitants of Corca Dóra and the urban gaeilgeoiri mirror that between the (edited and revised) Gaeltacht authors and their readership.

As it transpired, in drawing attention to the offensive nature of Ambrós the pig, O’Nolan’s publishers were not being over-cautious. An Béal Bocht’s reviewers were reasonably sanguine about his attacks on the gaeilgeoiri and the absurdities of

76 O’Nolan dedicated the book to R. M. Smyllie, whom he dubbed – in Gaelic fashion - ‘An Smaolach’ (the thrush) (ABB, 5). The editor of Ó Criomhtháinn’s book was Pádraig Ó Siochhradha, better known by his pen-name, An Seabhac (the hawk).

77 The brackets indicate a phrase which O’Nolan added to the 1964 edition. Arguably, the original line was more pointed.

78 On the very first page of the text, Myles helpfully footnotes Bónapárt’s references to ‘dibheairseans’ [diversions] and ‘haidhhtiurs’ [adventures] with their Irish translations: ‘sceilip’ and ‘eachtraí’. This joke is repeated a number of times throughout the 1941 edition, many of which are omitted from the 1964 text.
revivalism, but the combination of Ambrós and the questionable moral standards of the Corkadorkians caused trouble in some quarters. 79 When the Seanduine Liath goes ‘hunting’, as becomes the Gael, it is to rob his neighbours’ houses. Many reviewers who otherwise lauded the book acknowledged that such passages were likely to cause offence:

...The implications of general dishonesty on the part of Seanduine and others in Corca Dorecha are very far-fetched...[and] are tinged with bitterness. They spoil the many cases of justifiable satire, ridicule, exposure of clichés and aspects of pseudo Gaelicism that make the book very readable and enjoyable... 80

The Bell’s reviewer was even less forgiving: ‘Whatever may be said about the Gaeltacht, it was never merely cheap’. 81 Bearing the latter remark in mind, the Leader’s more positive review made an important point about the unfortunate Ambrós:

...The stress laid on the smell of the pigs in An Béal Bocht is hardly invited by anything that we remember in the work of any modern Irish writer and must be taken as a jibe at the Anglo-Irish humourists and uplifters of an earlier generation with whom Myles na gCopaleen is not otherwise concerned..... 82

Certainly, O’Nolan would later echo the judgement that Carleton alone provided a faithful portrait of the Irish peasantry, subsequent nineteenth-century novelists producing only ‘a canon of amiable cawboguery’ and things worsening with the likes of Synge, Gregory and Yeats, who ‘persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided they were other people’. 83 (In that respect, Bónapárt is justified in wondering whether the

79 The Irish Independent’s reviewer queried the pig in the house: L.O.R., ‘Leabhar Nua’ (17 February 1942), and the Sunday Independent’s reviewer found Ambrós’s stench in bad taste: E. de B., ‘An Béal Bocht’ (14 December 1941).
81 P. O’S. The Bell (February 1942), pp. 405-06.
82 Anon. ‘Current Affairs’, The Leader (27 December 1941).
Gaels are really human (PM, 100). However, the greater part of An Béal Bocht depicts both the Gaels and their observers as being culpable for the misery of Corca Dorcha. Though the Corkadorkians are bound by the precepts of the ‘good Gaelic books’ (PM, 100) to accept the harsh life which is fated for them, they are wilfully fascinated by their own ill-luck. The gaeilgeoiri might wish to preserve Corca Dorcha in its primitive state, but the only sign of native industry in the place stems from the Seanduine Liath’s dishonesty. In this much, O’Nolan parts company with Ó Criomhthainn and other writers, ascribing the Corkadorkians a stage-Irish temperament which is distinguished by dishonesty, laziness and chronic helplessness.

The Corca Dorcha feis is the closest O’Nolan comes to implying that the reality of life in the Gaeltacht is ignored by language revivalists. His intertextuality tends to indicate instead that realism is nothing of the sort, but is only a naïve accumulation of clichés. As An Béal Bocht progresses, his parodic references to Ó Criomhthainn and Ó Grianna give way to a more ominous sense of being confined by literary fate; one that rivals the claustrophobia of At Swim-Two-Birds or the nonsense universe of The Third Policeman. Bónapárt’s incarceration following a trial he can’t understand is the final, most Gaelic and most miserable product of the encounter between the Gael and English-speaking society. In one sense, it is the pre-determined end of the generic Gael, Jams O’Donnell, but it also gives literal expression to Bónapárt’s literary entrapment. It is no accident that this child among the ashes, the scribe of a community whose like will never be seen again, is taught by a schoolmaster called Aimeirgean Ó Lúnasa, who recalls the founding-figure of Gaelic literature and

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84 Ó Criomhthainn wryly tells how he would have to make time for the visiting scholars after his day’s work was done. Robin Flower, trans. The Islandman (Oxford: OUP, 1937, 2000), p. 224, p. 238.
85 Despite An Béal Bocht’s war on ‘the poor mouth’, it does recognise the truth underlying these writers’ accounts of hardship. In this respect, the scene at the Corca Dorcha feis takes the part of the Gaels. The visiting gaeilgeoiri compete to see who can talk most gaelically about the Gaelic cause, while all around them the Gaels drop dead from hunger, cold and the exertion of the truly Gaelic rince fada (long dance). Admittedly the trials of the Corkadorkians is subject to the usual exaggeration: the feis is marked by incessant rain and myriad deaths from over-exertion, drink, dancing and starvation.
86 Patrick Power points to the similarity to the case of the Maamtrasna murders, for which Irish-speaking defendants were convicted, despite not understanding their English trial (PM, 128).
completes the literary circle. This literary paralysis is underlined in Bónapárt’s journey to Cruach an Ocrais/ Hunger-stack mountain in search of its legendary treasure. He finds the treasure, but also its ancient owner, Maoldún Ó Pónasa. Maoldún addresses Bónapárt in middle Irish – as might have been anticipated – but more eerily, he is otherwise no different from the storytellers whom Bónapárt has already met in the Rosses:

...I saw the dead person – if he were dead or only soaked with spirits-weariness – endeavouring to settle himself on his stony seat, to shove his hooves in the direction of the fire and to clear his throat for storytelling...

- It is unknown wherefore the yellow-haired, small, unenergetic man was named the Captain – he whose place and habitation and steadfast home was a little lime-white house in the corner of the valley... (PM, 109).

The stories of the Gaels are as interminably repetitive as the plot of The Third Policeman. Bónapárt cannot escape his literary fate any more than the women of the Rosses who gather on the shore every evening crying for their fishermen. Life in the Rosses is even more predictable than that in Corca Dorchá so it is fitting that there Bónapárt encounters the greatest menace of all to An Béal Bocht’s Gaels: the Sea-cat. Bónapárt’s drawing of the creature looks very like a prostrate Ireland, ‘...the pleasant little land which is our own...’, as Myles helpfully notes:

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. (PM, 77)

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87 Power chose to translate the name as Osborne O’Loonassa. There is also a parody of Amergin’s poetry in At Swim-Two-Birds, placed in the mouth of Finn MacCool: ‘I am an Ulsterman, a Connachtman, a Greek.../ I am Cuchulainn, I am Patrick...I am every hero from the crack of time’ (ASTB, 19).
88 The episode recalls the medieval voyage tale Immram curaig Mail Dùin/ The Voyage of Maeldoon, but it also has a touch of H. Rider Haggard.
89 The Rosses is populated by a few stock figures: the two men who come courting; Mary, a young girl; the ‘Gambler’, a young man who is habitually off carousing in Scotland; and a wise old seanachai.
This creature is dreaded for bringing bad luck; in effect, it gluts itself on the misfortune of the Gaels. It is a suggestive image – Irish nationalism had long justified itself by drawing attention to the miserable state of Irish subjects under British rule, but somehow cultural nationalists had revised an abject image of the poverty-stricken (yet spiritual) Gael into a marker of authentic Irishness. Bónapárt Ó Cúnasá may finally be interred by a foreign legal system, in the classic colonial manner, but it is a stultified Irish tradition that maintains his miserable condition.

Despite some reviewers’ objections to Ambrós and the moral state of the Corkadorkians, An Béal Bocht was enthusiastically welcomed, even in the Irish-language press. Barely two months after publication, an Irish Times advertisement reported that the first edition was sold out: ‘an event without precedent in the history of the publication of books in Irish’. A review published in The Standard early in January 1942 corroborates this claim, telling how a bookseller had to sell his own copy to an importunate customer before he had finished reading it, and calling it ‘one of the daftest, bitterest, most hardhitting and outrageous books ever written in modern Irish; it is also one of the best’. The Leader pointed out that it was ‘the first purely humorous work of any dimensions to be written in the language in modern times’. Strangely enough, it was not this stalwart of Irish Ireland, but The Irish Library Bulletin which took offence at O’Nolan’s temerity in mocking the literary works of native Irish speakers, and it launched the ultimate insult:

*Nil amhras ná gur bhaist ughdar an leabhair seo thuas a leabhar féin maith go leor: is fearra dhúinn gan tabhairt fá n-a bhreaghnúighadh, acht d’fhág sé aon nídh anmháin gan luadh-do b’lé ba chóir do a rádh “droch-sgéal ar an droch-shaoghal, breacaithe i ndroch-Ghaedhilg!”*

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90 The Irish Times (17 January 1942). A second edition was published in February 1942. The National Press wrote to O’Nolan on 15th September 1942 that there were only 300-400 copies left in stock, and by December 1943, there were only 50 (30 December 1943). By this time, An Béal Bocht had probably sold up to 2,000 copies. In January 1944, O’Nolan proposed another print run of 500 but his publishers declined. Letter to P. Cannon, National Press (10 January 1944), BC.


There’s no doubt but that this author christened his book well: we would not like to contradict him, but he left out one thing he should have mentioned; it is: “a bad story about the bad life, scribbled in bad Irish!”

But given the parodic style of *An Béal Bocht*, it is arguable that any linguistic awkwardness was in fact deliberate. Nevertheless, the criticism did strike home. A 1950 *Cruiskeen Lawn* column purported to reproduce Browne & Nolan’s reader’s report on *An Béal Bocht*, and did so in similar terms: ‘I can safely assert that in an experience of sixty years this is quite the craziest piece of Irish I have ever met... What surprises me most is the self-assurance of the author... For want of knowledge he cannot begin, or continue or finish a sentence properly... spend none of the firm’s money on this work.’

Browne & Nolan did reject the novel in May 1941, but their actual reader’s report only mentioned O’Nolan’s Irish in praising his use (or abuse) of phrases from ‘the ‘Gaeltacht’ books’. O’Nolan himself felt that his peculiar use of Irish was central to the book’s humour, rejecting Timothy O’Keeffe’s suggestion in 1960 that *An Béal Bocht* should be translated into English: ‘The significance of most of it is verbal or linguistic or tied up with a pseudo-Gaelic mystique and this would be quite lost in translation...’. Apart from obvious instances of wordplay in the text, much of its humour comes from O’Nolan’s satire of *caint na ndaoine*, which Ó Laoghaire recommended as the proper basis of all Irish prose. The Seanduine Liath

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94 *CL* (25 October 1950); *HD*, p. 31. O’Nolan claimed that *An Béal Bocht* sold 12,000 copies, a feat unknown in Irish-language publishing. It certainly was unknown; the true figure was probably closer to 2,000, or the 3,000 he quoted in a letter to Timothy O’Keeffe on 27th February 1960, SIUC.
95 Browne & Nolan wrote to O’Nolan on 29th May 1941, inviting him to come in and talk about the manuscript. O’Nolan wrote on the letter that it was: ‘To say that Foley “did not understand it” and would not advise publication.’
96 This ‘Summary of Observations of Persons to whom Book was sent by Browne and Nolan’ is held in Boston College. The points on which they objected were ‘turning a dwelling house into a piggery’, stealing, ‘marital infidelity’, the digression on Sitric, and a sly joke about the weight of a prominent female revivalist. The reader advised more material like the chapter on the Corca Dorchá feis.
97 Letter to Timothy O’Keeffe (27 February 1960), SIUC.
98 A virtually untranslatable example of this is O’Nolan’s fantasia on the Irish phrase: ‘Thit an lug a r an lag orm’ which the Oxford Irish dictionary translates as ‘I lost courage’. Literally translated, it means ‘misfortune fell on my weakness’. At the end of the Corca Dorchá feis, O’Nolan stretches the phrase to depict Bónapárt’s misery as an endless avalanche of misfortunes: ‘Thit an lug ar an lag agam, thit lug eile ar an lag sin, agus niorbh fhada go raibh na luganna ag titim go tiabh ar an chéad lag agus orm féin. Ansin, thit cith laganna ar na luganna, luganna ar na laganna ina dhiaidh sin, agus i ndeireadh báire tháinig lug amhain móir donn anuas ar mhullach gach ní eile ag cur múchta ar an solas agus fós ag cur stad le réim an tsaoil’ (*ABB*, 52); the translation is in *PM*, pp. 60-61.
can pick up ‘a whisper in Galway, half a word in Gweedore and a phrase in Dunquin’ (PM, 42) in a morning’s walk, and O’Nolan’s ambition to satirise the Gaeltacht as a whole is reflected in his prose, which ‘blends their various dialects in a composite Irish literary style no other writer of Irish... succeeded in doing.’  

An *Béal Bocht*’s primary source text, *An tOilednach*, was a product of the Kerry Gaeltacht (though, as noted, some of the episodes parody the Ulster writer, Séamus Ó Grianna). The meeting with Maoldún Ó Pónasa, who speaks middle Irish, is a diversion to the scholastic tradition, while Bónapárt’s journey to the Rosses introduces him to the idiom of the Ulster writers. On the road there, he meets another Jams O’Donnell:

He stopped in front of us, recited the Lay of Victories, walked three steps of mercy with us, took a tongs from his pocket and threw it after us... It was evident that he was Ultonian according to the formula in the good books... (PM, 64).

As might be expected from ‘the good books’, this Jams asserts that he has ‘no Gaelic, only Ulster Gaelic’ (PM, 64), and proves it with his faithfully provincial turns of phrase. It is the Seanduine Liath who disingenuously enquires whether he has read Ó Laoghaire’s *Séadna*, the template for the folk style he represents.

Throughout disputes over the standardisation of Irish, O’Nolan supported the drive to adapt the language to the needs of a modern, literate, centralised state. He pronounced, for example, that it was ‘monstrous’ that schoolbooks were to be provided in the dialects of Ulster, Connacht and Munster:

...Irish, we are agreed, cannot be revived because it is a babel rather than a language, a welter of shrill provincial jealousies. It requires to be attacked with a sledge-hammer, made simple, uniform and rational. Far from addressing this task,

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100 *Cruskeen Lawn* was largely printed in Gaelic type, as was the first edition of *An Béal Bocht*. For its reissue in 1964, the Dolmen Press developed a new form of Roman type, and O’Nolan modernised its spelling. This had been a point of contention with Sáirséal agus Dill, who had initially agreed to publish *An Béal Bocht* in 1956. Letter from Seán Ó hEigicartaigh, S&D to Brian O’Nolan (30 July 1957), BC.
the present situation is to be perpetuated for at least another generation of distracted school-children.\footnote{101}

The backward look was hardly receptive to the needs of the urban Irish speaker, and certainly not to the demands made of a state language. Tellingly, when O'Nolan praised any Irish prose, it was on deliberately aesthetic grounds. His genuine regard for An tOileánach, for example, was based on the fact that 'every page is a lesson how to write, it is all moving and magnificent'.\footnote{102} (Flower's translation, on the other hand, was a 'parcel of bosh and bunk... it gives a wholly wrong impression, hiding inside its covers of opulent tweed' \textit{(HD}, 180).) In a 1941 review of Eoghan Ó Domhnaill's \textit{Scéal hLúdaí Seáinín}, O’Nolan acknowledged the harshness of the lives such writers recounted, but did not find that praiseworthy in itself; interestingly, he negatively compared the shapeless prose of the Ulster writers to their counterparts in the Blaskets.\footnote{103} Deliberately judging such books in aesthetic terms might have been a way of evading the cultural baggage which they dragged in their wake, but it also demanded a literary, rather than a linguistic, standard. Comparing An tOileánach favourably to Séadna, O’Nolan asserted that:

\begin{quote}
...is litríocht, cur i gcás, 'An tOileánach'. Níl aon leabhar (agaínn-ne nó ag aon treibh eile) i mBéarla atá ion-churtha leis.

Agus ní an ‘Chainnnt na ndaoine’ nó na ‘cora deasa caimnte’ atá ann a bhронnann uaisleacht litríocht air. Níl aon bhaint ag liteardhachas an leabhair leis an nGaedhilg. Tá an fior-stuif udaráisach daonna ann, tá sé ealadhanta, bogann sé an léightheóir chun cumhtha nó áthais do réir mar is rogha leis an údar...

...‘An tOileánach’, for example, is literature. Neither we, nor any other people, have a book in English which is comparable to it.

And it’s not the ‘common speech’ or ‘nice idiom’ in it which grants it the nobility of literature. The literary quality of the book has nothing to do with Irish. It has true
\end{quote}

\footnote{101} CL (24 April 1944), cited in Ó Conaire, \textit{Myles na Gaeilge}, p. 96.
\footnote{102} CL (17 January 1955), cited in ibid., p. 120.
\footnote{103} Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Leabhair Nua’, \textit{The Irish Times} (22 February 1941), p. 5.
humanity, it is skilful, it moves the reader to sorrow or joy as the author chooses... 104

Arguably, O’Nolan made little allowance for the oral roots of this literature; An Béal Bocht’s satiric repetition of seanfhocal (proverbs) and the other linguistic props of the Gaeltacht books recalls Cruiskeen Lawn’s ‘Catechism of Cliche’ rather than the structure of an oral narrative. 105 What another writer might praise as authentic caint na ndaoine and folk wisdom, O’Nolan represents as automatic, inert and fatalistic responses to the vicissitudes of life. Some of these phrases are merely the verbal tics of the authors whom O’Nolan was parodying, such as Ó Criomhthainn’s infamous refrain, or the storyteller’s chant: ‘...is scéal eile an scéal sin agus lá eile dom á innsint sa scribhinn seo thios...’ (ABB, 10-11, 12, 32), or the habit of setting everything ‘i dtóin an ti’ (which appears too often in An Béal Bocht to cite). 106 Along with respectful references to ‘ár sean agus ár sinear’ (ABB, 35, 41, 93), and the resigned reflection that ‘ní mar a shíltear a bhítear’ (ABB, 16, 32, 84), the book is littered with formulaic (and superstitious) exhortations. 107 The most common is Bónapárt’s reflection that: ‘is iонтach an saol atá inniu ann’, which is repeated in one form or another nine times. 108 Aside from these reflex responses, one word which is unfailingly reiterated throughout An Béal Bocht (apart from ‘fearthainne’/ ‘rain’) is ‘cinniuint’/ ‘fate’. The repetition is wholly warranted since it was the sources of these hackneyed phrases, the Gaeltacht autobiographies, which fixed a certain image of

104 CL (24 February 1942); BM, p. 268.
105 Ironically, At Swim, a novel which makes the reader highly conscious of its textuality, draws heavily on a tradition of oral storytelling. See Declan Kiberd, ‘Gaelic Absurdism: At Swim-Two-Birds’, in Irish Classics, p. 505. Similarly, anecdotal monologues (or monologues masked as dialogues) were a regular feature of Cruiskeen Lawn, as can be seen in the encounters with the Plain People of Ireland or the interminable tales about the Brother. But An Béal Bocht satirises the attempt to simply transpose oral narratives to the page, as in Ó Laoghaire’s Séadna, which in its first serial publication was introduced each week as if it were a tale being recounted at the fireside. See editor’s note, Peter O’Leary, trans. Cyril and Kit Ó Céirin, Séadna (Dublin: Glendale, 1989), p. 6.
106 These phrases can be translated as: ‘...that is another story and I’ll write it down another day...’ and ‘in the bottom of the house’.
107 This is the customary invocation of ‘our forebears and our ancestors’, and the proverb means: ‘things are not as they seem’. Variations of ‘...slán mar a n-instear é agus i bhfad uainn an drochrud...’ (‘God save us from the likes of it and may evil be far from us’) appear in ABB, pp. 9, 12, 21, 62. The Seanduine Liath’s characteristic exclamation, ‘m’ianam ón riach’ (‘my soul from the devil’) is repeated on pp. 20, 23, 28, 32, 34, 78, 87, 102.
108 ‘It’s a strange world that there is today,’ ABB, pp. 23, 26, 29, 30, 57, 58, 68, 75, 102.
Gaeltacht life in the popular consciousness. The linguistic circularity and predictability of *An Béal Bocht* provides a suitable correlative to the Corkadorkians’ fatalism.

In a way, this itself reflects the stereotype of the Irish language which O’Nolan repeatedly countered in *Cruiskeen Lawn* – an image of a language frozen in a rural idiom and wholly unadaptable to contemporary Ireland. One day Myles reported that he had been reading a book on music which was littered with French expressions:

\[ \text{Lá éigin, b’fhéidir go mbeidh striapach pinn éigin ag iarradh snáis a chur ar a bhaoth-Bhéarlá le sciotachán Gaedhilge – lá éigin nach fada uainn, nuair bhéas Éire aris ag Cáit Ní Dhuibhir.} \]

“There is a distinct bias of fág-a-bhealach about Stravinsky, a sort of mad thaidhbhsíúl ebullience mixed with a beagáinín of mise is tusa is an bóthar go réidh faoi n-áir gcosa. One might even say he is dána in the better sense of dán, a poem...”

French was perhaps not guaranteed to raise the tone of any critical prose, but certainly indicated its pretensions. In its place, the Irish is comically subversive, its incongruity heightening the absurdity of this linguistic snobbery, but also betraying its own shortcomings. The language had not been integrated into urban life, it had not adapted to the modern world. Arguably, neither had Ireland, but opponents of the language revival glossed over that point. Perhaps, eventually, O’Nolan began to agree with them. But over the first couple of years of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the column’s satire targeted both those who piously deferred to the national language and those who condescendingly dismissed its revival. *An Béal Bocht*, which was of course descended from *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s ‘Tales from Corkadorky’, continued in the same vein. While comically indicting contemporary attitudes to the Gaeltacht, it also pilloried the state of contemporary writing in Irish. But O’Nolan’s particularly literate brand of humour

\[ ^{109} \text{ CL (13 August 1942). The first line reads: ‘One day, maybe there will be some literary hack [lit: whore] trying to polish his foolish English with a smattering of Irish – a day not far from us, when Ireland will again belong to Cáit Ní Dhuibhir.’ Blas - taste; fág-a-bhealach - leave-him-his-way; thaidhbhsíúil - spectral; beagáinín – a tiny, little bit; mise is tusa is an bóthar go réidh faoi n-áir gcosa - me and you and the road ready before us; dána - bold.} \]
was itself a promising development, not least for appealing to a reasonably well-read audience which was not otherwise well served by Irish publications. By the mid 1930s, of the one hundred and twenty-seven novels which An Gúm had published since its inception in 1926, eighty-four were translations of European novels. Arguably there were simply not enough competent writers available to meet government ambitions to create a body of literature in modern Irish, but O’Nolan had little respect for An Gúm’s policies and his frustration was echoed by other writers. Seán de Beaumont (the editor of An tÉireannach, a socialist news weekly which was produced in the Gaeltacht from 1934 to 1937) complained in 1939 that An Gúm’s policy was insulting to the people of the Gaeltacht, implying that they could not produce their own literature. Seosamh Ó Grianna similarly interpreted such statistics as betraying a lack of faith in contemporary Irish writing:

\[ Nil \text{ lítrócht ar bith sa Ghaeilge is fíú a léamh. Nil scribhneoir ar bith Gaeilge againn ar fíú scribhneoir a thabhairt air. Taobh thall den fháraige Ghaelaigh atá gach rud a bhfuil tairbhhe ar bith ann. } \]

There is no literature in Irish worth reading. We have no Irish writer fit to be called a writer. Everything of merit is across the Irish sea.

Surveying contemporary writing in 1935, León Ó Broin remarked that Irish books in print were still a novelty, and were not to be found in bookshops other than those which catered to students. The full-length novel in Irish was a rarity, and the impulse to experiment was dampened by the prospect of a limited readership. At a time


111 This was distinctive from other Irish publications since it was produced in the Gaeltacht and contained international news and new writing rather than the older Irish texts and folklore found in revival journals. Ó Ciosáin compares its series of humorous letters from a character called ‘Pilibín Ó Neachtain’ [Pádraig Mac Fhionghaile] (supposedly the owner of a students’ lodging-house in Galway) to Myles na gCopaleen’s columns. Ó Ciosáin, An tÉireannach, p. 183.

112 Cronin, Translating Ireland, pp. 157-158.

113 Cited in ibid., p. 157.

when most still wrote for the student, and with priorities that were more linguistic than literary, it is understandable that O’Nolan would incongruously compare Ó Laoghaire’s attempt to transfer an oral folk tradition to the page to another writer who masterfully blended the oral and the textual, James Joyce:

... tá na litriocht a d’fhág sé [Joyce] ‘na dhiadh níos Gaedhealaígh ‘ná a lán atá againn ó dhaoine nár thuig focal Béarla...

... Nuair bhéas uthdar ion-churtha leis ag scriobhadh i nGaidhilg, beidh an teanga mhathardha as baoghal agus ní beidh go dtí sin. Ins an mheántráth, beidh an saothar cuanna mín-mheilte sin againn – “Séadna”. Agus “Niamh,” “An Béal Beo,” “An Mháthair,” maraon le’na lán treachlasice eile atá comh bréagach míghaedhealach is tá si suarách.

...the literature he [Joyce] left is more Irish than much of that written by people who never understood a word of English...

... When we have an author writing in Irish to compare with him, then the mother tongue will be out of danger and not till then. In the meantime, we have such charming, foolish work as Séadna. And Niamh, An Béal Beo, An Mháthair, along with a lot of other rubbish that is as false and un-Irish as it is contemptible.115

*An Béal Bocht* is a corrective to this brand of literature; it is telling that, like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the book is a thoroughly intertextual concoction and so steeped in modern Irish fiction that it sets a formidable challenge to any reader less well versed in this tradition.116 In contrast to the majority of Irish writing published since the revival, *An Béal Bocht* is a conspicuously literate text. So too was the sophisticated *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and given the critical and commercial success that greeted both enterprises, it is doubly strange that after 1943 O’Nolan rarely wrote in Irish at all.

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115 CL (25 January 1941). Ó Laoghaire published *Niamh* in 1907. The other works which O’Nolan refers to are Tomás Ó Máille’s *An Béal Beo* (1936) and Pádraig Pearse’s *An Mháthair* (1916).

The Demise of the Gaelic Satirist

There is no obvious reason why O’Nolan did not build on the commercial and critical success of An Béal Bocht in December 1941 with another work in Irish; more curiously, from late 1943 onwards the number of Irish Cruiskeen Lawn columns dwindled immensely. When the column began to appear daily in September 1941, O’Nolan had alternated Irish and English, but as Breandán Ó Conaire has pointed out, by October 1943 articles written wholly in Irish were becoming rare and they effectively disappeared after 10th March 1944. Throughout the rest of the decade, O’Nolan published only five columns in Irish.\(^{117}\) (In December 1952, ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ mutated to ‘na Gopaleen’, finally deferring to a monolingual English readership.\(^{118}\)) Interestingly, as the Irish columns dwindled out during 1943, Myles became increasingly preoccupied with the activities of two new revivalist organisations, Glun na Buaidhe and Ailteirí na hAiseirí.\(^{119}\) Formed in 1942 after a split within Craobh na hAiseirí, itself a breakaway group from the Gaelic League, they shared an unhealthy brand of right-wing exclusivist nationalism, as well as a bitter rivalry.\(^{120}\) Some of their activities merely added to the stock of revivalist absurdity which fuelled Cruiskeen Lawn, as when O’Nolan noted with pleasure in November 1942 that Ailteirí na hAiseirí had just proposed rebuilding the royal palace in Tara.\(^{121}\) But from early 1943 onwards, they began to be presented in a more sinister light, their vehement street orators inspiring regular complaints from Myles. In March, he wrote:

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\(^{117}\) Ó Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p. 50. Jack White, a fellow Irish Times staff member, stated that the decline in Irish ‘...was not a matter of editorial policy; in fact, Smyllie was very keen to keep on teasing the Gaelic-Leagueers, and he tried to insist that Myles should produce his quota of Irish; but in practice Myles did as he pleased. Perhaps he found Irish harder work; perhaps the performer was responding to the larger audience.’ ‘Myles, Flann and Brian,’ in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, p. 67.

\(^{118}\) Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 158. The decision to do so was O’Nolan’s own. Jack White claimed that: ‘We in the Irish Times cherished the pedantry of the eclipsis in the genitive, but he had his way’. Ibid., p. 63.

\(^{119}\) Louis de Paor drew attention to the Cruiskeen Lawn commentaries on these groups in ‘Twisting the Knife’, The Irish Times (29 March 2002), p. 12. Their titles are enlightening in themselves, Glun na Buaidhe meaning ‘Generation of Victory’, and Ailteirí na hAiseirí proclaiming themselves to be ‘Architects of the Revolution’. (Although reportedly a more popular translation of Glun na Buaidhe was ‘Cow’s Knees’).

\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) CL (21 November 1942).
I was recently held up at a Dublin street corner by a small crowd who were listening to a young man with a strong North of Ireland accent who was aloft on a little Irish scaffold.

"Glun na Buaidhe" he roared, "has its own ideas about the banks, has its own ideas about amusements, has its own ideas about dancing. There is one sort of dancing that Glun na Buaidhe will not permit and that is jazz dancing. Because jazz dancing is the product of the dirty nigger culture of America..."

Substitute jew for nigger there and you have something beautiful and modern.122

In time of war, the consequences of the racist and chauvinistic attitudes of some language revivalists were not easily ignored. Indeed, for all their defiant Irishness, it is ironic that the xenophobic leanings of these right-wing groups bore an uncomfortable similarity to contemporary European politics.123 O’Nolan himself emphasised this connection to his readers. Later that year, faced with another exhortation to the youth of Ireland to deal ‘Bás do’n Bhéarla’, or ‘Death to English’, as the spoken language of the Irish people, he advised that it would be better to exhort all and sundry ‘to read the papers and have a look at what goes on on the shrapnel-pocked crust of H. M. Mother Earth’.124 Given that references to these groups cropped up in Cruiskeen Lawn throughout 1943, it is feasible that their more aggressive breed of language activism made O’Nolan increasingly less inclined to continue writing in Irish. From the beginning of Cruiskeen Lawn he had always been writing against the grain, whether satirising the language’s nationalist associations, or playing up its sophistication and complexity as an antidote to the folk bias of the revival. However, perhaps at this stage, when a new generation of language activists was challenging the Gaelic League’s conservatism with a more insidious conservatism of their own, O’Nolan’s frustration had reached its peak. It is telling that he often chose to deplore the chauvinism of these groups in English; evidently, this was not an internal matter for the amusement of fellow Irish speakers, but something that required a more public

122 CL (15 March 1943). The character O’Nolan describes (or is intending to target) is likely to be Proinsias Mac an Bheatha, the Belfastman who founded Glun na Buaidhe.

123 Ailteirí na hAiseiri ran candidates in the 1943 and 1944 general elections, though to little effect. Their goal was to establish a ‘corporate State based on the 1916 Proclamation’. D. J. Hickey and J. E. Doherty, A New Dictionary of Irish History From 1800 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), p. 6.

124 CL (13 December 1943).
denunciation. Cunningly, he reminded these language enthusiasts that their fond racial fantasies were in contradiction with the history of the language revival itself:

Wanders through the streets… a native person standing on a rather cute little Irish scaffold and talking loudly and hoarsely to himself. We want to see Ireland free he told himself and the most important plank in our platform is the revival of the Irish language. We want to see Ireland thoroughly Irish, he said.

Now excuse me one moment. I think that it was in the 90’s that some readers of this journal, bored with knitting and transplanting the silk worm, founded the Gaelic League for the long winter evenings. I mean our Protestant heritage… Almost immediately this club is ‘discovered’ by readers of the other journals in the country. And now, ever since the century turned (the way milk does) we have been haunted by hordes of tweed-bearing flat-nosed Paddies whose great agony, whose eternal anguish is that the (small) world will somehow fail to appreciate that they are….. Irishmen!125

Late in 1944 came an interesting footnote to this intermittent diatribe against Glun na Buaidhe, Ailteiri na hAiseiri, and all their ilk. That December, O’Nolan wrote his only known drama in Irish, a short sketch called An Scian (The Knife).126 The piece satirises the rivalry and bigotry of these groups, centring around a violent argument between a husband and wife who belong to the opposing associations. At the climax of the row (after many cries of ‘Glún na Buaidhe abú!’) the husband stabs his wife in the back. The knife he uses is a wedding present, given to him on his retirement as secretary of his branch of the Gaelic League.127 As a satire of the internecine warfare in the language movement (or to be more exact, the Gaelic League) An Scian is certainly pointed, if unremarkable. But given O’Nolan’s specific choice of targets, it is

125 CL (22 February 1943).
126 The manuscript of An Scian is held in Boston College and is dated 5 December 1944. De Paor notes that it formed part of the Gate Theatre’s Christmas variety show that year. ‘Twisting the Knife’, The Irish Times (29 March 2002), p. 12. Included in the Flann O’Brien collection in Boston College is a typescript of acts three and four of another Irish play (concerning a dragon, a princess and a marriage match), though this is unlikely to be O’Nolan’s.
127 O’Nolan wrote a similar sketch in English, called ‘The Handsome Carvers’. In this version, the argument is over the husband’s alcoholism. After he stabs his wife, there is a flashback to the day he was presented with the wedding present by his colleagues. To mark the occasion, he had accepted his first glass of whiskey. SIUC.
a little ironic that it was his own brother, Ciarán, who was co-founder and editor of Glun na Buaidhe’s newspaper, *Inniu.* The two brothers had followed very different paths; while Brian O’Nolan was writing *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the back bedroom of their home in Blackrock, Ciarán was composing an Irish detective novel, *Oíche i nGleann na nGealt,* also published in 1939. He spent his entire career as an Irish-language journalist, while Brian O’Nolan, safely ensconced in *The Irish Times,* and with the success of *An Béal Bocht* behind him, chose fairly quickly to return to English. It was a curious decision for a writer to stop working in his first language, but perhaps it was a decision which he never consciously made. The aggravation he expressed at the political appropriation of the Irish language in the 1940s was undoubtedly a factor, since it identified its supporters with an unsavoury brand of right-wing nationalism. But for a writer who often drew inspiration from other texts, another factor was perhaps the lack of a supporting framework of modern Irish writing. While *At Swim-Two-Birds* had ingeniously exploited the Middle Irish texts which O’Nolan had encountered in UCD, *An Béal Bocht* had gutted (and implicitly rejected) the entire modern prose tradition. Admittedly, a new generation of skilled writers - such as Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Seán Ó Riordáin - were coming to the fore, but perhaps too late to provide him with any sense of intellectual community. In the meantime, *Cruiskeen Lawn* sated itself on a diet of folk parodies and anti-revivalist bile.

By turning to English, O’Nolan might have secured himself a much wider readership, but he sacrificed a unique position as a fluent writer in Irish who was a scourge of both revivalists and their opponents. *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *An Béal Bocht* effortlessly shattered stereotypes about the Irish language and those who spoke it; after Myles na gCopaleen, there could be no easy assumptions about the character of the Irish speaker. As Bertie Smyllie recognised: ‘Until Mr Myles na gCopaleen came along, all the Gaels had been refusing to admit that anyone knew anything about the language

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but themselves... I think he has done more than anyone else for the Irish language'.\textsuperscript{129}

O’Nolan’s colleagues in \textit{The Irish Times} have testified that Smyllie encouraged him to continue with the Irish columns, if only to irritate the scions of the Gaelic League. Unsurprisingly, the disappearance of Irish from \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn} also prompted objections from many of Myles’s readers. His intermittent response to these complaints was usually to assert that the language was simply too troublesome to handle, and that it was preserved in an anachronistic form that made it inadequate for his uses.\textsuperscript{130}

Curiously, just when the number of Irish columns was obviously declining O’Nolan made one of his most eloquent defences of the language. Like many before, it was inspired by an \textit{Irish Times} editorial which questioned the worth of the language revival. The trite folkery, bitterness and bigotry which Myles had satirised in the language movement over the previous three years did not prevent him from asserting the cultural value of the Irish language itself:

> There is probably no basis at all for the theory that a people cannot preserve a separate national entity without a distinct language but it is beyond dispute that Irish enshrines the national ethos and in a subtle way Irish persists very vigorously in English. In advocating the preservation of Irish culture, it is not to be inferred that this culture is superior to the English or any other but simply that certain Irish modes are more comfortable and suitable for Irish people; otherwise these modes simply would not exist. It is therefore dangerous to discourage the use of Irish because the revival movement, even if completely ineffective, is a valuable preservative of certain native virtues...\textsuperscript{131}

Perhaps uncomfortable with his own fervour, O’Nolan added in a more characteristic tone that ‘Even if Irish had no value at all, the whole bustle of reviving it, the rows,

\textsuperscript{130} Ironically, this echoed Smyllie’s criticism of the language which had raised Myles’s ire in the first \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn}.
\textsuperscript{131} CL (11 October 1943); \textit{BM}, pp. 283-84. It would be interesting to examine how O’Nolan’s Irish ‘persists’ in his written English. Admittedly, he was a master of all linguistic registers – from the farcically correct to the broadest Hiberno-English - but it is a topic that remains to be explored.
the antagonisms, and the clashes surrounding the revival are interesting and amusing... The lads who believe that in slip-jigs we have a national prophylaxis make life less stark.’ Admittedly, his own idea of which admirable ‘native virtues’ were preserved by the Irish language probably differed a great deal from those which conservative Gaelic Leaguers would have had in mind. But there was no clearer expression of his ultimate sympathy towards the revival project, if not its practicality. Perhaps at the time O’Nolan had consciously decided to cut back on the Irish columns, and this was their swansong. However, they still appeared irregularly over the following months, and in December, the Gaelic Myles made a brief return to satisfy his readers’ curiosity about the disappearance of Irish from Cruiskeen Lawn. He imagined that they worried that it had been made scarce by the war, like many of the pleasant things of life, and they would suspect the involvement of the black market. But O’Nolan admitted (in Irish, ironically) that:

Seachas Béarla, tá sí achrannach agus trioblóideach le ceapadh agus scríobhadh mar is cóir. Acht rud abhfad níos measa, is deacra ar fad í do mhíleadh agus do bhascadh agus do thionntó bun-os-cionn dochum adhbhar siamsa do soláthar don lucht léighe. Tá an Béarla óg láthmhár so-lúththa; cailleach crap-chnámhach iseadh an Ghaoluing, céasta ag an aicíd ar a cruaidh cratha... Conathaobh í againn i n-aochor?

Corr-uair is féidir rud do rá i nGaedhilg nach mbeadh ceadaithe i mBéarla, toisc aos a tuigsiona bheith tearc. Acht tá an buaidh céadna ag an laidir. Is trua gan mise i Sacsaihb, ní fiú ins na Sé Conndaethe dí-líonnmhar...

Compared to English, it is difficult and troublesome to write properly. But what is worse, is that it is even more difficult to mangle and pummel and turn upside-down in order to supply something amusing to the reader. English is young, agile and flexible; Irish is a withered old hag, tormented with rheumatism.... Why do we have it at all?
Sometimes it is possible to say something in Irish which would not be allowed in English, because few understand it. But Latin has the same advantage. It would be a pity to deny me to the Saxons, or to the humourless Six Counties...\textsuperscript{132}

The same theme returned the following June - the Irish language, he claimed was simply not up to the challenges he set it: ‘The grammar was subject to fungoid complaints, the syntax was old, patched and leaky, some words completely unusable. Spending money on repairs was like pouring money down a well...’\textsuperscript{133} Given the fashion for modernisation and post-war planning (of which Myles was also a fervent critic), he implied that the language would soon become even more of an anachronism in Irish life, and ‘the day when standards \textit{in anything} can be dictated by peasant usage is gone forever. Paudrig Crohoore, with his harp, his gnarled ash-plant and his smoke-stained wife is no longer the accredited formulator of the Irish aesthetic’. This column neatly combined a characteristic swipe at the antiquated, ‘peasant’ bias of the revival with a dig at the all too modern (and too European) perspective of Ireland’s social planners. Myles’s movement away from Irish in 1943 - the year when Glun na Buaidhe and Ailteiri na hAiseiri first made their mark - indicates that he was no longer inclined to continue confounding stereotypes about the Irish language and its supporters. Ironically, this column carried on the trend in a slightly different fashion. Myles na gCopaleen had always demonstrated that there were no safe assumptions about the allegiances of the Irish speaker; now he was even surprising himself, and (however facetiously) was echoing those who touted the Irish language as the ultimate defence against the iniquities of a modern, urban society.

Though O’Nolan effectively stopped writing in Irish in late 1943, his attitude to the language and its revival showed little change by the time he began composing a manuscript on the subject – in 1947 or shortly thereafter - of which only three chapters

\textsuperscript{132} CL (9 December 1943). O’Nolan revived the same gag a few months later: ‘Are they unaware that the stuff can’t be got – that there hasn’t been a word of Irish come into this country for near on three year?’ CL (20 May 1944).
\textsuperscript{133} CL (5 June 1944).
These are evidently preliminary drafts, scribbled over with corrections and suggestions (in Niall Montgomery’s hand) but bearing no traces of O’Nolan’s own revisions. Of these three chapters, ‘Decline and Revival’ supplies a history of the language revival from the nineteenth century to the 1940s; ‘What is the position of the Gaeltacht?’ provides a statistical examination of the decline of Irish throughout the country, as well as a discussion of government policy on the preservation of the language and the Gaeltachts; and the most entertaining chapter, ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’, is a Mylesian broadside on revivalist polemics, past and present. One of the interests of this unfinished manuscript (which is as unstructured and digressive as any of O’Nolan’s products) is that it encapsulates much of the criticism of the language revival scattered throughout those first years of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Aside from *An Béal Bócht*, which is more focused on the literary aspect of the revival, it is O’Nolan’s most lucid and comprehensive response to the language question; however it largely reiterates his usual themes, albeit in a balder fashion. There is no evidence that he was commissioned to write a book on the subject, or any obvious reason why he chose to do so at the time (only to abandon the project mid-way). But it is interesting that he turned to the topic long after he had ceased writing his Irish *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, and that his attitude now seemed one of utter disenchantment. The manuscript is characterised by a deliberate and dour realism throughout, whether regarding the very feasibility of reviving (or even preserving) the Irish language, or the unsavoury motivations of some language activists. ‘The Pathology of Revivalism’ refers, to be specific, to the lunacy of revivalists’ expectations that Irish could soon (or at any stage) be reinstated as a language of daily life in Ireland: ‘certain aspects of the revival movement are very harmful to the simpler type of mind. The gospel of the more extreme “Gaels” is a farrago of childish

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134 This unpublished manuscript is held in Boston College, and its existence has not hitherto been adverted to by any of O’Nolan’s critics. Internal evidence suggests that it was written around 1947 – at one point, O’Nolan adapts a remark made by Thomas Davis a hundred years ago to apply to that year. He also refers to the 1946 census, noting that its findings would not be made public for some years. Interestingly, the few notes he made for the book are in a notebook used at the 1943 tribunal on the Cavan orphanage fire.

135 A notebook which contains quotations used in the manuscript also has some notes that indicate O’Nolan considered an alternative structure for the book, under the following headings: ‘The Cult of the Peasant, The Fate of the Gaeltacht, The Literary Background, The Language and Nationality, INTO – Education’. [Language Revival Notebook] BC.
pretences, ignorant opinions and plain lies'. Quoting with relish the fantastic aspirations of various revivalist pundits and pamphleteers (from the pages of An Cladheamh Soluis to Corkery's 1942 leaflet, What's This About the Gaelic League?), O’Nolan devotes the greater part of the chapter to a decimation of insularity and xenophobia in the language movement. Citing the GAA’s ban on members playing foreign games, and the depiction of Irish dancing as the spiritual antidote to such foreign depravities as the foxtrot, it was easy for O’Nolan to deduce that for the Gaels, ‘things are either good (Irish) or bad (foreign)’. The Gaelic tradition itself, as revived, was a fake – a collection of European folk dances and other cultural symbols of dubious descent. His quotations from revivalist polemics are selected to show the language revival at its worst, as a band of hysterical fantasists. All this would have been familiar to a reader of Cruiskeen Lawn; more uncharacteristically, the accompanying chapters attempt a sober analysis of the condition of the Irish language in contemporary Ireland, the causes of its decline and its chances of survival. O’Nolan’s deliberations on the subject studiously by-pass any cultural polemics (unlike the Gaeltacht Commission Report of 1926, which – as he notes – referred to Gaeltacht communities as ‘the Evicted Tenants of the Race’). Like An Béal Bocht, the chapter on the Gaeltachts emphasises the depressed economic conditions in these areas, recommending the introduction of industry into the Gaeltachts rather than the government’s plans to re-settle farming communities to more fertile land in English-speaking areas. Indeed, O’Nolan attributes the decline of Irish in the nineteenth

137 Pointing to the fact that the GAA (note the English title) had always conducted its business entirely through English, O’Nolan observes ‘who but people besotted with humbug could fail to see the humbug, if not the humour, of their “ban” on “foreign games”?... it is pitiful to see the enormous natural powers of assimilation which characterises the Irish race deliberately stultified and frustrated, not only by a “border” deliberately imposed for that purpose, but by stupid and ignorant “Gaelic” exclusivists at home. Vigorous peasant dances known, in one form or another in every agricultural community, are distinctively Irish, while the sophisticated dance diversions of the civilised globe are not only “foreign” and “English” but depraved, immoral and “negroid”. (The oppressed Gaels never express fellow-feeling for the oppressed negroes!)’. Ibid., pp. 7-8.
138 Ibid., p. 6.
139 O’Nolan had little respect for Corkery’s polemics. Cruiskeen Lawn supplied the following verdict on Corkery’s ‘What’s this about the Gaelic League?’: ‘Tá stuff ann nach mbeadh ceaduithe fíu leath chéad bliain oshoin ar dawnburstry, erin-go-braw, agus eabhrachtaí ar dul dithin mar na tsaoil mhóir. Ní féidir na leathanai fheiceadail, beagnach, ar an green flag ina bhfuilid cuachta...’ ‘There’s stuff in it which you couldn’t get away with even fifty years ago – plenty dawnburstry, erin-go-braw and ignorance of the ways of the world. You can hardly see the pages for the green flag they’re wrapped in....’ CL (20 June 1942).
century more to economic factors than to the machinations of a colonial government. The Penal Laws, he claims, saved the spoken language by preventing the development of a Catholic middle class who would, out of their own self-interest, have abandoned the language much earlier. While he argues that those in power at the time most likely preferred to keep the Catholic population Irish-speaking, as a means of securing against their economic advancement, he also points out that it was Protestant Ireland which led the nineteenth-century language revival, at a time when Maynooth remained hostile to the language. O’Nolan deliberately (and revealingly) avoids making the decline of the Irish language a tale of nationalist grievance. His own comments betray a pragmatic attitude to the merits of revival, just like that which he attributes to the generations who first turned to English:

The Gaels see nothing absurd in ignoring the economic facts which killed Irish; instead they insist that the whole process must be reversed, that the Irish people must all be re-locked in the prison of a language they broke out from, and cut away from the civilisations to which English gives them access...  

But by the late 1940s, the aim of a monolingual, Irish-speaking Ireland can only have been entertained by the most extreme (and delusional) language activists. Few could have ever desired this prospect, and O’Nolan’s image of a ‘prison of a language’ perpetuates the fears of isolation and backwardness which inspired the language revival’s opponents. Ironically, O’Nolan’s own writing in Irish had done much to counter the stereotype of the language which he replicates here, creating in *Cruiskeen Lawn* a sophisticated, consciously literary brand of satire with an unmistakeably modern sensibility. In concentrating so much on the lunatic fringe of the revival, on the backward look of one branch of cultural nationalism, perhaps O’Nolan showed too little faith in the future. Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille* was published in 1948, a

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140 ‘There is no reason to suppose that the Protestant overlord minority were not all in favour of the Catholics speaking Irish, and that to retain such a situation was one of the main objects of prohibiting education. Even today, many people ignorant of Irish think it is barbarous. Nor must one assume that the British in a later day were entirely destitute of benevolent sentiments when they introduced the teaching of English in the national schools in the Gaeltacht... Not only the English, but the Irish themselves, came to associate the Irish language with degradation and servitude.’ ‘Decline and Revival’, p. 3.

141 ‘The Pathology of Revivalism,’ pp. 2-3.
novel credited with introducing European modernism to literature in the Irish language. Despite the inventiveness of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and O’Nolan’s peculiarly domesticated style of modernism in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he never challenged Ó Cadhain’s status as a founding-figure of a truly modern Irish literature. *An Béal Bocht* is a transitional book, but O’Nolan never built on its success. While it acutely dissects the state of contemporary Irish writing, and the cant surrounding it (as did *At Swim*), its humour and linguistic inventiveness suggested a new vein in Irish-language writing which no one was more qualified than O’Nolan to develop, but he didn’t.¹⁴² For the following twenty-odd years, *Cruiskeen Lawn* was written wholly in English.

¹⁴² *The Irish Times* review picked up on this point: ‘Even the Irish is somewhat new: the author has got to grips with the problem of evolving a clear unprovincial style, and shows up with skill the evocative, colourful and humorous content of certain Irish words and phrases.’ F. O’R. ‘Myles Takes off His Coat!’ (13 December 1941), p. 5. Perhaps the choice not to write in Irish was simply pragmatic: ‘Suppose... there be a man with a perfect command of Irish PLUS the ability to write a memorable novel. (What am I talking about – amn’t I in that boat myself?) Why should such a person write that book in Irish for a handful of readers and possibly half-a-bucket of potato skins for payment? ...Is there any point in paying so much attention to a dead language? There can be if the person is cultivated, and deep knowledge of it can be useful for solving problems in archaeology. But what of its pursuit as a universal national nostrum? Sheerest humbug and scandalous waste of money’. *CL* (13 June 1962); cited in Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 191.
Chapter Five
Myles at War: The Early Years of Cruiskeen Lawn

On the 12th of August 1941 Myles announced that ‘This is English Language Week’. The column had often strayed into English before, most pointedly on St. Patrick’s Day when newspaper editors usually attempted to muster a patriotic smattering of Irish, but this was the first time that most Irish Times readers could enjoy prolonged exposure to Myles. Without the worthies of the Gaelic League to act as fall-guys, O’Nolan turned his attention to the cultural activities of the more anglicised middle-class Dubliner. Matters under discussion included the number of fakes in the National Gallery (to which Myles proposed to add his share), a project for sending ballet dancers to Leopardstown, and — in a typically oblique reference to the current war — the distinguished Russian general and Corkman, Tim O’Shenko (‘Tom was the brother, of course’). Whether this conversion to English was an immediate success with readers, or the English language week had in fact been a trial run, from that September onwards Cruiskeen Lawn ran as a daily feature, alternating columns in English and Irish. Writing in English presupposed a much broader readership for Myles, some of whom would have a very different range of preoccupations to his bilingual readers. On his Irish days, Myles could ridicule the quaintness of the language revival safe in the presumption that while his readers would be proficient in the Irish language (and so hardly disdainful of it), as purchasers of the Irish Times they were unlikely to hail from the more extreme reaches of the revival movement. Converting to English opened up the more traditional base of the Irish Times readership, one perhaps less disposed to appreciate the subtlety of his criticism of the language revival. Perhaps because of this, by the time O’Nolan finally ended his Irish columns in late 1943 not only had Myles acquired a broader scope, but also a more polemical (and even didactic) character. Under the exigencies of a long-running daily column, comic

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1 This week opened with the immaculately Irish heading of ‘Cruiscín Lán’. Myles reminded his readers the following day that ‘Seo seachtain an Béarla. Má tá Béarla agat, labhair é. Cur síntiú chuig ciste na teangan, leabhar Béarla ar an nGuthán’ (‘This is English Week. If you know English, speak it. Make a donation to the language fund, speak English on the Telephone’).

2 It is telling that on the occasions when Smyllie’s editorials thundered against the government’s language policy, Myles typically leapt to its defence (in English), despite his own mockery of its premises.
standbys such as the Brother were gradually retired and his genial mockery of Dublin’s middle-class culture (whether of language revivalists or Bell liberals) expanded to include satire of current social and political affairs. Indeed, between 1940 and 1945, Myles gradually swapped the character of the eccentric man of letters for the more aggrieved air of the frustrated civil servant.

Though Cruiskeen Lawn appeared fairly consistently until O’Nolan’s death in 1966, the scope of this chapter is predominantly confined to its English columns over the war years. It was in the earliest years of Cruiskeen Lawn that its most celebrated features made their appearance: Keats and Chapman, the Plain People of Ireland, the Brother, The Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction, the long and varied history of Sir Myles na gCopaleen, the Research Bureau and the Catechism of Cliché, all of which were established by 1943. Cruiskeen Lawn’s Bores arrived in 1944, and the final section of The Best of Myles – devoted to ‘Miscellaneous’ features – best describes the variable nature of the column in the later war years, as O’Nolan’s humour became more topical and more discursive. Focusing on the column from 1941 to 1945 throws a number of its curiosities into relief. The nature of Cruiskeen Lawn itself changed significantly during this time, as the columns developed from haphazard collections of short items (in a muddle of languages) to those which addressed a single topic, often over a few days. Although O’Nolan reportedly wrote the week’s Cruiskeen Lawn in a single sitting on a Sunday afternoon, reading the columns chronologically in The Irish Times does not always give the sense of consistency that this might imply. In the first few months of the daily column,

1 However, there were intermittent breaks in the publication of Cruiskeen Lawn in the 1950s and 1960s, due to O’Nolan’s ill-health. The column also disappeared for much of 1951, at a time when O’Nolan’s relations with The Irish Times were soured by its suppression of potentially libellous pieces (and apologies for others). Cronin, No Laughing Matter, pp. 177-179.

2 When requesting a raise in 1942, O’Nolan pointed out the popularity which Cruiskeen Lawn had already achieved over the previous two years, the unique nature of the column, and the publicity which it had given The Irish Times. Letter from Brian O’Nolan to The Irish Times (21 October 1942), BC. His case would have been supported by a report in The Leinster Leader on the 16th of May 1942 on the conviction of a newsboy for stealing copies of The Irish Independent and The Irish Press. When making his ruling, the judge in the case observed that Myles na gCopaleen would be distressed to know that The Irish Times was left behind.


4 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 115.
Cruiskeen Lawn ran an extended series on the Myles na gCopaleen WAAMA League and its troubled Escort Service, but such sequences were rare, this sustained focus being more typical of O’Nolan’s intervention in the debate on social planning in 1944 and his later observations on the post-war world. These changes in the column over its first few years – in its composition, its scope, and its delicate balance of nonsense and satire – are in part due to the circumstances of its publication during the war years (the war’s official title in Ireland, ‘the Emergency’, managed a curious blend of a stereotypically British sang-froid and a stereotypically Irish insularity). Throughout the war, the draconian press censorship which was in place to protect Ireland’s air of neutrality ensured a difficult period for The Irish Times, a paper long used to identifying with the Commonwealth and the British Army. At a time when Bertie Smyllie’s editorials were regularly the subject of unwanted attention from the censorship authorities, O’Nolan’s wartime commentary was largely restricted to the famed inventions of the Myles na gCopaleen Research Bureau, a body which mimicked the Emergency Scientific Research Bureau’s efforts to stave off the pain of rationing. The fact that Cruiskeen Lawn became noticeably more topical after May 1945 (as Myles commented on the atomic bomb, the Nuremberg trials, and the very public spat over the airwaves between Churchill and de Valera) can be partly attributed to the more polemical direction in which the column had been heading over the previous year. Nevertheless, the changing tenor of the column was obviously accelerated by the end of press censorship that summer as, finally free to look beyond internal squabbles, Myles swiftly responded to the dramatic consequences of the war. By the end of 1945, the nonsensical column which many had hailed as a welcome distraction from the gloom of wartime was juggling a mix of nonsense, satire, and outright political commentary.

There are other reasons for confining the focus of this chapter to the war years, not least because the Emergency itself deserves consideration as a distinct period, one which aggravated changes already underway in Irish society. Predictably, emigration

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7 The Emergency Scientific Research Bureau was established by de Valera to investigate means of compensating for raw materials which could not be imported during the war.
worsened during the war, as many joined the Allied forces and others exploited employment shortages in Britain. The haemorrhage from rural Ireland in particular (whether through emigration or migration) notoriously inspired the rural propaganda of de Valera’s 1943 St. Patrick’s Day speech. As The Bell pointed out, and this speech tacitly admitted, emigration was not solely (though primarily) an economic problem; it was also an expression of dissatisfaction with the nature of Irish life.⁸ The clash between Myles and the Plain People of Ireland is a comic symptom of these demographic changes. However, while the Plain People are in one sense designed to appeal to the Dubliner who is suspicious (or disdainful) of his country cousins invading the capital, in a manner typical of O’Nolan’s double-edged humour they also served to satirise the cultural pretensions of a new breed of Irish Times reader typified by O’Nolan himself: the disenchanted, middle-class, Catholic civil servant. Much as the Emergency years forced the State to fall back on its own resources, they also forced a reconsideration of its cultural agenda, the very mixture of nationalist politics and revivalist aesthetics which many intellectuals of O’Nolan’s generation (the new Irish Times readers) increasingly found questionable. By cutting Ireland off from Europe and America, war had accidentally brought Arthur Griffith’s ‘sinn féin’ philosophy to its logical conclusion and as J. J. Lee notes: ‘the war taught the prophets of self-sufficiency a painful lesson in elementary economics... The dream came true in 1940. Ireland was cut off. The dream now became a nightmare’.⁹ It would not be until 1958 that the economic fantasy of self-sufficiency would finally be abandoned, but in the interim, the Emergency years provided a bracing dose of reality. Similarly, with British and American markets closing off throughout the war, Irish writers were finally forced to confront the consequences of literary censorship. The bitter Seanad debate over The Tailor and Ansty in 1943 might not have achieved any changes in legislation (with a censorship appeals board only being established in 1946), but it highlighted the contentious nature of the issue. Otherwise, the war years were not as stagnant culturally as might be supposed. The establishment of The Bell in October 1940 was a significant act, even if the journal’s liberal agenda still betrayed a bias.

towards defining culture in nationalist terms, and as discussed in the previous chapter, there was some renaissance in Irish-language publishing. In fact, Vivian Mercier argues that the Emergency ushered in something of a boom for Irish writers, with increasing support from Irish theatres and more opportunities for publication at home (*The Irish Times*’s Saturday books page was a typical example, providing a forum for new poets). In 1943, the Irish Exhibition of Living Art finally brought modernism to Dublin, where both this landmark exhibition and its successors were chronicled with gleeful disdain in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. From 1938, the Radio Éireann orchestra provided regular concerts of classical music, though these only found their true audience in the 1940s - among whom was Myles na gCopaleen, who fortuitously discovered his talents as a music critic. Throughout this strange period of apparent stagnation and tentative change, *Cruiskeen Lawn* stealthily developed, as Stephen Young put it, into ‘a monstrous caricature of the whole of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century’. Myles himself, a brilliant mimic of the multifarious Irish public, captured the contradictions of an era when the reality of cultural, political and economic isolation was beginning to undermine the state’s nationalist ideology.

The most immediately striking aspects of *Cruiskeen Lawn* are its variety and its vast size, neither of which makes analysing the column an easy task. In order not to lose

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11 Mercier argues that ‘...the writers who remained at home during the war did feel a sense of gratitude to their country for sheltering them and providing them with alternative sources of income, now that the British and American markets for their work was disappearing... The Abbey Theatre devoted itself almost entirely to the production of new Irish plays, while the Gate, Gaiety, and Olympia theatres all produced more Irish work than before’. He points out that most Dublin papers helped Irish writers and in 1944, for example, Donagh MacDonagh edited a collection of poetry that had been published in *The Irish Times*, most of it during the war. ‘Literature in English, 1921-84’, in *A New History of Ireland*, Vol. VII, p. 503.
12 For O’Nolan’s comments on the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art see *CL* (4 October 1943), and on the Subjective Art Exhibition mounted the following January see *CL* (10 January 1944).
itself in a Mylesian phantasmagoria this chapter focuses primarily on some of the
column’s most consistent themes: The Bell, literary Dublin, Ireland’s cultural self-
consciousness and, towards the end of the war, more topical matters such as the
debates over social planning and the war in Asia. In doing so, it preserves a broadly
chronological progression which demonstrates how Cruiskeen Lawn developed over
this time. Since this chapter aims to draw the column into focus thematically and
contextually, rather than to catalogue its various comic set-pieces, it is admittedly
skewed in favour of the more topical and polemical aspects of Cruiskeen Lawn. While
much of the comedy of Cruiskeen Lawn (a hugely inventive mix of nonsense stories,
parodies and wordplay) is arguably a natural extension of the earlier fiction, its status
as a daily column in a national newspaper undoubtedly gave added impetus to
O’Nolan’s satirical talents. However, the character of Myles inflated the stentorian
authorial voice to a farcical degree, and he frequently criticised the effrontery of
contemporaries such as Seán O’Faoláin and Frank O’Connor for making
pronouncements on the state of Irish society.\(^\text{16}\) But towards the middle of the 1940s,
Cruiskeen Lawn began to move away from its comedic roots and became less of a
variety act. This chapter broadly traces the arc of its early development, examining
Myles’s progress from the nimble jester who mocked Dublin’s intellectuals and Plain
People alike, to the censorious satirist disdainfully coming to grips with the post-war
world.

‘the peasant jester’: Cruiskeen Lawn and The Irish Times

When discussing such a topsy-turvey creation as Cruiskeen Lawn it is as well not to
begin at the beginning, but at the end. Thomas Woods’s 1946 Bell profile of Myles na
gCopaleen took a retrospective look at O’Nolan’s career to date and drew particular
attention to the delicate position of an Irish-language satirist who wrote for a paper

\(^{16}\) Stephen Curran discusses how O’Nolan’s criticism of The Bell highlights ‘the capacity of critics... to
initiate debate that is itself fraudulent’, whether overtaken by critical clichés or, in the case of O’Faoláin, a
popularly identified with Anglo-Ireland. According to Woods, 'the great stupidity of the mind of the mass' was the proper material of the humorous columnist, but as a journal of the minority (of 'unionists and ex-unionists, intellectuals and mock-intellectuals'), The Irish Times could not safely exploit such condescension:

...in writing for the Irish Times, there is the danger of appearing to be too much outside what Myles would call the national ethos. It is to be expected that the Irish Times will sneer at the Irish people (or so the Irish people are likely to think). On the other hand, by leaning too much the other way, Myles might seem the bridgehead of the Irish people in the Irish Times. In either case, the effectiveness of his satire would be weakened. In fact, Myles has skilfully evaded both traps... [but] the ambivalence of his position has left its trace in his work and has been responsible for a certain ambiguity in his approach.

Woods did not specify how this ambiguity is expressed in Cruiskeen Lawn, being content only to identify Myles's 'anomalous position' as the 'peasant jester in the Irish Times'. It is difficult to gauge whether this anomaly was in fact felt by contemporary readers of Cruiskeen Lawn. Certainly, many of the initial responses to the column presented it as an Anglo-Irish plot, but as noted in the previous chapter, O'Nolan was himself responsible for most of the letters on the subject. The most vitriolic attack of this type – the poem previously quoted from The Standard - says more about the biases of that paper than it does about typical attitudes to The Irish Times. Nevertheless, Woods's point is suggestive. Whether or not O’Nolan’s readers viewed him as a ‘peasant jester’ in an Anglo-Irish paper, the way in which O’Nolan himself exploited the ambiguities of the Myles na gCopaleen persona betrays a certain self-consciousness about his position - sometimes playing the paternal aristocrat, sometimes the cunning peasant rogue.

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17 Not only did the article address the nature of The Irish Times in the 1940s, and more particularly, the readership whom Myles expected to address, but its author, Thomas Woods, was well placed to capture the nuances of Myles’s humour, since he was a fellow civil servant who was himself engaged in 'part-time literary activities'. See Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 162. Woods also contributed a number of articles to EnvoY, particularly as a theatre critic.

18 'Thomas Hogan' [Thomas Woods], 'Myles na gCopaleen,' The Bell 13:2 (November 1946), p. 132.

19 Ibid., p. 139.
Interestingly, Woods compared Myles to the humorist J. B. Morton (otherwise known as ‘Beachcomber’ of the Daily Express) in a way that may illuminate the sources of this uncertainty, or ambiguity.\(^{20}\) The Plain People of Ireland were descendants of Beachcomber’s dim-witted adversary, Prodnose, a reader who suffered volleys of abuse for intercepting the writer’s flights of fancy. Similarly, the Myles na gCopaleen Research Bureau may have satirised de Valera’s Emergency Scientific Research Bureau, but its bizarre inventions also recalled those of Beachcomber’s Dr Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht. The Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction, convened under Twinfeet J., mirrored the absurd proceedings conducted under Beachcomber’s Mr Justice Cocklecarrot, who was long preoccupied with the labyrinthine case of the twelve red-bearded dwarves. Beachcomber’s ‘Dictionary for Today,’ itself borrowed from Flaubert’s Dictionnaire des idées reçues, inspired an Irish-language equivalent in the first year of Cruiskeen Lawn. Many correspondents to The Irish Times pointed to the similarities between the two writers, but Woods interestingly set them apart – not for any inherent quality in their humour, but because of the very different contexts in which each was played out.\(^{21}\) Arguing that ‘the mind of the mass’ was the proper material of the humorous columnist, Woods claimed that Beachcomber, an outsider to English society (one of ‘the Belloc-Chesterton school’, and so presumably an outsider by virtue of his Catholicism), was well placed to attack the values of the Daily Express reader. On the other hand, the position of Myles in relation to the Irish Times reader was quite another matter. J. B. Morton was writing for one of the first newspapers to successfully target a mass readership; his editor constantly cited the Daily Express reader (in his own words, ‘the man on the Rhyle promenade’) as the ultimate consideration in his editorial decisions.\(^{22}\) Along with the Daily Mail, the Express had a hand in creating the contemporary image of the mass man (or the plain man, perhaps), one reflected in the newly-minted law of torts whose

\(^{20}\) Morton had been writing the Beachcomber column, ‘By the Way’, since 1924, when he had succeeded D. B. Wyndham-Lewis in the job.

\(^{21}\) For example, D. V. Briscoe, writing to The Irish Times (27 September 1941): ‘Myles na gCopaleen is the closest contender to Beachcomber (J. B. Morton) for the title of best European humorous columnist.’

yardstick of reasonable behaviour was the ubiquitous man on the Clapham omnibus. The Irish Times, on the other hand, was a good deal more antiquated and more restricted in its appeal than the Daily Express. Long regarded as the newspaper of the ascendancy class, the Times was left somewhat stranded after 1922. In a 1941 interview with The Bell, Smyllie admitted that its detractors still regarded The Irish Times as being aimed at ‘old ladies and colonels... “dug-outs” in the Kildare Street Club’, but he claimed to be targeting young readers fresh from school and university, the voters and leaders of the future. It was no harm to trumpet such a policy to The Bell – itself a declared champion of a new and youthful Ireland - but Smyllie’s adoption of young writers from UCD such as Niall Sheridan (who introduced him to O’Nolan) bears out his claim. Nevertheless, the Times’s lingering reputation placed Myles in a far different position to Beachcomber, whose erudite fancies (according to Woods) openly subverted the populist policy of the Daily Express.

Despite Smyllie’s reformist rhetoric, in the early 1940s The Irish Times was still largely preoccupied with the activities of a certain class of Irishman. University notes maintained a conspicuous position in the paper, as did reports of horse shows and other society events. However, as the war progressed, changes in the format of The Irish Times made it more competitive in the marketplace, though its editorial stance was still hardly designed to appeal to the bulk of the Irish readership. Early in the war it moved news to the front page - a significant change, if only in showing that The Irish Times was now openly competing with its peers on the newsstand, rather than relying on the loyalties of its traditional readership. However, of its two main domestic rivals, it could only hope to win readers from the Irish Independent, since readers of the Fianna Fáil-sponsored Irish Press would hardly look favourably on Smyllie’s vision of an independent Ireland with strong connections to the British

25 Ironically, paper shortages during the Emergency meant that The Irish Times eventually had to resort to requiring subscriptions from its readers.
Commonwealth. The war years brought mixed fortunes for The Irish Times: on the positive side, paper shortages and transport problems led to a huge reduction in the circulation of British newspapers in Ireland (which had fallen by 60% in September 1941), allowing domestic newspapers to gain a stronger foothold. However, paper shortages also took their toll, at one point reducing the Times to four pages. Disputes over press censorship disrupted the normal production of the paper and led to a number of open attacks on the Times from senior government politicians (which Smyllie appeared to savour). In one way, these constant skirmishes with the censors perfectly exemplify why The Irish Times was the natural home for the Gaelic oddity, Cruiskeen Lawn. While Thomas Woods feared that O’Nolan’s satire could be hampered by the Irish Times’s reputation as a rather patrician critic of the plain Irish, the paper’s position during the Emergency was somewhat more embattled than this suggests. Smyllie, staunchly pro-Allied and disdainful of Ireland’s neutrality, appreciated a good battle with politicians and censors; as it turned out, his protégé thrived equally well in such an atmosphere.

On one occasion, a certain amount of Mylesian even infected the ‘Irishman’s Diary’ column which Smyllie himself habitually wrote under the title ‘Nichevo’. References to Irish servicemen in the British forces were officially banned (ensuring that the Times’s obituaries slowly filled with fatalities from ‘lead poisoning’), and this led to the curious incident of the Japanese soldiers:

> In his broadcast on Sunday night, Mr Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister (NB Britain is an island to the east of Eire) mentioned by name nine military and

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26 As Conor Cruise O’Brien reported in 1945: ‘Middle-class Catholic families who were reading the Independent ten years ago are reading the Irish Times today – it was a bad day for the Independent when the Irish Times quietly dropped the invidious ‘Roman’ before ‘Catholic’...’. Donat O’Donnell (Conor Cruise O’Brien), ‘The Fourth Estate: The Irish Independent’, The Bell 9:5 (February 1945), p. 393.


28 As early as January 1940, The Irish Times was severely punished by being ordered to submit to the censor in full before publication. On this occasion, the order was lifted after Smyllie appealed to de Valera, though with the condition that all his editorials would be submitted prior to publication - a requirement which Smyllie flouted as far as he could. After three such omissions, Aiken re-introduced the order in December 1942 and The Irish Times was compelled to submit each issue in full to the censor until press censorship was finally lifted in May 1945. See ibid., pp. 162-164.
naval commanders who had gained fame recently in North Africa and the Mediterranean. I append the names of the gallant nine:

- General Wavell, English
- General Dill, Japanese (North Island)
- General Mackie, Australian
- General Brooke, Japanese (North Island)
- General Wilson, Japanese (North Island)
- Admiral Cunningham, Japanese
- General O'Connor, Japanese
- Admiral Sommerville, Japanese
- General O'Moore Creagh, Japanese

As the venerable member of the Samurai, San Tiok Eli might or might not have put it: 'Quae regio in terra non plena laboris?'

The Tánaiste, Seán T. O'Kelly might or might not have put it like that when he saw his paper that morning (providing it was not the Irish Press which he took with his breakfast), but – to hazard the obvious – it did not improve relations with the censor. Despite the conflicts which most newspapers had at some time or another with the censorship authorities, it was evidently The Irish Times which they regarded with most disdain. On one occasion the Minister for Defence, Frank Aiken, dismissed the tiny anti-censorship lobby in the Oireachtas by growling that they ‘represented in parliament what the Irish Times represented in the press’. Senator Seán Campbell dispelled any doubts about the nature of this constituency:

There is a little coterie in this country who affect to be devotees at the shrine of liberal thought and who do not like the censorship of books, nor the divorce laws nor many other things which the people of this country favour... [the anti-censorship is] the squealing of propagandists... the squealing of people who know they have no right to speak for the people of this country.

29 Nicho, ‘Irishman’s Diary’, The Irish Times (11 February 1941); cited in Ó Drisceoil, p. 164. Seán T. O’Kelly was still the Minister for Local Government and Public Health when O’Nolan joined the department in 1935, which makes the episode a little suspicious. This particular classical tag was also a favourite of Myles.

30 The Irish Independent was an exception, since it maintained a strict policy of self-censorship. On the other hand, the editor of The Irish Press, William Sweetman, was moved to complain that the paper was being discriminated against to prove the censor’s impartiality, ibid., p. 169. Surprisingly, it was not the pro-Allied Irish Times which was the first newspaper ordered to submit in full to the censor, but the Catholic Standard (on 23 September 1939), though this order was soon revoked, ibid., p. 230.

31 Ibid., p. 260.

32 Ibid., p. 261.
Campbell’s intemperance betrayed the beliefs (or prejudices) of ‘the vast majority of ordinary people’ whom he claimed to represent. (It is little wonder then that its most famous columnist often imagined himself beleaguered by the Plain People of Ireland.) In a Bell profile of The Irish Times, Vivian Mercier drew attention to the disparity between its contemporary readership (‘in the main orientated towards Ireland rather than England’ and the popular image which the paper still enjoyed as ‘a dyed-in-the-wool, dry-as-dust, dead-in-the-last-ditch Ascendancy organ, the sworn enemy of the Irish people, for ever wailing whatever may be the Ballsbridge equivalent of “Wisha, God be with the good ould times”...’. To some extent, Smyllie’s mischievous treatment of the press censors played into such prejudices. Wilful anomalies, such as his insistence on referring to Cobh and Dun Laoghaire as Queenstown and Kingstown, did not endear him to those who suspected that The Irish Times still yearned for a pre-lapsarian, pre-Independence Ireland.

Aside from The Irish Times’s disregard for nationalist sensibilities, the paper was also well known as an opponent of literary censorship. Its Saturday books page regularly printed lists of newly-banned books until the authorities divined that this was a subtle form of advertisement and restricted such notices to the more obscure pages of Iris Oifigiúil. It was only fitting that this unorthodox environment, with its slight whiff of belles-lettres, should have played host to Myles na gCopaleen, but O’Nolan nevertheless maintained a slightly embattled air within the Times. On the matter of literary censorship, for example, he maintained quite a distinct position:

The fuss that is made about the censorship in certain quarters makes me laugh. The rule is that you must make a scathing reference to the censorship at every possible opportunity in speaking or writing. Give the impression that it is a personal scourge, a thing that is destroying you, subjecting the “artist” in you to diabolical torment. Then you are made as an Irish intellectual and eligible for your first corduroys.

34 Ibid., pp. 290-291.
35 CL (6 October 1941).
Once *Cruiskeen Lawn* became fairly well entrenched in the paper, it was given a permanent home between the leading article and ‘An Irishman’s Diary’, from which position O’Nolan conducted intermittent campaigns against his editor. As the persona of Myles became gradually more defined, O’Nolan increasingly presented himself as a bemused (and grandly anglicised) visitor to these shores, a benign dispenser of advice to ‘you Irish’. The grandiose tone had shades of Bertie Smyllie, as Vivian Mercier recognised: ‘Does any other paper in the world allow its editorials to be parodied right on the editorial page? Beachcomber’s or Low’s disrespect for their several employers is as nothing compared with Myles na gCopaleen’s.’36 Of course, O’Nolan’s very first column had attacked an editorial criticising the government’s policy on the language revival and he continued in much the same vein.37 Even in less satirical moods, the defiantly nonsensical character of *Cruiskeen Lawn* provided an antidote to Smyllie’s dour leaders on the progress of the war. O’Nolan fully exploited his position as the in-house clown; for Myles, a meeting with the editor was not only a sobering experience, but a lesson in journalistic cliché:

...chatting away serious supplies position city its back to wall world cataclysm without precedent penalties of neutrality soft thinking no substitute for hard work things worse before get better outcome which no man can foresee and few would be so foolhardy as to predict. (The old relentless stuff that makes the reader every morning push away the Luke Waugham egg and light shaky cigarette halfway through breakfast.)38

*Cruiskeen Lawn* did not simply act as a counterpoint to the serious business being conducted across the page, but often subverted Smyllie’s editorials with its own

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37 This stance was another reason for *The Irish Times*’s difficult relationship with Fianna Fáil. On 30 September 1943 the front page gleefully reported de Valera’s attack on the paper during his closing speech at the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis. The Taoiseach had complained that the editor’s habitual criticism of the government’s language policy was detrimental to the revival movement.
38 *CL* (3 March 1943).
O’Nolan had a habit of mischievously claiming responsibility for neighbouring articles, and when Smyllie complained in July 1945 that de Valera behaved as if the Irish were doing Britain a favour by remaining in the Commonwealth, O’Nolan announced a few days later that he had had second thoughts about his editorial:

I apologise... for insinuating that we have by brute force and strength of armour coerced H. M. Govt. into according us certain ad limina privileges vis-à-vis their consuls and pro-consuls. It’s just sheer good nature on the part of your men, who are all decent fellows. Permit me to say this for the British – they don’t take half as high a view of themselves as we decent Irish do of them...  

Stephen Young has described Cruiskeen Lawn as a ‘bizarre newspaper inside the newspaper’ and it certainly had the air of an independent republic within the Times - at least in its later, more polemical, incarnation. Cruiskeen Lawn remained in the leader page until the summer of 1945 when Myles was moved to a less conspicuous position, as Donohue argues, because of Smyllie’s growing irritation at Myles’s attacks.

However, O’Nolan’s ridicule of the press was not confined to the pronouncements of his editor. On a slow day, excerpts from various newspapers (including The Irish Times itself) could undergo excruciatingly pedantic analysis in Cruiskeen Lawn. Though O’Nolan had no compunction about padding out a column with the odd windy paragraph from an ancient number of An Claidheamh Soluis, most of these excerpts were not used merely as fillers, but as launching-pads for his fertile imagination. His praise for the clarity and precision of the Irish language was matched by his scorn for the slovenliness of modern English prose, particularly as practised by journalists. His

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39 For example, in O’Nolan’s opposition to the proposals for post-war social planning, which Smyllie supported in his editorials. This is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.
40 CL (24 July 1945).
42 Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 122.
43 It was not just the press which underwent dissection by Myles - an anthology of essays on Irish Art provided a full week of column fodder in April 1944, while a tortuous fortnight on the constitutions of European nation states followed in April 1945.
one-man campaign against the well-worn phrase was typified in the Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliché, introduced in March 1942 as a 'unique compendium of all that is nauseating in contemporary writing':

Is man ever hurt in a motor smash?
No. He sustains an injury.

Does such a man ever die from his injuries?
No. He succumbs to them... 

Like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the Catechism of Cliché was a distant descendant of the ‘ready-made’ book which O’Nolan and his UCD friends had once planned to write. However, *At Swim* is much more than a compendium of hackneyed literary styles, and the Catechism similarly grew more nuanced than the original concept might suggest. It might have owed something to the ‘Ithaca’ episode of *Ulysses* (both deriving from the Catholic catechism), but as an anatomy of social conventions, it is more similar to Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. Myles’s generic obituary of the upstanding Irishman is a case in point; his mimicry of the form is exact, but more pointed is his satire of the tacit consensus concerning ‘all that is best in Irish life’:

Of what was any deceased citizen you like to mention typical?
Of all that is best in Irish life...

What article of his was always at the disposal of the national language?
His purse...

At what time did he speak Irish?
At a time when it was neither profitable nor popular.

With what cause did he never disguise the fact that his sympathies lay?
The cause of national independence.

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44 CL (27 March 1942); BM, p. 202. It is only fair to contributors to *The Bell*, or to government reports, or any of the other works of literature which Myles regularly excoriated, to acknowledge that he paid equally close attention to the repetitive banalities wheeled out at bus stop or barstool: ‘And I’ll tell you a man that went off very quickly, Mickie D., shure I seen him there at the last smoker, he was the size of your fist look, the poor fella couldn’ stand straight but he wouldn’t let the crowd down, he sang “In Cellar Cool” and do you know what I’m going to tell you, he never sang it better. Ahh he was real Dublin, the ould crowd are goin fast, sure there’s poor little Rooney that’s not lookin himself this two year, I wouldn’t say he’s long for this world, Ahh yes, Ahh but shure we’ll all go the one way, every man of us. And we’ll all meet again. We’ll all meet again. Aye...’. CL (4 February 1942).

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And at what time?
At a time when lesser men were content with the rôle of time-server and sycophant…

As O’Nolan later observed of the cliché, ‘a sociological commentary could be compiled from these items of mortified language’, linguistic ruts reflect social ruts. The clichés which O’Nolan attacked were not simply inelegant lumps of prose, but symptoms of thinking that had slipped into easy habits. His tortuously inverted catechism resorted to the simple solution of obstructing their convenience. O’Nolan found the ludicrous in the most commonplace of phrases, generally the product of the parrot-like press:

What does it behove us to proclaim?
Our faith.
In what does it behove us to proclaim our faith?
Democracy.
From what vertiginous eyrie does it behove us to proclaim our faith in democracy?
From the house-tops.

The inventiveness (or inconsistency) of O’Nolan’s own prose style subverted common journalistic practice, since most newspapers were not so much distinguished by a ‘system of competing voices’ as by their house style. Though Myles often assumed a grandiose tone that carried a mischievous echo of his editor (as in the catechism above), Cruiskeen Lawn played host to a vast repertoire of voices. These not only outraged the bland uniformity of much journalistic prose, but hinted that even a by-

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45 CL (1 May 1942); BM, p. 203.
46 BM, p. 227.
47 CL (2 October 1942); BM, p. 219.
48 Young, ‘Fact/ Fiction: Cruiskeen Lawn 1940-66’, p. 116. O’Nolan’s parody of journalistic conventions was continued in his 1943 Cruiskeen Lawn anthology. This collection – the only one published in his lifetime - maintains the layout of the newspaper, its cover mimicking an Irish Times front page. Inside, the pages are split into two columns, the left headed with an arrow pointing to: ‘So-called English down below here/ Annsó sios an dranntán galleadh neamh-Ghaedhil’ and its right-hand counterpart announcing: ‘An teanga mhin mhathairdha gigh mí-ghramadúil annsó sios/ Here the kingly and melodious Irish.’ As if to exaggerate the dual character of his bilingual anthology, O’Nolan’s bilingual titles do not correspond exactly. The lines in Irish read respectively: ‘Here below the foreign, un-Gaelic growling.’ and: ‘The mothertongue, sweet but ungrammatical, here below’. 193
O’Nolan drew attention to the machinery of editing and printing that intervened between the writer and the reader, as well as to the formal conventions which determined any writer’s style. In the hands of Myles na gCopaleen, even the implied reader did not remain an unnoticed presence, and the reader’s voice was instead travestied in the form of the Plain People of Ireland. Neither was O’Nolan coy about drawing attention to the position of Cruiskeen Lawn within the paper; when he wished to refer to what was going on in adjoining columns, he found that the easiest method of drawing the reader’s attention was simply to point. (On one occasion, he even led his readers across the page to ‘The Irishman’s Diary’ for a change of air.) The self-reflexive instinct that characterises his early fiction – and which lingered on even in Mick Shaughnessy’s asides in The Dalkey Archive – is equally visible in Cruiskeen Lawn.

This self-reflexive quality has interesting implications for the persona of Myles himself. O’Nolan’s habit of dissecting the journalese of The Irish Times or the jargon of The Bell shows an inescapable (if playful) self-consciousness about the very tools of his trade; indeed, Cruiskeen Lawn’s seemingly endless ironic regressions betray a dislocated centre of authority, as if the critic in O’Nolan was forever overtaking the writer. He could betray some anxiety on this point, once despondently remarking that his ‘...sole contribution to the terrestrial literatures has been to refute each and every claim to originality on the part of other writers’. The originality of Myles na gCopaleen might seem too obvious to be questioned, bearing in mind the antic inventiveness of Cruiskeen Lawn. But Cruiskeen Lawn, like the parodic At Swim and

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49 O’Nolan sometimes claimed that Cruiskeen Lawn was in fact the work of three hands, in order to protect himself should any particular column offend his superiors in the civil service. Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 185.
50 CL (1 March 1943).
51 Admittedly, Myles’s criticism of his fellow journalists often had little to do with the perils of language itself – frequently, he merely adopted the attitude of an impatient school-master in relation to his contemporaries. Dissecting one issue of The Bell, for example, he complained that ‘...if these uppish highly trained writing savants who are sure they are worth more than five bob insist on dragging in foreign words by the scruff of the fair hair, why not do it accurately and thus show that the use of these words is perfectly natural and the result of long sojourns abroad?’ CL (1 June 1942); BM, pp. 232-33.
52 CL (4 March 1958).
An Béal Bocht, also betrays O’Nolan’s strength as an essentially reactive and responsive writer: in a literary context, this can be seen in the way Myles adapted many comic devices of the Daily Express’s Beachcomber for the very different environs of The Irish Times. And in some respects Cruiskeen Lawn was a master ventriloquist’s act, combining the interjections of the Plain People of Ireland with echoes of the pompous editor, Dublin pub talk, and every manner of hackneyed prose, from legal jargon to the meanderings of steam engine enthusiasts. It is because of this responsive quality in O’Nolan’s comedy that Stephen Curran argues that Cruiskeen Lawn was beneficial to his career, since it provided him with a ready-made (and much-needed) audience:

In his first novel, At Swim-Two-Birds, audiences already figure as an indispensable structuring motif, and the presence of an alert, responsive readership proved a precondition for the satirical program initiated in his journalism… O’Nolan quotes readers’ letters back at them or, in turn, informs them, probes their responses, harangues them, mocks them, and sets out to persuade them.53

In At Swim, O’Nolan’s parodies set up a dialogue with his predecessors (notably Joyce), one that is mirrored in the characters’ comic debates on the stories in hand. The multi-faceted Myles, who berates and mimics his readers to varying degrees, is very much a descendant of At Swim. Even the conceit of presenting the novel as an unfinished work in progress - a long and rambling collage of different styles, its direction (if any) shifting in line with the interjections of its readers - strangely anticipates the actual form of Cruiskeen Lawn. Like Comhthrom Féinne in which O’Nolan first honed his comic style, Cruiskeen Lawn now gave him the opportunity to play off an actual readership, or as his colleague Jack White put it: ‘to keep up a dialogue with his audience, absorbing the reactions into the next work to be produced’.54 And Myles’s humour inevitably gains added pungency when read not merely in the context of its publication in The Irish Times (and its impish subversion of the paper’s editorial identity), but also with attention to the kinds of readers whom

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53 Curran, “‘No, this is not from The Bell’: Brian O’Nolan’s 1943 Cruiskeen Lawn Anthology”, p. 80.
it addressed. As noted, in its first English week <i>Cruiskeen Lawn</i> immediately sent up the cultural pursuits of middle-class Dublin, the target readership of <i>The Irish Times</i> (perhaps to provoke another skirmish in the letters page). But the column’s remit necessarily broadened with time and O’Nolan’s relationship to his readership gradually changed; as White argues: ‘…he came to interpret this instant reaction as influence, or even power’. As Myles became more dogmatic, his identity became more consistent and the dialogue more one-sided; the evasive playfulness and continual inventiveness of the early period gave way to a more abrasive satire, and to a style of commentary more typical of newspaper columnists (comic or otherwise). However, the following section explores one branch of <i>Cruiskeen Lawn</i>’s satire that was present from the very beginning, and which did much to define the Myles na gCopaleen persona as the plain man’s intellectual: O’Nolan’s commentary on the Irish literary scene and the nature of contemporary Irish cultural debate. His most frequent target in this line was <i>The Bell</i> and its editor, Seán O’Faoláin. Setting himself up against the most prominent writer and critic of the post-revival scene enabled O’Nolan to create an instantly distinctive critical identity for Myles. Ironically, he and O’Faoláin showed a good deal in common in their criticism, if not in their fiction. Both mocked the ideological fog surrounding the Irish language, both derided the pious attitude fostered towards rural Ireland and both queried the dominance of nationalism in Irish society. Nevertheless, as soon as <i>Cruiskeen Lawn</i> began to appear regularly in English, O’Nolan made a fall-guy of the new literary establishment (such as there was). For three days a week, <i>The Bell</i>, the Abbey and others filled in for the old-guard Gaelic revivalists who fuelled Myles’s satire on his Irish days.

**The Irish Writer and the Plain People of Ireland**

In the first week of the bilingual column, O’Nolan introduced the Myles na gCopaleen WAAMA League, a parodic version of the artists’ association which O’Faoláin had recently founded. Its comic antithesis, the Plain People of Ireland, appeared only a

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55 Ibid., p. 67.
month later. The conjunction of the two neatly exemplifies the double-edged humour of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. While the Plain People flattered the prejudices of ‘kultured idiocated’ Dublin whom the WAAMA League and its escort service mocked, like the uncle in *At Swim-Two-Birds* they served as a reminder to many new *Irish Times* readers of the rural Ireland they had just endeavoured to escape. Reports on the WAAMA League’s book-handling and escort services remained a regular feature of *Cruiskeen Lawn* until early 1942. The breakaway organisation had been formed to solace Myles for losing the presidency of WAAMA to Seán O’Faoláin:

One shrinks from gratuitous comparisons, but man for man, novels for novels, plays for plays, services to imperishable Irish nation for services to i. L.n., popularity as drawingroom raconteur for p. as d.r., which was the better choice? I leave the answer not only to my readers but also to a betrayed posterity who may yet decide that Dermot MacMurrough was not the worst...  

O’Nolan’s WAAMA League operated as a kind of artist’s mafia, whose members were adept in complaint and extortion. This was standard for O’Nolan’s characterisation of Irish artists (and their followers), who ranged – in his eyes - only from genteel conmen to peasant conmen. The WAAMA League Escort Service was a good illustration of O’Nolan’s attitude to the species, providing ventriloquists for tongue-tied theatre-goers who conducted erudite conversations for all to hear. Of course, the ventriloquists went to the bad, ending by blackmailing their clients and letting loose ‘a wilderness of false voices, unsaid remarks, anonymous insults, speakerless speeches and scandalous utterances’ in the city’s theatres (not a bad description of *Cruiskeen Lawn* itself). The book-handling was a slightly more civilised affair, designed to accommodate the individual with a hefty purse and intellectual

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56 *CL* (25 March 1942); *BM*, p. 93.
57 *CL* (5 September 1941); *BM*, pp. 15-16.
58 ‘You know the limited edition ramp. If you write very obscure verse (and why shouldn’t you, pray?) for which there is little or no market, you pretend that there is an enormous demand, and that the stuff has to be rationed... I beg to announce respectfully my coming volume of verse entitled ‘Scorn for Taurus’... But look out for the catch. When the type has been set up, it will be instantly destroyed and NO COPY WHATSOEVER WILL BE PRINTED... The edition will be so utterly limited that a thousand pounds will not buy even one copy. This is my idea of being exclusive.’ *CL* (7 January 1942); *BM*, p. 228.
59 *CL* (23 January 1942); *BM*, p. 31.
ambition, but little time to develop an impressively well-thumbed library. As with many commercial services, book-handling was offered in a variety of options, including the deluxe:

> Each volume to be mauled savagely... a passage in every volume to be underlined in red pencil with an exclamation mark or interrogation mark inserted in the margin opposite, an old Gate Theatre programme to be inserted in each volume as a forgotten book-mark (3 per cent discount if old Abbey programmes are accepted)...

Apart from the 'great cultural uprising of the Irish people' (or rather, the fake cultural uprising) which the book-handling and escort services were designed to enable, *Cruiskeen Lawn* was replete with caricatures of the Irish intellectual, or 'corduroy'. O'Faoláin was cast as the archetype of the species, as an arrogant and hectoring individual who constantly bemoaned the impossibility of dragging the plain people up by their bootstraps. This was the impression reproduced *ad infinitum* in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, where O'Nolan gave his adversary all the dimensions of a cartoon, presenting O'Faoláin as a precious intellectual haughtily defending his cronies from the vulgar attentions of the mob. Arguably, the discrepancy in their status contributed to the resentment which often creeps into O’Nolan’s treatment of O’Faoláin and Frank O’Connor in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. When O’Nolan began writing in the 1930s, both O’Faoláin and O’Connor were already established in their careers and carried the personal imprimatur of Yeats and A.E. In 1933, O’Faoláin had named his first novel, *A Nest of Simple Folk*, but barely a decade later, the Plain People of Ireland were treading all over this antiquated taste for the plain, simple and homespun. Writing in 1954, O’Nolan banded O’Connor and O’Faoláin with a string of writers he classed as ‘perverted Carletons’: from Charles Lover to Somerville and Ross, J. M. Synge, Lady Gregory and Aodh de Blácam. The two were described as only the latest peddlers of the homegrown stage-Irishman, producing ‘stories about wee Annie going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals, old men in chimney nooks after fifty years in

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60 CL (7 November 1941); BM, p. 19.
61 CL (17 November 1941); BM, p. 23.
America, will-making, match-making – just one long blush for many an innocent man like me, who never harmed them’ (HD, 103). This criticism of O’Faoláin and O’Connor is ironic given that their involvement in The Bell stemmed from a desire to represent Ireland faithfully to itself. In the magazine’s first editorial, Seán O’Faoláin emphasised The Bell’s critical and realist ethos. Its very title was a sign of the journal’s attempt to shake off the legacies of romantic nationalism: ‘All our symbols will have to be created afresh...’ However, leaving behind the old symbols was no easy task. In one sense, it is telling that The Bell shares the same birthday as Cruiskeen Lawn - both were representative of a new phase of Irish writing which abandoned nationalist nostalgia and revivalist aspirations in favour of a more realistic assessment of life in independent Ireland. Nevertheless, as Terence Brown’s account of this period would suggest, both were constrained by the unchanging parameters of Irish intellectual discourse:

For many, the years of the war were simply a continuation of pre-war experience, in economically straitened circumstances, with the language, national sovereignty, religion and the protection of Irish distinctiveness as the dominant topics of intellectual and cultural concern in a society still moulded by its essential conservatism...

Any cursory reading of Cruiskeen Lawn proves that language and nationality (if not religion) still dominated Irish cultural discourse, but an alternative set of concerns slowly established itself during the Emergency. As travel to Britain became more difficult and Irish writers found their international market shrinking, they were forced to confront not only Ireland’s censorship mentality, but also the basic conservatism of its intellectual culture (though the plain practicalities of making a living in Ireland surely compelled The Bell’s campaign against literary censorship as much as it did

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62 Seán O’Faoláin, ‘This Is Your Magazine’, The Bell 1:1 (October 1940), p. 5. O’Faoláin’s mission to seek out the ‘real’ Ireland, inviting readers’ submissions on their own lives so that all could experience a part of ‘the Ireland we are making’ met a withering response in Cruiskeen Lawn. Myles answered that ‘one can only point out (a) that it would be a queer business if it was a medieval... China we are making and anyhow, (b) that we are not making any Ireland. We just live here (the travel ban) – some of us even work here’. CL (26 August 1944); BM, p. 389.

O’Faoláin’s promotion of an equitable environment for Irish artists through WAAMMA). However, while the variety of contemporary European writing published in *The Bell* indicated a desire for a more cosmopolitan outlook,\(^{64}\) ironically, its quest to discover the ‘real’ Ireland could appear suspiciously like the old reviverist project in new dress. O’Faoláin’s parish-pump aesthetics inspired predictable scorn in Myles, the more so because to O’Nolan, the former’s quest for the authentic Ireland - if not authentic Irishness - showed a naïve faith in the sham perpetrated by realist fiction and undermined the premises of the cultural debates orchestrated in *The Bell*.

Whether *The Bell*’s goal to ‘open a window on the world’ was naïve or simply disingenuous, interestingly O’Nolan had little time for O’Faoláin’s public persona. Given that Myles’s own voice fluctuated uneasily between bombastic self-aggrandisement and self-effacing absurdity, it is unsurprising that *Cruiskeen Lawn* parodied O’Faoláin’s editorialising as mercilessly as it did that of Bertie Smyllie. However, O’Nolan detected overweening authorial ego even when the artist remained ‘within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.’\(^{65}\) He uncharitably diagnosed more egotism than realism in Frank O’Connor’s 1947 travel book, *Irish Miles* (or *Irish Smiles*, as Myles dubbed it). O’Connor’s pen portraits of the characters he passed along Irish roads met with a withering response:

> Mr O’Connor cycled about the country in shorts accompanied by ladies with French names, also on bicycles and clad in jodhpurs. It’s one way of seeing the country, I suppose, though it seems to have more merit as an all-out plan for being seen. There’s quite a point there, mind you. If you want to see really clearly, you must yourself be invisible, otherwise you are altering the sum of what you want to see by the addition of yourself. (*FC*, 106-107)

\(^{64}\) To counteract the government’s isolationist policy, Shovlin notes, O’Faoláin ‘...occasionally wrote a ‘One World’ editorial focusing on international affairs and certain issues of the magazine were devoted solely to foreign matters of interest. Pieces by writers as diverse as Erwin Shroedinger, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Abdul Aziz of the Indian National Congress were featured.’ *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923-1958*, p. 101.

In his own writing, O’Nolan turned the notion of authorial invisibility on its head. *Myles na gCopaleen* is the author writ larger than life, and in some moods he is as farcically garrulous as Tristram Shandy. The flamboyant Mylesian persona serves much the same function as do the myriad authors in *At Swim-Two-Birds*; both draw attention to all the vagaries and contrivances of the authorial voice. But in this case, O’Connor’s crime was not simply in seeking to draw a mask over the artificiality of his literary persona. While censorship was cutting off the market at home in the 1940s (albeit not in O’Nolan’s case), there was money to be made in explaining the Irish enigma to an international audience and O’Connor’s post-war *Irish Miles* was typical of many books which provided tourist trips of independent Ireland as a slightly exotic theocratic state. Unlike O’Nolan, both O’Connor and O’Faoláin were full-time writers dependent on commissions, but in taking on such projects, they risked casting themselves as intermediaries between a sophisticated metropolitan culture and a provincial backwater. Indeed, this was the image presented by O’Connor in his ill-fated article on ‘The Future of Irish Literature’ which was published in *Horizon’s* Irish issue of January 1942 – the issue itself being inspired by the embattled position of the Irish writer at home and abroad. (Cyril Connolly’s editorial explained that the issue was intended to balance the hostile press which neutral Ireland had received in Britain over the previous months, though he neatly avoided condoning the Irish case for neutrality.) O’Connor assumed a strangely metropolitan perspective on Irish culture in his discussion of Seán O’Faoláin’s latest novel, *Come Back to Erin*, which depicted a transatlantic love affair between ‘a complex, cultured woman’ (American) and ‘a young provincial barbarian’ (the Irish element). O’Connor contradicted Irish critics of the novel by stating that he preferred O’Faoláin’s American scenes to the sections of the novel based in Ireland:

…the writer [O’Faoláin] has ceased to find what is most valuable to himself in Holy Ireland, and cannot translate back into its idiom what he has found outside it. Into that life a cultured Frenchwoman or American – and that means their creator – simply will not go.66

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The implication was that he and O’Faoláin were not only intellectual outsiders in the Ireland of their day, but had also outgrown it. Though they were denied an Irish readership (since their books were banned), O’Connor’s attitude suggests that, in any case, there would not be a sufficiently sophisticated readership in Ireland for their work. Predictably, the article aroused antagonism in Ireland, which was no doubt aggravated by the fact that O’Connor’s complaints were primarily intended for a sympathetic British readership. Indeed, access to an audience outside Ireland was one of the greatest differences between O’Nolan and his contemporaries. After the unsuccessful publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O’Nolan did not publish outside Ireland again until the 1960s, unlike O’Faoláin, O’Connor, or Patrick Kavanagh, each of whom was represented in the *Horizon* issue. O’Faoláin’s urbane tone in *The Bell* perhaps jarred on O’Nolan because he was so finely tuned to a local readership. For better or worse, *Cruiskeen Lawn* thrived on an unusual sense of intimacy with its audience. Despite O’Nolan’s mockery of Ireland’s theatrically plain people and self-conscious intellectuals, they may have been his saving grace – unlike his predecessors, this latter-day Myles na gCopaleen was deprived of the attraction of playing over the heads of the local crowd to a more cosmopolitan audience. It is significant that his own ridicule of Irish stereotypes, antique revivalism and the *fior-Gháel* over the first years of *Cruiskeen Lawn* was unambiguously directed at a domestic audience. And strange though it may seem, because O’Nolan wrote solely for Irish readers, he was perhaps forced to be more realistic (in attitude, if not in style) than some of his contemporaries. He eschewed a flamboyantly outspoken stance – in the manner of O’Faoláin – while, like many others, adopting a cynical and derisive attitude to many

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67 The only exception was a short story published in America: Flann O’Brien, ‘John Duffy’s Brother,’ *Story* (1941). It is curious that O’Nolan managed a profile in *Time* magazine in March 1943 (from an American press attaché to Ireland, Stanford Lee Cooper), but never succeeded in publishing in America until *At Swim-Two-Birds* was issued by Pantheon in 1951.

68 Admittedly, O’Nolan was writing for the minority – a professional, urban middle-class and (as *Irish Times* readers) quite probably unsympathetic to the populist Fianna Fáil. But he repeatedly chided his readers for the self-conscious habit of looking abroad for approval. Myles was not impressed by complaints that a 1944 ‘March of Time’ documentary on Ireland presented the place as a peasant backwater, favouring thatched cottages over power stations: ‘You flood the world with stamps to show that you have an unlimited lineage of great men dead... but you simultaneously require visitors to take note of the fact that your feet are no longer webbed’ *CL* (9 September 1944).
of the culture's sacred cows. Tellingly, *Cruiskeen Lawn* never strayed too far into dangerous waters; religion, for example, is a topic noticeably absent from the column.\(^6^9\) Admittedly, this might have more to do with the caution of *The Irish Times* than with O’Nolan himself. When Myles, referring to some recent public lectures, remarked that the Institute of Advanced Studies had apparently discovered there were two St. Patricks and no God, the newspaper was forced to settle a case for libel.\(^7^0\)

However, as demonstrated in the last section of this chapter, the social conservatism which O’Nolan shared with most of his contemporaries was revealed more clearly when Myles began to comment on social and political matters towards the mid-1940s.

This conventionality was already in evidence when O’Nolan joined in the general backlash against O’Connor’s *Horizon* article. Roibeard Ó Faracháin’s *Irish Times* review savaged O’Connor’s article on grounds which readers might have expected from *Cruiskeen Lawn*:

> One is successively angry, weary, indulgent, and perhaps, finally just bored, by Mr. O’Connor’s tantrums, eccentric literary judgements, and pathetic championship of great writers who are their own best champions. It is refreshing to find that Mr. O’Connor believes we need satire. We do, indeed. And one could name one gorgeous subject...\(^7^1\)

By the time O’Nolan got around to the subject, O’Connor had already responded bitterly on the letters page, querying Ó Faracháin’s critical abilities and more particularly, his abilities as a poet.\(^7^2\) O’Nolan ignored the pettiness of this personal dispute and instead took issue with this ‘expensive upperbrow English monthly’ itself:

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\(^6^9\) O’Nolan was not so coy in later years, criticising the covert machinations of Catholic bishops during the 1951 ‘Mother and Child’ controversy (though arguing that their *overt* interference in the issue was perfectly legitimate), and engaging in a long war of words with Alfred O’Rahilly over the *Irish Times*’ right to comment on the question. See *FC*, pp. 158-173. It is only in the 1960s novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, that religion and theology (or to be more specific, Jesuits) are made topics of humour, but O’Nolan’s dedication in the latter includes a minor caveat: ‘...to my Guardian Angel, impressing upon him that I’m only fooling and warning him to see to it that there is no misunderstanding when I go home’ (*DA*, 5).

\(^7^0\) See *CL* (10 April 1942).

\(^7^1\) Roibeard Ó Faracháin, *The Irish Times* (21 February 1942).

\(^7^2\) Frank O’Connor, *ibid.*, (25 February 1942).
‘I am not too happy... about a handful of the lads lining up self-consciously to be
looked over by the visitor in the drawing-room’. However, his disdain for the
impulse to turn to London for approval was not typical of Horizon's critics. The
backlash against O'Connor's article was more generally due to outrage at the
unflattering image of Ireland which he presented (exacerbated by the accompanying
extracts from Kavanagh’s ‘The Great Hunger’). Those who hoped that the Horizon
issue would generate a positive - or at least sympathetic - image of neutral Ireland
abroad were sadly disappointed. Characteristically, O’Nolan interpreted such
sensitivity as an outburst of Irish self-consciousness. However, on this occasion his
disregard for what the neighbours thought was perhaps a little disingenuous. Like Ó
Faracháin, he detected a whiff of self-promotion in O'Connor’s article from which he
was sedulously excluded:

We are told (so help me) that Irish literature began with Yeats and Synge and Lady
Gregory. That’s a quare one for you. As to the future of the thing, we have four
pages on Mr. Sean O’Faolain (good man, Sean) and a half a page on Mr. Patrick
Kavanagh. From the phrase “when O’Faolain and I began to write...” one deduces
that Mr. O’Connor is there too. This will help anybody writing an M. A. thesis. We
now know where Irish literature began and the names of the three gentlemen
responsible for sustaining it. Fair enough.74

For a one-time Gaelic scholar like O’Nolan, the implicit dismissal of all pre-revival
literature would be gallingly obvious. But arguably there is also an element of
professional jealousy here, as O’Connor’s casual sketch of the literary scene (‘when
O’Faolain and I began to write’) unwittingly encapsulated the incestuousness of
literary Dublin. Unfortunately, O’Connor soon wandered into another Mylesian trap,
concluding his criticism of the Abbey Theatre with a casual arrogance that was a gift
to Myles: ‘Small wonder that young men and women are fleeing the country in
thousands. In the worst days of the blitz I used to meet them in the passport office...

73 CL (2 March 1942).
74 Ibid.
‘Oh, anything is better than Ireland,’ they said hopelessly when I drew them into conversation’. As Myles interpreted it:

This seems to mean that the present tide of emigration is due to the inferior fare that is being provided at the Abbey by Mr. Blythe.

The brother is thinking of clearing out.

*Is that so?*

Thinking of beating it to the other side. Can’t stand this country at all. Says we’re all bunched.

*Why is that, pray?*

It’s d’Abbey. Says the stuff they do be puttin’ on at d’Abbey is more than flesh and blood can stand. Years since they had a Rooshian play or a pome by Yeets. All the crowd above in the digs are thinkin’ of skippin’ too. Th’oul place isn’t the same since Yeets went. The brother is in a fierce temper about it.75

However unlikely it was that O’Connor really intended to conflate economic hardships with his own artistic frustrations, O’Nolan’s opportunism here was typical of his critical manoeuvres in *Cruiskeen Lawn* (and of his caricature of Irish writers as a peculiarly self-obsessed species with a persecution complex). At the time of writing, he was serving as Private Secretary to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health, the day job firmly anchoring him outside the literary world and its concerns. His tenure as a civil servant served as a forcible reminder of the banal but indispensable machine of actual (if slow) social reform. Implicit in his attacks on the literary class in *Cruiskeen Lawn* is a sense that these characters had no authority to pronounce on the condition of Irish society, their criticism simply being self-aggrandising. Worse than that, it was condescending:

Elsewhere in this essay we are informed about “the horror of Irish life,” our “vulgarity,” “provincialism”... We are all pretty low and bad and to tell you the truth, we ought to be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves. We are just ignorant bosthoons.

75 Ibid.
The Plain People of Ireland: Is that so? Is that so, indeed?

Myself – Shhh! Don’t take it too seriously. You have me on your side, haven’t you?

The Plain People of Ireland: All the same, the cheek.76

It took a fellow writer to drive O’Nolan on to the side of the Plain People of Ireland, a spot which he found increasingly congenial as the years passed (this is the period in which Donohue characterises Myles as ‘The Citizen’, beleaguered by political incompetence, Dublin Corporation, CIE, Abbey Boards, and as ever, The Bell).77

Tellingly, around 1943 when Myles first began to cast himself as a critic of Irish public life, the matters he addressed were most often directly related to his own experience as a civil servant. And in doing so he revealed himself to be far closer in spirit to the conservatism of the Plain People than to the liberalism of O’Connor or O’Faoláin.

But while both these writers were voluble personalities whose commentary on public affairs chimed with the social preoccupations of their fiction, at this stage (in the early 1940s) the absurdist flavour of Cruiskeen Lawn and the polymath persona of Myles still allowed O’Nolan to play the didact while at the same time evading responsibility for the opinions he expressed. The bombastic character of Myles implicitly ridiculed the image of the Irish writer which developed in The Bell under Seán O’Faoláin, and later Peadar O’Donnell - in other words, the writer as social commentator. As a showman and a stylist, at this point in his career O’Nolan had little in common with those who followed the realist trend set by The Bell. However, in fairness to his contemporaries, he diagnosed a condescending paternalism everywhere in Irish culture. The finger-wagging malaise ran all the way from the Friends of the National Collections to Glun na Buaidhe’s hysterical street orators:

76 Ibid. Considering O’Connor’s virulent reaction to Roibéard Ó Faracháin’s review, his response to O’Nolan was relatively mild. In a letter to The Irish Times the following day, O’Connor claimed to be planning a biography of the late Myles na gCopaleen, which promised to provide a ‘treasure-house of complexes’ to continental psychologists. The Irish Times (3 March 1942).

77 Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 123.
Can we awful Irish louts (leaving aside for the moment our red faces, high cheek bones and gnarled hands) ever be made into little jintlemen?...

...these ‘Friends’ tell us that we should be gracious. By what authority do they issue this impudent admonition? Who are they to talk? One passes by a street corner to hear oneself being told by a brat standing on a stool that one should be ashamed of oneself, that one has betrayed Emmet and Lord Edward and Tone, that an Ireland without Gaelic is not Ireland at all... Muintir na Tire takes a very poor view. The Monetary Reform Association takes a very poor view. The Standard takes a very poor view. The Leader is very unhappy. The GAA will not allow that one is Irish at all...  

The arch self-consciousness of Myles an gCopaleen was itself an antidote to demagoguery in all its forms. But this column was published early in the spring of 1944, by which time O’Nolan was proving to be adept at assuming the tone of the demagogue himself. The difference in his case was that when Cruiskeen Lawn adopted an aggrieved tone, it did so in an essentially defensive fashion. The column quoted above ended with Myles asserting his right to do as he saw fit, without having to suffer the admonitions of various interested parties. The philosophy of the lone ranger was a fairly constant feature of Cruiskeen Lawn, visible in O’Nolan’s comments on the State’s paternalism, or on matters of culture and art, and in his antipathy to being swallowed up within the ‘great Irish nation’. His dialogues with the Plain People of Ireland are themselves miniature dramas pitting the aristocratic Myles against the lumpen masses.

Nevertheless, despite Myles’s aristocratic leanings, it is worth noting that in the Cruiskeen Lawn gallery of rogues, the arrogant demagogue was only as bad as the self-regarding artist who imagined himself to be something quite apart from the general run of people. (O’Faoláin and O’Connor could find themselves being attacked on both grounds.) Though the Joycean model of artistic indifference (and impenetrability) was abandoned by a generation of more openly political writers in the 1930s, O’Nolan skirted both paths. When Patrick Kavanagh’s negative review of the

78 CL (15 March 1944); BM, p. 248.
1941 Royal Hibernian Academy exhibition was attacked by a number of disgruntled artists who snapped that he wasn’t even an art critic, Flann O’Brien was exhumed for the defence. He pointed out that artists live by the patronage of the public, ‘not by the praise of “qualified” and “intelligent” critics’:

What a world it would be if you could not complain about the quality of a pint unless you were a brewer, or complain about a play unless you were born and bred in the Abbey!...

Incidentally, painters are the last people in the world to talk. They discuss and criticise everything without any shyness, and even write queer books about life. A well-known continental painter has found time in recent years to meddle in a lot of matters that have nothing to do with Kunst.79

Art for art’s (or artists’) sake didn’t wash; neither did the idea that the artist or writer was in a privileged position to enlighten the plain people on their deficiencies. (As At Swim suggests, O’Nolan conceived the relationship as a more equal dialogue.) Tellingly, O’Nolan’s only contributions to the The Bell were on the decidedly non-literary topics of pubs, dance halls and dog races.80 It would be misleading to cast O’Nolan as a champion of the plain man, but he demonised writers whom he suspected of transforming literature into a private professional fiefdom to which only the initiated had access:

Of all the arts the wind can blow, literature, as well as being the most objectionable, is the most inferior. Music, painting, sculpture, architecture, do not

79 Letter from Flann O’Brien, The Irish Times (5 April 1941). O’Nolan made a similar point during the Rouault controversy, when the National Gallery refused a loan of his work, ‘Christ and the Soldier’, fearing that it would cause offence. Myles resisted protestors from both sides: ‘...inasmuch as the modern artist makes his own rules, the onlooker must also be permitted to fix his own standards of appraisal... it is an impertinence for Mr. [Sean] Keating to say that the picture is ‘childish’. Nobody wants to be bothered with Mr. Keating’s opinion. We can form our own. Equally inadmissible is the attitude of other commentators who have assured us that Rouault was taken a high view of by the stained-glass man Healy, and that a bunch of Frenchmen... thought so much of him that they devoted a whole room to a display of his work. What has that got to do with it? Must we ‘like’ whatever some individual or coterie has pronounced to be good?” He deplored the fact that the public would not be allowed to form its own opinion on the painting. CL (10 October 1942); BM, pp. 236-37.

80 Flann O’Brien, ‘Going to the Dogs,’ The Bell 1:2 (October 1940), 19-24; ‘The Trade in Dublin,’ The Bell 1:2 (November 1940), 6-16; ‘The Dance Halls,’ The Bell 1:5 (February 1941), 44-52.
require to be transformed before an “uninitiated” man; a foreigner or a “barbarian”
can appreciate them...81

Though the passages cited above show O’Nolan in a democratic mood, as a critic he
did not consistently identify himself with the public voice. The hieratic tone Myles
adopted in conversation with the Plain People of Ireland was no doubt a mockery of
O’Faoláin’s Arnoldian manner in The Bell. However, as he recognised, the subversive
potential of the Plain People was limited, given their association with the reactionary
ideals of de Valera’s infamous 1943 St. Patrick’s Day speech. Myles’s sympathy in
fact strayed between the Plain People (bewildered by ‘corduroys’) and the urbane
Irishman who was frustrated by the conservative folksiness of Irish culture.82 Indeed,
the student’s uncle in At Swim-Two-Birds haunts Myles’s Plain People, who inspire a
similarly ambivalent affection. Whether they were accepted as self-caricatures by
O’Nolan’s readers, or projected as the dim country cousins of the more astute
Dubliner, they quickly gained common currency in 1940s Ireland. By 1943, the
coinage had become so accepted that O’Faoláin was moved to query the provenance
of these peculiarly plain individuals: ‘Why, one asks, are the people suddenly become
‘plain’? Is this a previously unheard-of Irish love for the homely, the ordinary, the
unaffected? Is there a desire abroad that we should be artless and simple-hearted, as
guileless as children...?’83 He answered his own question with reference to the comely
maidens of de Valera’s recent speech, but the mythical plain people had long held a

81 CL (5 January 1942).
82 ‘The Plain People of Ireland: How about those jokes. Myself: Well wait till I see. Would you say that the
cousin of the French Pretender is the Duc de Guise? The Plain People of Ireland: Whaa? Myself: And I
wonder would he be anything to the Wild Geese? The Plain People of Ireland: Dear knows some people
are very smart, these County Council scholarships to the universities above in Dublin do more harm than
good... You say you’d like a joke or two for a bit of crack and the finger of scorn is pointed at you. It’s
madness, the country’s in a right state. Madness. There’s no other word for it. Madness.’ CL (25 March
1942); BM, p. 93.
83 Sean O’Faoláin, ‘The Plain People of Ireland,’ The Bell (October 1943), pp. 4-5. The Plain People’s
ubiquity may be gauged from a speech which the Labour senator, Seán Campbell, made in the Seanad
during the 1945 review of the Censorship Act: ‘The working class do not want it [new legislation] but the
pseudo-intellectuals tell us that we must let up on censorship. They are making a mistake if they think that
the plain people are going to stand for a reintroduction of the vicious type of literature which the original
Act was largely successful in keeping out.’ Adams, Censorship: The Irish Experience, pp. 106-107. Perhaps some of O’Nolan’s irony was lost in the process.
strange fascination in Ireland. It is ironic that another of O’Faoláin’s *Bell* editorials betrayed his own fondness for appeals to the plain folk:

In general... we keep on trying to project a picture of popular life, to live in tune with it, to move in its atmosphere, to feed on it, to get from it that assurance of normality, balance, health, which must be lost by those who live in cliques, great cities, salons, teashops, government offices.\(^{84}\)

A lurking deference to the noble savage had haunted the literary revival, and as O’Faoláin’s comments on de Valera recognised, it had also invaded the political culture of Ireland in the 1940s, which was characterised by a casual paternalism. However, while O’Nolan’s Plain People satirised the revivalist image of the simple and saintly Gael, as well as the anti-intellectual streak in contemporary Ireland, they were a curiously double-edged comic device. As *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s demonisation of Seán O’Faoláin shows, O’Nolan himself was fond of playing the plain man, and O’Faoláin was only one in a long litany of items that Myles deemed offensive to the plain and sensible Irishman: the anti-censorship campaign (supported by *The Irish Times*), *The Bell*, exhibitions of modern art, James Joyce (on a bad day), even the artistic aspirations of Charlie Chaplin. Though the Plain People were to some extent designed to flatter the urbane, post-revival intellectual of the 1940s, O’Nolan also employed them to maintain a degree of sceptical philistinism in *Cruiskeen Lawn* about the Irish artist and all his endeavours, including his role as a social commentator.

**Myles: The (Un)Civil Servant**

When the English columns first appeared regularly in 1941, their themes reflected the preoccupations of *At Swim* and the early letter controversies; it is interesting that the phasing out of the Irish columns late in 1943 coincided with O’Nolan’s satire acquiring a broader and more topical range. Nationalism, for example, became a more

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\(^{84}\) Seán O’Faoláin, ‘Attitudes’, *The Bell*, 2:6 (Sept 1941), p. 7. O’Faoláin spoils the effect of a merry aesthetic democracy by asserting further on that science and the arts rely on taste and special knowledge, though the populace should be deferred to in everything else.
frequent topic in the summer and autumn of 1943 (hardly surprising in the midst of a world war), with Myles pointedly affecting a rather urbane attitude to the matter:

No decent person should consent to have himself called an Irishman, an Englishman, a Jew, a German, simply because of considerations of geography or because of a genealogical convention devised long before his time... If one prefers to have a nationality, it should be the one dictated solely by reason... Most of us, however, think it sufficient to enter a caveat when we hear ourselves described as Irishmen and for the rest are content to be uncommunicative and mysterious as to what other nation, if any, we conceive ourselves to belong...°

The solution he proposed on a number of occasions was simply to resign from the Irish nation (and thereby from its attendant stereotypes).°° Since these columns began appearing in mid- to late 1943, at a time when O’Nolan was berating the revivalist groups Alteirí na hAiséirí and Glun na Baoidhe, and slowly abandoning his Irish columns, arguably they reveal a growing tedium with the repetitive nature of intellectual debate in Ireland. Admittedly, Cruiskeen Lawn was no innocent in the matter, its satire had frequently orbited around issues concerning the Irish language and the question of national identity - from the imagery of the Gael popularised by language revivalists to The Bell’s anxiety over the shaping of a ‘new Ireland’. But it is interesting that it was also the summer of 1943 when O’Nolan introduced a number of significant changes in the column, summarily banishing many of its comic stalwarts and beginning to address a single subject over a number of days, rather than combine a series of short sketches within one column.°° Earlier in the year, O’Nolan had

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° CL (13 July 1943). See also CL (6 July 1943): ‘To be decently ashamed of where one was born is the civilised attitude... one need not be Irish because one was born in this island, even of Irish pay rents. That is not to say that one is English or Scottish. One can be what I conceive myself to be - a person. (Not a Persian, mind: a person.) When in France I call myself Myles de Raciné.’

°° ‘The world will have heard that late to-day the Irish people were relieved at their own request of all rights of citizenship and have decided for the future to dissociate themselves permanently from all Irish situations, whether alcoholic, pugnacious or merely relevant to inchoate political formalisms. The resignations have been accepted with genuine regret. The Irish people leave at their own request to better themselves.’ CL (6 September 1943). See also CL (16 May 1944).

°° ‘Gone for months are such standbys as The Brother and the Plain People, and only the Research Bureau, Keats and Chapman and the clipping service fill in as necessary.’ Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 109. In late 1942 O’Nolan was already showing signs of tedium: ‘...This seems reasonable enough until we bring (to bear) upon it our whole fatuous battery of professional paranoia, perversion and catachresis, rushing out
produced his first (and only) anthology of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and Curran argues that his selections for the anthology showed him to be consciously refining the Mylesian persona:

...[it was] clearly intended not simply as a representative volume but as a means of consolidating certain features and of identifying the column as satirical... In the period following the 1943 anthology, O’Nolan was able to use his refashioned persona of *Cruiskeen Lawn* to engage with momentous issues in contemporary Ireland.  

Whether or not O’Nolan was deliberately pushing *Cruiskeen Lawn* in a more satirical direction in 1943, over the following couple of years the shift from comic set-pieces to more sustained narratives certainly allowed the character of Myles to develop in a more consistent fashion. Ironically this meant that Myles, the guerrilla satirist, would gradually acquire the admonitory tone which he had criticised in O’Faoláin and others. In any case, the phasing out of the Irish columns in late 1943 was a momentous change for *Cruiskeen Lawn*; the quiddities of cultural nationalism and the language revival had been a particular feature of the Irish columns, and the final turn to English coincided with an extension of the column’s satirical scope. Increasingly, Myles’s preoccupations were less those of the urbane man of letters than of the distracted civil servant.

In 1943, the year his political satire *Faustus Kelly* was produced in the Abbey, Myles first began to express the disgruntlement of his alter ego trapped in the Department of

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with our precast vaudeville clown-routine of quotation, misinterpretation and drivelling comment. Does the result please anyone, bring the most faded polite laugh, the most tenuous giggle, the most bilious sneer?" *CL* (7 December 1942); *BM*, p. 330.  

88 Curran, “‘No, this is not from The Bell’: Brian O’Nolan’s 1943 Cruiskeen Lawn Anthology’, pp. 90-91.  

89 On occasion the cultural and political overlapped. It was characteristic of O’Nolan to criticise a speech on behalf of *Comhdháil na Gaeilge* which referred darkly to the international ‘threat to Irish culture,’ but the sentiment jarred slightly with his ensuing observation: ‘Funny that this should appear in the same issue containing an Irish “Beveridge Plan,”’ in the same year in which Pat has excelled himself in a disgusting aping of foreign technological and social catchwords... I do not find that there is anything discernible under the head of “Irish culture”. If the speaker has in mind step-dancing, crubeens and potheen, I say that is not culture. If he means French pictures made-in-Ireland, young architects blathering about prefabrication, plastics and “planning,” I say that none of that is culture...’. *CL* (20 October 1944).
Local Government and Public Health.\textsuperscript{90} Over the following years, the day job increasingly seemed to inform the literary work, as the column was punctuated by long and pedantic analyses of government documents, such as the 1944 Vocational Report.\textsuperscript{91} Despite the restrictions governing the public utterances of civil servants, by April 1945 the tortuous prose of a Department of Finance memo on ‘The Post-War Building Programme’ was being subjected to a Mylesian decimation; that November, O’Nolan began his advance on the publications of his own department (or as he termed it: the ‘Department of Yokel Government and Public Houses’).\textsuperscript{92} As early as 1946, this caused consternation in official quarters; that year the Department of Finance objected to O’Nolan’s promotion, citing concern over his ‘outside work’. But despite the offence Myles habitually caused to O’Nolan’s political masters, he received a certain measure of protection from some, as a colleague testified:

It was even whispered that a minister was tickled to have him in his retinue. Fair enough – if the mere servant were of such cultural calibre, the upper-class electoral imagination might be induced to boggle at the stature of the master.\textsuperscript{93}

Furthermore, \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn} would certainly be a useful ally in any public debate, given its self-professed reputation as the enemy of native humbug and cant, and especially considering that it was (quite literally) well placed to undermine Smyllie’s anti-Fianna Fáil commentary across the page. Understandably, on points of conflict O’Nolan did not usually comment on matters directly relating to his own Minister or

\textsuperscript{90} One day Myles received a visit from a shabby deputation: ‘...are you civil servants of the Department of Home Affairs of the Free State Twenty Six Counties of Southern Ireland, Eire?’ Yes; they were. Educated guess. What then could I do for them? One chap opens out. Scandal of the hours, service seething with unrest, talk of mutiny, thousands depressed below level of subsistence. Savings gone, no breakfast in second half of week, rickets, malnutrition, cost of living, vicious spiral, black market, expected to keep up appearances, tragedy of black-coated worker, scandal that cries to heaven, entire service on brink of strike action...’, \textit{CL} (22 November 1943). See also \textit{CL} (15 May 1944).

\textsuperscript{91} The Report of the Commission on Vocational Organisation was published in August 1944, and thereafter thoroughly vilified in \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn}. The first of the series on constitutions appeared on 5 April 1945 and ran for a week, after which it was resumed after a break.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{CL} (3 April 1945); \textit{CL} (19 November 1945). O’Nolan’s remarks increased in vituperation as the years passed. The civil service, he observed in 1953, was ‘a secret society which holds its rites in the day-time behind closed doors and whose members are debarred under oath from adult employment.’ \textit{CL} (14 December 1953), cited in Donohue, p. 162.

\textsuperscript{93} Michael Phelan, ‘Watcher in the Wings: A Lingering Look at Myles na gCopaleen’, \textit{Administration}, 24:1 (Spring 1976), p. 99.
department. In January 1942, for example, Seán MacEntee was pilloried in *The Irish Times* for his opposition to the provision of free hot lunches in Dublin schools, with Smyllie describing the Minister’s letter to Dublin Corporation on the topic as ‘a masterpiece of unctuous folly and platitude.’

MacEntee professed himself opposed to the scheme ‘for moral and social reasons’, arguing that providing meals in schools would undermine family life. While he was satirised by editor, correspondents and letter writers alike, there was not a whisper of the farce in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

As Curran points out, the confluence of the roles of writer and civil servant is illustrated most clearly in O’Nolan’s contribution to the debate over social planning which was conducted in the Irish press after the publication of the Beveridge Plan in December 1942. Curran has tracked Myles’s extensive criticism of the Irish reports that followed in 1944 and which were rejected by the Fianna Fáil government, despite winning widespread support in the press - particularly from Smyllie’s *Irish Times*. It was O’Nolan’s department which dealt with such plans, and he made use of this experience to produce a more trenchant criticism of the proposals for social insurance than appeared elsewhere in the press, particularly in the case of their financial viability. Up to this point, he had been reasonably careful to separate his two careers, not least because civil servants were not free to express their political preferences in public. However, on this occasion, Myles’s opinions fortuitously echoed those of MacEntee, who in January 1945 resoundingly rejected the social security plan proposed by Bishop Dignan. O’Nolan’s opposition to these plans chimed with his criticism of the modern art exhibitions that had recently invaded Dublin: ‘It is my considered view that Paud keeping step with world hysteria in the belief that he is

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94 *The Irish Times* (20 January 1942).

95 Curran, ‘“Could Paddy leave off from copying just for five minutes”: Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan’, p. 360. In particular, Curran discusses the report produced in October 1944 by Bishop Dignan, Chairman of the Committee of Management of the National Health Society: *Social Security: Outlines of a Scheme of National Health Insurance*.

96 Though any kind of obfuscation was prime fodder for Myles, O’Nolan made no mention of a classic case from the period - the tribunal report on the Cavan orphanage fire, which was published in September 1943. As secretary to the tribunal, O’Nolan was present for the entire hearing in April of that year, but his Mylesian alter ego occupied the time with stories for steam men and debates with the Plain People of Ireland.

being “modern” is a woeful spectacle... Eighty per cent of what has been put up before us is blatant imitation of what tremendous and strictly local revolutions have thrown up elsewhere and our “planners” have lacked the wit to dish up even some native sort of jargon’. However, the debate over social planning, by prompting an uncharacteristic frankness in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, also exposed a less familiar aspect of O’Nolan - the extent to which he was (like many of his generation) a predominantly Catholic intellectual.

In 1942, MacEntee had defended his objection to school meals with reference to a branch of Catholic thinking that venerated the family unit and strictly defended its independence against state interference. O’Nolan’s response to the 1944 proposals on social security seem to follow a similar line. Much of his commentary on the plans was made in the guise of the efficient civil servant (leavened with a dash of Mylesian hyperbole), as he quite reasonably pointed out flaws in their design. But he also showed a large measure of resistance to the idea that the state – or indeed, a body not answerable to the state – should be allowed the degree of interference in the individual’s life as would be required by the implementation (and funding) of a national health scheme. This was certainly consistent with his characteristic aversion to any group which might lay claim to his allegiance (whether Gaelic revivalists, Bell liberals, or the more sparse collection of Irish modernists). Indeed, the aloof and aristocratic aspect of Myles’s nature was well illustrated by the mock *Irish Times* headline of his 1943 anthology: ‘Myles na gCopaleen Crowned King of Ireland’. But regal daydreams aside, it is notable that alongside his careful analyses of the impractical elements of these plans, O’Nolan incorporated some rather more philosophical objections. While Smyllie pointed out that if Britain alone was equipped with provisions for social security, this would only exacerbate emigration from Ireland, Myles took the broader view:

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98 *CL* (10 May 1944); cited in ibid, p. 363.
100 The cover of the anthology is a mock-up of an *Irish Times* front page. Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn* (Dublin: Cahill, 1943).
The growth... of mechanistic philosophies, pragmatical methodologies, pathological ideologies and technological mysticism... had the net result of leaving men weak, wanton and witless – believing creation to be remediable, believing ‘life’ to be a... a.... fact – not perceiving it to be the fabulous, not entirely un-entertaining illusion that we older men know it to be... two observations I permit myself to make - one, responsible persons who offer a plan to cover “all the hazards of life” are either not terribly serious or else believe that their commerce is with fools. Two, is such a plan desirable, granted that the reversal of the eternal order is within human power?

Certainly, O’Nolan was taking a swipe at the over-ambitious nature of Bishop Dignan’s scheme here. But a later column continued the philosophical tone, however tongue-in-cheek it might have been, appealing to no less an authority than Plato. Life, as Myles presented it, was an unceasing struggle which strengthened the soul, ultimately rendering death an ‘unfearful consummation’:

...if you are to inhabit the earth by act of parliament with a vast fraternity of insured stooges, by statute immune from “want,” bedded, dressed, fed and supplied with false teeth by mammoth intellectual stamp-vending ganglions, furnished with rations of work, drugs, utility furniture and “regional hospitals”... will poor perplexed Plato be outmoded?... The soul is the trouble. Have your meal ticket by all means, give freely to those who ask, do not be tolerant of social injustice. But do not prate to me of “freedom from want”. For that phrase connotes repose, and repose is possible only in cemeteries.

Arguably, a homily on the spiritual benefits of suffering is not what you want to hear from a public servant. (Besides, it is a little ironic coming from the author of An Béal

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101 CL (3 October 1944).
102 CL (10 November 1944). At the end of the war, when there was much talk of human rights and freedoms, Myles disdained these as fashionable clichés and resumed the theme of human conceit: ‘I do not see at all how one can being human at the same time be... free. Free to do what? And human rights – what on earth are these dowdy liberal artefacts? Do they possibly include the right of free transport from womb to tomb? Finally might I be permitted to ask: Who made the world?’ CL (6 June 1945).
Bocht, a book that makes a farce of the suffering Gael. Anthony Cronin argues that O’Nolan’s scepticism towards the brave new world promised by these social planners stemmed partly from his own gloomy Manicheanism, a sense that eternal (and earthly) bliss was not the natural human condition. However, in pointing out that these proposals were not a cure for all ills (as they were presented to be in many quarters of the press), he was also displaying a characteristic pragmatism - not least concerning their economic efficiency. Both strains in his thinking are illustrated in his observation on the ambitious schemes set forth in the 1944 Planning Exhibition; given the continuing depopulation of the Irish countryside, he argued, the planners might ‘As well erect traffic lights in a grave-yard’. But his scepticism also betrayed a social (and Catholic) conservatism that was closer in spirit to his Fianna Fáil superiors in the Department of Local Government than to Smyllie’s more liberal Irish Times.

By 1944, social planning and modernist art exhibitions were taking the place of O’Faoláin and The Bell as the butt of O’Nolan’s attacks on liberal Ireland. Though Cruiskeen Lawn had launched itself in 1940 with assaults on the anachronistic models of Irishness popularised by organisations like the Gaelic League, curiously only four years later Myles na gCopaleen was betraying a similar antipathy to the forces of modernisation. This does not necessarily indicate an ideological change on O’Nolan’s part; as argued with regard to At Swim-Two-Birds, there was always a more conservative element to O’Nolan’s writing than has been recognised. But to some degree this shift is explicable in terms of a changing cultural context, as liberal voices in Ireland gained (a little) more ground. There was certainly a capricious element to

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103 Elsewhere in Cruiskeen Lawn, at about the same time that O’Nolan was arguing for the social and spiritual ills attendant upon the new plans, he still satirised the ideological image of the suffering Gael. Following the incidents at Trinity College on VE day, O’Nolan dissented from the hope that British-Irish relations would be improved in the post-war era. According to Myles, ‘Paudrig Crohoore’ and ‘John Bull’ would only dislike each other the better they understood each other: ‘...I think the promotion of these ‘good relations’ is wrong. Apart from being calculated to destroy a lively and dynamic milieu, it would tend to attenuate the ever-diminishing Irish opportunities for individual redemption through suffering, poverty, injustice and holy resignation in adversity.’ CL (21 May 1945).

104 Cronin, No Laughing Matter, pp. 157-158.

105 Curran points to the similarity between the criticism of O’Nolan and Seán MacEntee of the plans, both claiming it made wild promises of a rosy post-war future, so that voters would tolerate increasing (and almost totalitarian) control over their lives. ‘Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan’, p. 373.

106 CL (10 May 1944); cited in Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 114.
Myles’s humour, a sense that he was compelled to usurp any burgeoning establishment. But tellingly, O’Nolan’s response to Irish social planning was comparable to his remarks on the Irish Exhibition of Living Art; in his view, the derivative nature of each enterprise only offered yet more evidence of the Irishman’s inferiority complex:

...your problem is that you... become more and more Irish every day – that is, more ‘anxious’ about things that don’t concern you (e.g. art), more voracious for alien social nostrums (e.g. ‘planning’, ‘social security’, ‘vocationalism’)… more saturated with the humble dog-like desire to please, to shine, to be regarded as ‘advanced’…

If that was the case, and the Irish were craven imitators to a man, then it is not surprising that Myles, ever the individualist, had repeatedly proposed a means of resigning from the Irish nation. He had always disdained the anachronistic images of the Irish speaker popularised by the Gaelic League and similar organisations; he had also objected to what he perceived to be O’Faoláin’s patrician attitude to the plain Irish. One side implied that the ideal citizen was a Gaelic peasant, the other that he or she should be a modern liberal. The common element to O’Nolan’s scorn of conservative language revivalists, The Bell, modernist art exhibitions and proponents of social security, is his objection to the pronouncements of others on how he (and presumably his readers) should behave. It is telling that his suspicion of Irish modernist art and social security centred on their imitative elements: ‘the humble dog-like desire to please… to be regarded as “advanced”…’. Myles seemed instead to pride himself on a defensive individualism (and of course his power to affront). But whatever the shifts in tone in Cruiskeen Lawn over time, his targets were neither indiscriminate, contradictory, nor simply born of an instinctual disdainfulness. It was consistent with O’Nolan’s dislike for Ireland’s home-grown demagogues that when Cruiskeen Lawn moved into a more topical mode in the mid-1940s, the more satirical Myles did not unambiguously assume a position of superiority over his readership.

107 CL (21 April 1945).
Instead, he claimed ‘the satirist’s role as a public benefactor’,\textsuperscript{108} as a defender of moral standards. This quality became more obvious after the end of the war (and of emergency censorship), when Myles broadened his perspective beyond the concerns of ‘Paud’, turning his attention to the international scene. Once the hostilities in Europe had ended, he assured his readers that post-war planning had merely been a joke, and not something they need worry themselves about. The foolish debate had been started, he wrote, when the hapless Paud pressed his face to the window and wondered why the great bounty promised across the sea could not be found at home.\textsuperscript{109} Now Ireland’s isolation was (officially) over, and Paud could take a closer look at the other side. Over the summer of 1945, Myles became less preoccupied with the Irishman’s quarrel with himself, and instead turned his moral cynicism on the great powers overseas.

When press censorship was lifted in May 1945, Smyllie railed that it had been ‘in some respects as Draconian and irrational as anything that ever was devised in the fertile brain of the late Josef Goebbels’.\textsuperscript{110} Myles simply observed that no one had ever dared to censor him. In a column published on the same day that The Irish Times reported de Valera’s reply to Churchill’s radio speech, Myles made his own post-war speech. In it, he adopted the patrician tone that the plain people might have associated with the editor of The Irish Times (since it had a smattering of the visiting imperialist), but it also bore the traces of their paternalistic rulers:

\textit{...Now, it has been borne in upon me – and this gave me of sadness – that some of you resented the effects of my censors. I say it with great humility but say it I must – that was terribly wrong of you. After all, when I now read the things you are writing without their help, I cannot help feeling you are trying to prove I was right...}

\textit{I want to congratulate you, all of you - you have been very good... I have no special message for you to-day, nothing that ‘can be published now’. I have always}

\textsuperscript{109} CL (14 May 1945).
\textsuperscript{110} The Irish Times (12 May 1945).
spoken my mind. But I still have the old message: Hold fast to your humility, your poverty, your talent for suffering. These are the clean enduring things.\textsuperscript{111}

Myles had always suffered from a regal delusion, now he was assuming the voice of de Valera himself; the following day he modestly took responsibility for Churchill’s address as well.\textsuperscript{112} His farcically grandiose persona had once been satisfied by the stewardship of the WAAMA League, but evidently he had progressed to comporting himself as an international statesman (proving that the all-knowing Brother was indeed a near relation of Myles). Over the following summer, O’Nolan’s sometimes provocative, sometimes outraged, but certainly \textit{sincere} comments on the post-war world reflected the changed nature of Myles na gCopaleen. Admittedly, \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn} was still a fairly unpredictable and varied entity – in the first week of June 1945, for example, Myles discussed art criticism on Monday, the unlucky comments of a presidential candidate on Tuesday, the dubious nature of ‘human rights’ on Wednesday, the ‘deplorable peasant patois that passes for Irish’ on Thursday (including some more observations on the upcoming presidential election), and amused himself with an extract from \textit{Irish Golf} on Friday. On Saturday, he reviewed a new publication on the office of the Irish President, which explains, at least, his repeated attention to the matter over the previous days.\textsuperscript{113} It is notable that the stalwarts of earlier years – the Plain People of Ireland, the Brother, the Catechism of Cliché, and others – are all absent, though Keats and Chapman were still making intermittent appearances at this time. In that last summer of war, when peace in Europe freed O’Nolan to comment on whatever he wished (without attracting the busy

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{CL} (17 May 1945).

\textsuperscript{112} ‘May I take the opportunity of thanking the many friends who by telephone, telegram, radio and... prayer, expressed to me their heartfelt congratulations on my radio address of Wednesday night. I mention the matter because it has become advisable to make one or two observations concerning my other address of last Sunday from the British station. Read together, it will occur to some people that I am not very consistent...’. \textit{CL} (18 May 1945). Obviously Churchill’s speech rankled with O’Nolan, as he obliquely returned to the topic on a number of occasions, for example, on 31\textsuperscript{st} July 1943 and - most cuttingly - on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of June: ‘What, My Excellency inquires, is the difference between war and peace? Well, one difference is that when the world is at peace, horror camps are not photographed. When Dachau was already a household word with all peoples, the Foreign Office of a benign neighbour was benignly conducted by one Vansittart, while a distinguished Northern Ireland statesman wined and most royally fed the Rev. Joachim von Ribbentrop – indeed, frolicked with the last-named. Tastes change, you see...’.

\textsuperscript{113} Myles na gCopaleen, ‘The Presidential Office’, \textit{The Irish Times} (9 June 1945), a review of Michael MacDunphy, \textit{The President of Ireland} (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1945).
pencil of a press censor), and while fighting still lingered on in Asia, *Cruiskeen Lawn* could finally take account of the momentous events of the past few years. Jokes about the Research Bureau and the unpalatable black bread on sale in neutral Dublin were replaced with much more dour observations on the effects of the atomic bomb and the conduct of the victorious allied powers. The dark and surreal elements of O’Nolan’s humour (which were displayed to best effect in the unsettling universe of *The Third Policeman*, despite its reassuringly moral, and Christian, frame), no longer contributed merely another whimsical element to *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The world, as the uncensored Myles now portrayed it, was a forbidding place, one which was more than equal to the febrile inventiveness of his black humour.

While Myles took his customary fortnight’s holiday in August 1945, the atomic bomb was launched on Japan. On the day of Japan’s surrender, Smyllie observed with grotesque equanimity that ‘it may be that the immolation of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has prevented, in the end, a greater slaughter’.\(^{114}\) The immolation of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the first subject in Myles’s thoughts on his return, and it remained so for the better part of the week:

> Why should this outsize barbarity be visited on the Japanese? It cannot be because Japan was at war with America, since human rights remain intact even in war... No, it must be because the Japanese are considered unpleasant folk; few of them are Knights of Columbanus, Elks or Rotarians, they are not afraid of death, they respect authority and live frugally. And they have manners.\(^{115}\)

O’Nolan’s suspicion that a sublimated racism permitted the use of the atomic bomb in far-off Asia was not shared by his editor, who was less querulous concerning the Allies’ methods. Shortly later, on the 10th of September, Myles began a week-long denunciation of his editor’s triumphalism, seeing a contemptible cultural superiority in Smyllie’s celebration of the British victory over Germany and Japan. Over the week,

\(^{114}\) *The Irish Times* (11 August 1945).
\(^{115}\) *CL* (20 August 1945); reprinted in *FW*, p. 172. The following day, Myles continued in an even darker fashion, arguing that the security of the world was now not merely dependent on the good behaviour of the nations in control of the bomb, but could also be at the mercy of their disgruntled scientists.
he compared the relative merits of Western and Eastern art, drama, and philosophy, always to Europe’s disadvantage:

Western civilisation starts with man, his body and his foolish mind, and ends there… I must say to the Editor of the Irish Times (a brave albeit foolish man) – go east, young man, learn the value of contemplation, the glory of the spirit, the grandeur of nature and forget, for the nonce, your whole wardrobe of penicillins, panaceas, plurality of county councils, Home Rule, statutory hospitals for Cork fever, planning. The East, by the way, is slightly larger than Ireland…

Even here, O’Nolan managed another shot at the ignoble nature of social planning (and its underlying humanism which - as can be seen from his comments on the schemes for social security - he found philosophically dubious). Cruiskeen Lawn disappeared for the next week, a curiosity which Donohue attributes to Smyllie’s irritation at his columnist’s incessant criticism. Interestingly, in the first week of its return, there was a resurgence of the fairly inoffensive adventures of Keats and Chapman. But O’Nolan’s humour was never without its bite, and even Keats and Chapman could have their didactic purposes. Back in the first week of September, when Myles had returned from holidays to a post-atomic world, the duo had made one of their most ghoulish appearances. One night, as Myles told it, they were caught in an area where atomic bombs were being tested: ‘The dread instrument produced a number of freak effects, the most noteworthy of which was to blow the backs off several humans, leaving them alive, conscious, and otherwise intact. Chapman arrived back from the nearest village to find Keats minus his entire back, lying face down on the wreckage of a bed and cursing loudly’. The following morning, they came upon a heap of human backs neatly piled in a nearby field. Keats began to search among them, still cursing and vowing vengeance, despite Chapman’s remonstrances: ‘I’m going to get my own back,’ Keats said savagely, turning over nearby fleshes.’ The atrocity story had now not only finally infiltrated the uncensored Irish press, but even

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116 CL (14 September 1945).
117 Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 122.
118 CL (1 September 1945); FW, p. 174.
the weird humour of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The column was no longer a playground where Myles performed juggling tricks while tiptoeing about the main topics of the day. As for the problem presented by the bomb, in early October he came to a conclusion on how to handle this diabolical new creation - to gather together all the scientists who had any knowledge of it and simply shoot them: 'Or else, and maybe this is better, make a very big atomic bomb, say about 7/8", and just let it off and kill everyone. Sure you’d never be missed.'

Throughout the rest of the autumn, Myles kept his eye on international affairs of state - as well as the conduct of Dublin Corporation, the state of Irish drama ('I still say there is a place in your Dublin for a play that does not take place in Thade’s cabin...'), Clement Attlee’s ‘H.M. Bolshevik Government in the U.K.’, and the variety of Bores to be met with on the streets of Dublin. Myles was settling into the role of the obstinate individualist and presenting himself as the self-appointed policeman of public affairs, whether the matter in question was of the most local, or the most global, significance. A telling indication of the direction in which Myles had developed, and one which has been silently passed over by O’Nolan’s critics, was his commentary on the Nuremberg trials in late 1945. At the time that he excoriated the use of the atomic bomb in Japan, he also noted acerbically that ‘Copaleen’s Law’ (a ‘Law of ‘Unilateral Responsibility in War’) had never been shown such respect as now, when it was being used to ‘sanctify’ the trials of war criminals. Myles’s opinion of the illegality of the proposed Nuremberg trials was bluntly stated and, as it would prove, unpopular:

...tamper thus with the sacred tabernacle of Justice, thus prostitute to a predetermined end the holy processes of the juridical ratio... [and] ye have procured an abomination that will, as if by atomic enheatment, sear all life from the planet. Readers will sympathise with me in recalling that mock trials... formed a

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119 CL (11 October 1945).
120 CL (12 October 1945).
121 CL (20 October 1945).
122 CL (25 August 1945).
prominent part of the unavoidable peace which supervened in Europe prior to 1939.\textsuperscript{123}

He later responded scabrously to readers who charged him with defending the accused: 'I defend nothing; I explain. I attack nothing; I merely annihilate what offends'.\textsuperscript{124} The remark unwittingly captures some of the contradictions of the Mylesian persona as it had developed over the previous five years. O’Nolan’s affectation of a judicial impersonality (not defending, merely explaining) is undermined by his admission that he indeed annihilates ‘what offends’ him. Myles na gCopaleen, in the guise in which O’Nolan had first created him, had maintained the ambiguity which characterised \textit{At Swim}’s humour; the character’s inflated authorial ego masked his creator in the same manner as the various parodic voices of \textit{At Swim}. Even on his critical days, Myles was as often a pedant and a stylist, as he was a polemicist. However, by 1945, the ambiguity and inconsistency of O’Nolan’s satire was dissipating, and Myles had become a much less playful and more dogmatic character. Admittedly, when in a didactic mood, O’Nolan still often assumed the tone of a paternal Anglo-Irish gentleman, weary dispenser of admonitions and advice to ‘you Irish’. But while the grandiose tone still showed a characteristic comic hyperbole, frequently at its core was a very personal polemic. The case of Nuremberg showed that Myles’s interest in matters legal had developed a good deal from a delighted examination of the quaint jargon bandied under the nose of Twinfeet J. His satire had progressed from style to substance, though Myles could still bluster in December 1945 that ‘\textit{The mock-juridical proceedings currently in train at Nuremberg have not from me obtained of sanction one hint or whisper. This I have stated and it is a fact}‘.\textsuperscript{125} A few days earlier, suddenly aghast, he queried why he did not have a seat in the Cabinet. And what had happened to the minority report of the na gCopaleen Commission?\textsuperscript{126} Perhaps O’Nolan was still slightly uncomfortable with his own didactic impulses, since he had long criticised both \textit{Bell} liberals and Glun na Buaidhe xenophobes on the same grounds. But despite its layers of irony, \textit{Cruiskeen Lawn}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} \textit{CL} (7 September 1945).
\item \textsuperscript{124} \textit{CL} (11 December 1945).
\item \textsuperscript{125} \textit{CL} (11 December 1945).
\item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{CL} (6 December 1945).
\end{itemize}
always had a considerable satirical bite; certainly more than its genial rival, *Dublin Opinion*. The next decade of *Cruiskeen Lawn* would be marked by disagreements with *The Irish Times* and O’Nolan’s forced retirement from the civil service, by the long-delayed publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in America and the lack of any fresh attempts at fiction. But by the close of the war years, Myles na gCopaleen was already abandoning the indirect routes of comedy, and the persona was coalescing into the self-appointed conscience of Irish political and aesthetic affairs.

Northrop Frye describes satire as ‘militant irony’, and the phrase neatly exposes the distance between the savage indignation of *Cruiskeen Lawn’s* commentary on Hiroshima and Nuremberg in late 1945, and Myles’s earlier ridicule of the dogmatic impulses of O’Faoláin and others. His columns on the post-war world epitomise satire as Frye defines it: as a mode in which ‘moral norms are relatively clear and… [which] assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured’. *The Third Policeman*, the most grotesque and absurd of O’Nolan’s earlier work, stands in marked contrast to these later columns. Though the text finally reveals that its murderous narrator is trapped in a cyclical hell, the excess of nonsense in the novel (with all its amoral qualities) overruns its satirical or allegorical elements. While the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* was distinguished by a seemingly endless comic ingenuity, once the column began to respond more frequently to the topics of the day O’Nolan became less an inventive humorist than an indignant satirist. The roles are not mutually exclusive, but by 1945 the balance between the two in his work was shifting in favour of the

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127 Vivian Mercier comments that this self-titled ‘national humorous journal of Ireland’ aimed to reconcile civil war antipathies and the various parties, north and south: ‘Such a policy inhibited the traditional Irish gift for satire, but it fostered a vein of humour best exemplified by the joke illustrations and political caricatures of C.E.K. (C.E. Kelly)’. ‘Literature in English, 1921-84’ in *A New History of Ireland* Vol. VII, p. 490. Perhaps Mercier’s point is proven by O’Nolan’s complaint to his superiors in 1946 that though Kelly, a fellow civil servant, also wrote political satire, it was regarded with far less suspicion than his own. Letter from Brian Ó Nualláin to the Dept of Finance (13 November 1946), BC.

128 O’Nolan resented the *Times’* policy of not paying for unpublished articles and since he had cost them a couple of libel settlements in his time, suspect columns were often refused. In 1960 he complained to the editor of *Hibernia* on the same question, remarking pointedly that ‘I had that matter out with the *Irish Times* some four years ago when they paid me £186 rather than go to court.’ Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Basil Clancy (22 September 1960), SIUC. O’Nolan became increasingly unhappy at *The Irish Times*, even agreeing to desert to Beachcomber’s *Daily Express* in 1956, a move which never came to fruition. Letter from Brian O’Nolan to T. Hew, *Daily Express* (9 September 1956), SIUC.


130 Ibid.
latter. And this later period itself casts an interesting light on all that had gone before, more clearly exposing a sense of moral and intellectual authority that was almost refined out of existence in O’Nolan’s earlier, self-reflexive writing. Indeed, the more satirical period of *Cruiskeen Lawn* suggests that the conservative element of all his work has been largely underestimated. As earlier noted, comedy can be used to enforce conformity as much as to subvert it, and it is telling that two of O’Nolan’s contemporaries (or near contemporaries), Thomas Woods and Anthony Cronin, depicted Myles na gCopaileen as no more than the licensed jester of the Dublin intelligentsia. Certainly, to some degree Myles simply played the respectable citizen, the harried everyman irritated by the petulant outbursts of liberal ‘cordoruys’, or by shrill extremists in Abbey Street demanding the revival of the Irish language. And his more direct engagement with topical matters towards the mid-1940s revealed a fairly conventional conservatism on social issues. Indeed, his comments on social planning appealed to some remote idea of natural order (one perhaps divinely ordained), which could only be upset by the interference of the state. Yet if O’Nolan can be cast as a conservative, Catholic intellectual because of his challenges to the editorial stance of the liberal *Irish Times*, the image is complicated a little by Oscar Love’s intermittent criticism of Franco’s Spain in the letters page, or Myles’s attacks on the legality of the Nuremberg trials. The common thread in these responses is a sense of moral indignation similar to that which George Orwell identified in the *Daily Express*’s Beachcomber:

It is no accident that the best comic writers of our time – Belloc, Chesterton, ‘Timothy Shy’ and the recent ‘Beachcomber’ - have been Catholic apologists; that is, people with a serious purpose and a noticeable willingness to hit below the belt… all great humorous writers show a willingness to attack the beliefs and the virtues on which society necessarily rests…

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Elsewhere, Orwell would describe Beachcomber and Timothy Shy in less flattering terms as reactionary ‘Catholic propagandists’, but his assumption of the essentially subversive quality of ‘all great humorous writers’ is interesting (if hardly unusual). As earlier noted, Thomas Woods praised Beachcomber’s humour for its critical perspective on English society - again, attributing this to his position as a Catholic outsider to the mainstream. Myles, he warned, occupied a more ambiguous position. Assuming Orwell’s viewpoint, O’Nolan’s Catholicism might have indeed anchored his humour with a ‘serious purpose’; on the other hand, it hardly enabled a subversive, critical perspective on 1940s Ireland. But the moral certainties of the later, more satirical *Cruiskeen Lawn* need to be read in light of the earlier work; the multivalent ironies of Myles na gCopaleen reflected the complex (rather than capricious) nature of his humour. O’Nolan was something of a conservative subversive, at ease neither with reactionary cultural nationalism and the paternalism of Irish politics, nor with self-proclaimed dissidents who were convinced of the backward nature of Irish culture and society. With his antipathy to the demagogue (of whatever political shade), and his suspicion of every degree of rhetoric, Myles adopted a position self-consciously outside literary or political fraternities. As such, his relationship to the Plain People of Ireland (or the less plain *Irish Times* reader) could be conducted on an equal footing reminiscent of the comic dialogues between writers and readers in *At Swim*. And in the post-war phase of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, O’Nolan’s long quarrel with the role of the Irish writer was only resolved as the more satirical Myles adopted not a position of superiority over his readership, but the role of the public servant, the satirist on their behalf. He may not have been a humorist who was ultimately willing to attack the beliefs and values of his society, as Orwell considered the task to be, but O’Nolan’s comic writing was equally effective for providing a criticism from within. The humour of this licensed jester was inflected with all the biases and prejudices of his readers; as the variable nature of *Cruiskeen Lawn* demonstrated, this intimacy could be disabling, but it could also enable a lacerating self-interrogation.

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Endnote

*Faustus Kelly* and *The Insect Play*

I am determined to expose – to drag into the inexorable light of day – every knave, time-server, sycophant and party camp-follower. I will meet them all and fight them. I will declare war on the Masons and the Knights. I will challenge the cheat and the money-changer... (*SP*, 180-181).

This speech could be a parody of Mylesian vituperation in the 1950s and 1960s, a period in which *Cruskeen Lawn* was ‘reproaching everyone and everything wrong with Dublin’.¹ It comes, however, from the title character of O’Nolan’s 1943 Abbey play, *Faustus Kelly*, a satire of political mendacity and greed. Kelly, a local councillor who sells his soul to the devil in order to become a T.D., is adept at the pompous, self-serving rhetoric which *Cruskeen Lawn* ridiculed in artists and politicians alike. But Kelly is mercifully free of all conviction; the long and meandering speeches which he makes throughout the play are merely collections of rabble-rousing clichés. In that much at least, he does not betray the arrogant, paternalistic streak which O’Nolan ridiculed in *At Swim’s* dogmatic villain Dermot Trellis, or in figures as diverse as Glun na Buaidhe’s xenophobic orators and the more liberal Frank O’Connor. It is an indication of the changed nature of Myles na gCopaleen in his later years that despite O’Nolan’s earlier antipathy to politicians and ideologues of all kinds, he himself stood for election to the Seanad in 1957. It is debatable how seriously he took this endeavour - neglecting to canvass, he polled only four hundred votes.² But in any event, by the late 1950s Myles had become something of a public watchdog; the indirect and ambivalent courses of the humour of *At Swim* and *The Third Policeman* had long given way not merely to satire, but on occasion to outright invective. His natural constituency was the readership of

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¹ Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist*, p. 158.
² O’Nolan stood for the NUI constituency, which had a total poll of nine thousand votes. Cronin writes that he regarded his candidature seriously and ‘seemed to assume that the readership of his column would vote for him almost en bloc, so he might even top the poll... He seemed to bear the disappointment scornfully enough, but it was a serious blow... attacks on politicians in his column became more frequent than ever in the weeks following the election’. *No Laughing Matter*, p. 192.
Cruiskeen Lawn, but as this minor political fiasco showed, O’Nolan misjudged the extent of his influence; like the hapless villain of his first play, he now overestimated the power of his own rhetoric.

Given this debacle, it is arguable that by the 1950s O’Nolan’s early uneasiness over the public role of the writer had been resolved (or at least forgotten). Whether or not O’Nolan regarded his foray into politics that seriously, the venture itself was ironic given his earlier ridicule of O’Faoláin and O’Connor for their earnest pronouncements on the state of Irish society (quite apart from the diatribes in Cruiskeen Lawn against all those who assumed a platform to tell others how to behave). If all were to mind their own affairs then the public sphere was no place for a writer, though perhaps at this stage O’Nolan identified more with his former role as a civil servant than with his stint as an experimental novelist.³ It is difficult to determine the point at which the polemical aspect of Cruiskeen Lawn first began to dominate and Myles became a more consistent character, establishing himself as the scourge of Irish public life. Certainly, in his contributions to the debates over social planning in 1943 and 1944, his positions as newspaper satirist and civil servant were beginning to merge. Donohue points to O’Nolan’s 1943 Abbey play, Faustus Kelly, as a significant point in the progression from the mischievous, apolitical nonsense of Comhthrom Féinne to the trenchant satire of the later Cruiskeen Lawn.⁴ Arguably, O’Nolan’s adaptation of the Capeks’ political fable, The Insect Play (also produced in 1943), can be read in the same light. Both dramas were commercial failures, and what might have seemed a promising vein of work in 1943 proved to be little more than a curious diversion in his career.⁵ (As Myles reported disconsolately shortly after Faustus Kelly closed, nobody recognised him as he strolled through Dublin)

³ O’Nolan took forcible retirement in 1953 on grounds of ill-health.
⁴ Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 105. See also p. 108. J. C. C. Mays sees the contrast dramatised in the structure of Faustus Kelly itself: ‘...the first act, which has all the charm and inconsequence of scenes in The Third Policeman’s barracks, is succeeded by two acts in which the moral implications come increasingly to determine how we react to the humour and in fact usurp it.’ ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination’, in Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan, p. 101.
⁵ Faustus Kelly opened in the Abbey on 25th January 1943 and ran for a fortnight. The Insect Play opened in the Gaiety on Monday, 22nd March 1943 and after only seven performances it closed the following Saturday.
'although I did hear one Cork accent mutter something about ex-playwrights as I passed'. But these plays also mark a kind of endpoint (if a slightly anachronistic one) to the early stage of O’Nolan’s career, the period under discussion in this thesis. This phase, from the earliest Comhthríom Féinne pieces to the Cruiskeen Lawn columns collected in The Best of Myles, is characterised most by its formal experimentation and endlessly inventive blends of comic techniques. Faustus Kelly is an anomaly for its time, its conventional form being closer in style to The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive, and as such it was a sign of things to come. Interestingly, O’Nolan only agreed to adapt the Capeks’ political satire after Hilton Edwards rejected his proposal to write a fantastic and unusual play for the Gate, one which sounds very like an adaptation of The Third Policeman. Edwards’s hint would be echoed in the critical reception of both plays, with Dublin’s drama critics registering their disappointment that as a dramatist Myles strived for entertainment rather than subversive satire. Following on the commercial failure of At Swim-Two-Birds and the outright rejection of The Third Policeman, it might well have seemed to O’Nolan that there was greater demand for the acid tongue of Myles na gCopaleen than for the literary flights of fancy he shared with Flann O’Brien.

The subject of Faustus Kelly, the failures and absurdities of Irish public life, would come to dominate the column in the following years. Indeed, when the play was being revived for a Carlow production in 1954, Myles made a typically self-aggrandising claim that in 1943 Ernest Blythe (then an Abbey director) had closed it

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6 Cruiskeen Lawn (22 February 1943); cited in Donohue, The Irish Anatomist, p. 105. Though the plays were billed under the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen, there is no explicit reference to either play in the column.

7 ‘I have in mind another play of a much better and more difficult kind – mostly funny stuff but ultimately involving the audience in horrible concepts of time and life and death that would put plays like Berkeley Square into the halfpenny place.’ Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Hilton Edwards (20 June 1942), SIUC. He was earlier encouraged by William Saroyan to adapt The Third Policeman as a play: ‘...about that book you finished: please forgive me and send it to somebody in New York... And please make a play of it and don’t worry about how it goes or how incredible or whatever it may be it seems to be [sic]. Get it out in play form and send it out. Your synopsis of the book sounds swell: really great...’. (9 June 1940), SIUC.

8 Joseph Holloway complained that ‘I am sure the play is interesting and often touching in the original form. As we saw it at the Gaiety it was a thing of sheer burlesque.’ Joseph Holloway. Manuscript Diaries. National Library of Ireland, MSS 2009, pp. 519-30; cited in IP, p. 12.

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early due to political pressure. However, he also betrayed a more credible element of self-doubt concerning the play’s actual merits:

Why did we all, including myself, think it so bad? In that now distant year, I thought I had gone too far, that the play (though straight farce) had hurt too many people, and that that sort of thing doesn’t pay in this country. I also thought it exaggerated some notorious national failings. Re-reading it in this different age, I am convinced I was right, but that the work takes on a new importance by reason of life and facts catching up on it. It had an unsuspected oracular and prophetic content.

If this ‘straight farce’ really seemed that scathing and incisive in 1943, these qualities were universally overlooked by its critics; O’Nolan was re-creating his younger self in the image of the later, more virulent Myles. In 1943, even the Irish Times reviewer was disappointed with Faustus Kelly, admitting that Kelly himself was a good character but commenting that his fellow councillors ‘tend to bring him down to the level of ordinary Abbey comedy, and to get laughs in the old-fashioned way’. The Evening Mail also found the whole enterprise tiresomely conventional, remarking that ‘it missed being an incisive satire on the New Ireland’. Admittedly, mocking local politics was a risky venture for a civil servant belonging to the very department which governed its activities. But while O’Nolan later exaggerated the play’s provocative nature, in fact Faustus Kelly merely traded on a standard comic currency of political venality and rural buffoonery. According to one commentator, the reigning Minister for Local Government, Seán MacEntee, was present at its first

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9 This is hardly true - the takings were so disappointing that Ernest Blythe wrote to O’Nolan that the play would have to close at the end of its second week. (4 February 1943), SIUC. Nevertheless, the Evening Mail reported in the first week that the Abbey audiences were enthusiastic, with Faustus Kelly playing to full houses. Man about Town, ‘Jottings’, The Evening Mail (1 February 1943), p. 3.

10 Cruiskeen Lawn (3 April 1954); cited in Cronin, No Laughing Matter, p. 135.

11 Anon. ‘Faustus Kelly’, The Irish Times (26 January 1943), p. 3. The reviewer also pointed out that O’Nolan’s brilliant command of language got him over the weak points of the play.

12 R. M. F. ‘Round the Theatres’, The Evening Mail (26 January 1943), p. 4. Ironically, when submitting the manuscript to Blythe in June 1942, O’Nolan demurred that ‘There are certain political implications in it which, as a stáir-sheirbhiseach [civil servant] I’m not too sure about, but possibly that could be got over’. Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Ernest Blythe enclosing the manuscript of Faustus Kelly (12 June 1942), SIUC.
night ‘and was obviously much entertained by his private secretary’s shafts of humour’.

O’Nolan remarked to Hilton Edwards that *Faustus Kelly* was conceived as ‘an Abbey play’, and certainly it did not disturb the Abbey’s standard brand of mild rural satire (or indeed realism). Lionel Pilkington describes Lennox Robinson’s 1933 Abbey comedy, *Drama at Inish*, as a play which heralded ‘a new cultural epoch, one in which the NTS [National Theatre Society] forgoes its previous role of rebarbative social criticism and opts instead for comedy and popular appeal’. *Faustus Kelly* is an exercise in the same vein, though it is curious that O’Nolan would expressly write a play for a theatre (or an audience) that he habitually derided - even more that in doing so, he would deliberately tailor it as ‘an Abbey play’. The standard Abbey comedy of the time, as Cronin describes it, was a domestic affair ‘usually set in rural or small-town Ireland and making fun of the manners and aspirations of rural and small-town people’. Of course, O’Nolan transplanted the action to the council chamber and to some degree followed in the footsteps of an earlier satire of verbose local politicians, William Boyle’s *The Eloquent Dempsy* (1906). But his urban district councillors are simply extensions of *Cruiskeen Lawn’s* Plain People, embodying the Dublin civil servant’s distant impressions of the local politicians he serves. The relative geniality of *Faustus Kelly* is all the more curious given that

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14 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to Hilton Edwards (20 June 1942), SIUC.
15 Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 112. He does note that the Abbey produced some contentious plays in the late 1930s (though not in the war years under Ernest Blythe), see pp. 131-134.
16 In 1944, for example, Myles wryly responded to fears that the Abbey was in decline. Quoting a scholar who pointed out the absence of drama from Gaelic literature, he mischievously questioned why one should be concerned that ‘...extinction threatens its execrable cult of foreignism, subsidised though it be by inarticulate tax-payers? What can one say of the monstrous inversion of putting this exotic mummery into a Gaelic garb and bribing peasants to play at being (of all things in this perishing world).... peasants?’ *CL* (24 August 1944).
18 Dempsey is a weather-vane politician trying to win an election as a nationalist and also secure an appointment as a Justice of the Peace. Desmond Roche reports that *The Eloquent Dempsy* ‘...gave a name (now forgotten) to a generation of flatulent carry-overs from a departed period of great political oratory’, *Local Government in Ireland*, p. 344. Another on a similar subject is Seamus O’Kelly’s *The Bribe* (1913), a more serious drama on corruption in a Poor Law Union over the appointment of a dispensary doctor.
O’Nolan could summon a great deal of bile on the subject of local government. On one day in June 1943, for example, he was presumably having a very bad day at the office:

England’s dirtiest blow at our national self-respect was the Local Government Act of 1898, which was the scaffolding within which has risen our present unique edifice of gombeen bourgeoisie. It gave the nonentity a solemn charter. And bad as all nobodies look when they are given some “status,” you will go a long way before you will encounter anything as awful as Paddy whack after he has enveloped himself in some “robe” and tangled himself up in a “gold” chain made in Manchester…

Nothing in *Faustus Kelly* is this vituperative. The first act (which is the least constrained by the machinations of plotting) presents an entertaining variety of stereotypes at war in the council chamber, from the Town Clerk, a cute Corkman (complete with ingratiating *fáinne*), to Reilly the bitter, Mylesian nay-sayer, and Kelly himself, who is the archetypal political windbag, a walking platitude. The very name of the west of Ireland man, Shawn Kilshaughraun, echoes Boucicault’s archetypal stage-Irishman:

*He is a thick, smug, oafish character, dressed in a gawkish blue suit. He exudes a treacly good-humour, always wears an inane smile and talks with a thick western brogue upon which sea-weed could be hung.* (SP, 121-122)

This act recalls the spiralling nonsense of the dialogues in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, displaying to the full the councillors’ aptitude for inconsequential argument, but its liveliness dwindles away once the action is moved out of the council chamber. Though the play depicts crooked electioneering, nepotism, and apathy on the part of public representatives (not to mention the Dáil candidate prepared to sell his soul for victory), O’Nolan’s cautiousness can be seen in his compliance with Blythe’s request to change the first draft, because it showed a senior clerical figure being induced by

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19 *Cruiskeen Lawn* (25 June 1943).
‘the Stranger’ to vote for Kelly. (Blythe suggested instead that he might easily blackmail ‘the most respectable man in town’; this became in the final version a Fianna Fáil T. D.) Overall, *Faustus Kelly*’s political satire gains more point from Kelly’s pompous speeches than from the action of the play. His impromptu flights of oratory marshal all the clichés O’Nolan honed in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, showing that he did little to adapt his customary habits for the stage. Only occasionally does it hint at a more pointed satire of Irish public life. The clearest denunciation of the band is put into the mouth of Margaret Crockett (a character who is as stilted as her brother, Captain Shaw):

You talk about Christian charity... and decency... and reforming all the nasty things one sees today in this country. What are you, the whole lot of you, but vulgar despicable hypocrites, a gang of drunken louts, worrying all day and all night about your own delicate hides! (*SP*, 185)

This is about the most trenchant point made in *Faustus Kelly*, considering the appeals to Christian charity and decency made by many in Irish politics, including MacEntee himself. Given O’Nolan’s delicate position as a civil servant, his curtain call was taken by an Abbey actor trussed up in stage-Irish fashion as Myles na gCopaleen. But by writing the uncharacteristically conventional *Faustus Kelly*, O’Nolan was engaged in some role-playing of his own – this time playing the Abbey dramatist, and to questionable effect. In *Faustus Kelly* O’Nolan merely gave an Abbey audience what it expected (or what he presumed it would expect). It was perhaps a pragmatic choice, but not one to be expected of Flann O’Brien.

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20 The devil’s title - ‘The Stranger’ – is suggestive given the insularity of contemporary Ireland.
21 Letter from Ernest Blythe to Brian O’Nolan (4 July 1942), SIUC.
22 Joseph Holloway’s verdict on this was that ‘All words and no play makes Faustus Kelly a dull boyo’. Joseph Holloway, Manuscript Diaries, National Library of Ireland, MSS 2009, p.163; cited in *IP*, p. 6.
23 Aside from these exercises in cliche, the most pointed shaft O’Nolan deals is at the close of the play, when the Stranger faces losing his position as a rates collector since his appointment is not sanctioned by the Department of Local Government. The fate of the man stamped with official disapproval, as the councillors gleefully depict it, is nothing short of social excommunication. Though the Stranger protests that he could live very quietly, disturbing no one, he is tersely informed that ‘the clergy wouldn’t have it’ (*SP*, 192). It is this very efficient social policing, presided over by a priest who chases unrespectable elements from his parish, which finally prompts the Stranger to flee.
24 See the discussion in chapter five of MacEntee’s opposition to the provision of free school meals.
The Insect Play had greater potential; it was an astute commission which played to O’Nolan’s strengths, providing a ready-made dramatic structure that allowed him to exploit his linguistic talents. First performed in Czechoslovakia in 1922, Josef and Karel Capek’s play was a political fable very much of its time. Using a tramp as chorus (the requisite outsider to bourgeois society), it presents an anatomy of human, or rather insect society, and its concerns are explicitly those of the early 1920s: the ants who labour for ever-increased efficiency are slaves to time and speed, and the bloody climax of the play is the futile war they wage in the interests of the state, industry, race, colonial power and a myriad of other empty enthusiasms. (Indeed, to underline the point, the Tramp is himself made a veteran of the Great War.) But Hilton Edwards proposed that O’Nolan tailor the play for a contemporary Irish audience:

I think very nice analogies might be made: the tramp and the Communist; the frightfully refined upper middle class and the common people, etc, etc. What about the plain people of Ireland, or why not Miles [sic] himself?24

In the event, Myles remained behind the scenes and did not assume the chorus role that Edwards proposed. But the Plain People - from Dublin beetles to Cork crickets and Ulster ants - are all over this insect fable, now re-named Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green.25 O’Nolan’s prologue indicates the topical flavour of his adaptation, as the tramp wistfully contemplates the social welfare proposals being widely debated in Dublin in 1943 (and thoroughly derided in Cruiskeen Lawn):

What a man like me wants is... family allowances, yeh know... family allowances... and plenty of free insurance, d’yeh Understand me. (He is becoming more and more maudlin.) An’ house-buildin’ facilities for getting’ married, d’yeh

24 Hilton Edwards to Brian O’Nolan (24 July 1942), SIUC. The first English production of The Insect Play was in New York, in a translation by Owen Davis, The World We Live In, which opened on 31 October 1922. Paul Selver’s translation (adapted by Nigel Playfair and Clifford Bax) - And so ad infinitum – was produced at the Regent Theatre in London, opening on 5 May 1923. The text was published the same year and it was this which O’Nolan was presumably working from (IP, 7).

25 This the title under which Robert Tracy edited the play, but it was performed as The Insect Play.
know. An’... wan more cow... wan more sow... an’ wan... more... acre... undher th’plough. \(\text{IP, 25-26}\)

The process of adapting another text did not wholly deflect O’Nolan from his usual preoccupations.\(^\text{27}\) The Capeks’ first act on the fickleness of love (which in the original translation followed the capricious love affairs of 1920s flappers, or rather, social butterflies) is replaced with a theme more congenial to the Mylesian canon. The butterflies are supplanted by worker bees who do no work, and their futile romances give way to a satire of the chattering classes whose aimless and morbid existentialism ends in self-destruction.\(^\text{28}\) The sexually licentious female butterflies, hardly a species widely found in 1940s Ireland, are replaced by frustrated bees who forego ‘the sensuous delight of stinging’ and remain ‘chaste’ in order to survive long enough to meet the queen bee \(\text{IP, 30-31}\).\(^\text{29}\) But despite the topical elements of this adaptation, it is significant that overall O’Nolan’s *Insect Play* is far less didactic (and more humorous) than Paul Selver’s earlier version. The Tramp does maintain his function as a chorus throughout, but not as intrusively as he did in Selver’s hands.\(^\text{30}\) And yet O’Nolan’s transposition of the third act’s ant war to contemporary Ireland proved too controversial for many of Dublin’s critics, being a farcical debacle between the loyal, industrious and ‘hord-headed’ \(\text{IP, 65}\) Orange Ants, the southern

\(^{26}\) Tracy notes that the slogan is that of P. J. Hogan, a previous Minister for Agriculture.

\(^{27}\) As Robert Tracy argues: ‘despite owing its concept, structure and incidents to the Capeks, *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* is essentially an original work by Myles himself... his own improvisation upon aspects of that play’ \(\text{IP, 7}\).

\(^{28}\) Edwards, politely responding to an early draft of this act, remarked that the Capeks’ social butterflies were not to his taste either: ‘...[I] always thought it unfortunate that the play opened with those impossible creatures, but monkeys are not insects - does it matter?’ Hilton Edwards to Brian O’Nolan (21 October 1942), SIUC. Selver’s butterfly poet, Felix, who is a frustrated lover courting approval with his doggerel, is replaced with a Shakespeare-spouting Drone who is sleepily indifferent to the action around him \(\text{IP, 85-86}\).

\(^{29}\) O’Nolan evidently hit his mark on this point; an outraged letter to *The Standard* complained that this first act was ‘blasphemous and most suggestive’: ‘References to the ‘Queen’ up in the sky and ‘keeping pure till we meet her’ made me squirm and the language and use of the Holy Name, along with the ‘maternity’ act in the second part, was vile’. Letter from S. M. Dunn, *The Standard* (2 April 1943). On the same day it published a retort from Myles to Gabriel Fallon’s scathing review, and Tracy thus suggests that ‘S. M. Dunn’ may be O’Nolan himself \(\text{IP, 15}\).

\(^{30}\) The second act follows the original text much more closely, though the Capeks’ chrysalis is replaced with an egg striving to be born, and a ruthless duck and his duckling take the place of a fly and larva. They are surrounded by capitalist Dublin beetles scurrying to protect their hard-earned pile, a pair of Cork crickets who have decamped to enter the civil service and raise a family, and an ingratiating parasite and self-professed communist.

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Green Ants (led by ‘Deevil so-ond-so’ (IP, 66)) and the imperial Red Ants. The victor, who imposes Irish as the sole language of the world is a typical shot at the ambitions of Irish language activists (and Eamon de Valera himself). However, making the Capeks’ ant war a local affair most likely served a dual purpose; in the midst of another world war the original text took on a new relevance, one that would hardly be appreciated by the government censors. So while these revisions certainly made the Capeks’ satire immediately relevant to 1940s Dublin (in a deeper fashion than the play's superficial panoply of Dublin, Cork, or Belfast accents), arguably it pandered a little to the tenor of Emergency Dublin by ignoring the Capeks’ caricature of a universal war in favour of more provincial concerns.

As earlier noted, Faustus Kelly was judged to have ‘missed being an incisive satire on the New Ireland’. The Insect Play met a similar response, with critics complaining that O’Nolan reduced the Capeks’ political fable to music hall burlesque. The Irish Independent and The Irish Times did praise its acute satire, but the latter admitted that O’Nolan had taken away much of the original play and made it ‘rather more of an entertainment’. His reaction to a similar complaint from Gabriel Fallon (concerning its double entendres and its ‘music hall’ nature) was to assert that the ‘...entire play is a salutary double entendre and may well present to the

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31 The Tramp is a veteran of the Great War in both texts (in O’Nolan’s, he is a veteran of the Royal Munster Fusiliers (IP, 76)), but Selver explicitly makes the connection between the conflicts.

32 Given O’Nolan’s parodies of political rhetoric in Faustus Kelly, it is interesting that in his version it is language which fuels bigotry and war, whether through the slogans contrived by the Orange Ants’ politicians (‘The Awnt State will feight ond the Awnt State wull be reight!’ (IP, 62)), or the dispute over Latin which provokes the civil war between the ‘ants of the Gael and ants of the Pale’ (IP, 19).


34 Even the ant war won censure on this point, one critic remarking that the Capeks ‘wrote a serious satire on the cruelties of the world... They would have been surprised to find their cornerstone being used... to burlesque the divisions in this country to make a theatrical holiday.’ T. W. ‘The Insect Play at the Gaiety’, The Irish Press (23 March 1943), p. 3. The play inspired a similarly bad-tempered diary entry from Joseph Holloway: ‘...I fear Myles had strayed miles away from the Capeks’ play and its import. As we saw it... it was just a pointless burlesque in Irish dialect over-emphasized to the point of grotesque exaggeration.’ Joseph Holloway, Manuscript Diaries, National Library of Ireland, MSS 2009, pp. 519-20; cited in IP, pp. 11-12.

35 ‘Swift’s version of Lilliput is not so very different from what the sleeping tramp... sees in Stephen’s Green.’ ‘The Insect Play’, The Irish Times (23 March 1943), p. 3. See also D. S. ‘The Insect Play. An Enjoyable Satire’, The Irish Independent (23 March 1943), p. 2.
mentally adolescent the same sort of shock that was given by the Rouault picture’. But judging from the direction taken by Cruiskeen Lawn in the later 1940s, the result of such criticism was that O’Nolan made the polemical aspect of his writing ever more obvious. As he increasingly adopted the critical role advocated by many Irish writers of the 1940s, and most particularly by The Bell, he slowly abandoned his own brand of literary vaudeville. It is curious that despite the political background of Faustus Kelly, or the topical flavour of O’Nolan’s Insect Play, both plays have been criticised for a rather blunted satire. Donohue’s comments on Faustus Kelly draw on J. C. C. Mays’s judgement that the play is ‘paradigmatic of the direction taken by Brian O’Nolan’s later writing. Its wit and inventiveness are often the same as before... but the more conscious moral purpose to which these things are subordinate causes their different effect.’ That may be so, but O’Nolan’s drama does not anticipate his later writing so much in its satirical content as in its conservative form. The talent for dialogue, or perhaps ventriloquy, that is used to startling effect in the fiction can be bland on the stage, as if the dramatic content of At Swim or Cruiskeen Lawn was really in productive tension with the genre. On the page, O’Nolan created flagrantly theatrical personae in Myles na gCopaleen and his cohorts; he also exploited metatextual elements to actively engage the reader, unlike the plays and the later novels, which give the audience a more passive role. And despite the political themes of both plays (subjects still largely absent from Cruiskeen Lawn in early 1943, and certainly from the early fiction), evidently Dublin’s critics were disappointed that Myles’s blows did not strike home. So the plays may be read as belonging to a transitional phase in O’Nolan’s career, anticipating the conventional forms and more topical satire of his later fiction and journalism, while still betraying the non-committal humour that characterises his early work. It was this satirical reticence, an avoidance of all seriousness, that led John Wain to accuse Myles (or

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36 ‘...There is no reference to sex as such anywhere; it is true that there are male and female characters, but very few people nowadays consider that alone an indelicacy.’ Letter from Myles na gCopaleen. The Standard (2 April 1943). Gabriel Fallon, ‘Red, Red Roses!’, The Standard (26 March 1943).

rather, that portion of *Cruiskeen Lawn* collected in *The Best of Myles*) of ‘aiming at “pure humour”, which, like pure lyricism, probably doesn’t exist’.38

Certainly, one of the aims of this thesis has been to demonstrate that ‘pure humour’ does not exist, even in O’Nolan’s most nonsensical text, *The Third Policeman*. As chapter three argued, *The Third Policeman*’s nonsense is itself shot through with the anxieties of the 1930s. The single-minded (and murderous) fanaticism of that novel’s central character stands in contrast to the subtle ironies and ambiguities typical of O’Nolan’s writing. If at the time his humour refrained from explicit political engagement, this was itself a loaded gesture. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Irish writer was in a very curious position. The draconian censorship legislation instituted in 1929 effectively marginalised the writer as a dubious, presumably subversive, character. Yet the ethos of cultural nationalism implied that writers (and other artists) could or should occupy an instrumental role in social and political life. (Arguably, this popular platform was threatened by the sophistication of Joyce’s later work, a clash that fuels the comedy of *At Swim* as much as the puritan dogmatism ridiculed in the character of its villain, Dermot Trellis.) The dissident, political character of *The Bell* might be seen as the natural consequence of this contradiction, but O’Nolan depicted its contributors as precious characters in paranoiac retreat from the Plain People of Ireland. His own response to the situation was more conflicted, showing a suspicion of the politically-engaged writer (one perhaps imbued by modernism), but also a dislike for self-involved aestheticism and a mischievous taste for controversy. The early *Cruiskeen Lawn* juggled endless variations of nonsense, satire, parody, wordplay and wit, and its open-ended nature allows any number of narratives to be assembled from the column. But broadly sketching O’Nolan’s progression over the early 1940s from a nonsensical humorist to a more polemical satirist shows how all his writing, whatever the comic modes it exploited, was inextricably bound up with contemporary Irish cultural debate.

Unfortunately, O’Nolan’s journalism remains the most neglected aspect of his writing, although it dominated his output for over twenty years and (until the 1960s) defined his work in the public consciousness, and quite probably his own. The readership of *An Béal Bocht* was by its nature fairly limited; otherwise, between 1940 and 1961 (when he published *The Hard Life*) O’Nolan was not apparently active as a novelist. His reputation in his own lifetime, and for the most part his identity as a writer, was built on *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Unlike his intermittent stints as a novelist (and his short-lived period as a dramatist), O’Nolan was active as a comic journalist throughout his career. His earliest publications were the articles which appeared in *The Irish Press* and *Comhthrom Féinne* from 1931 onwards, followed by his short-lived magazine, *Blather*, and the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column; in the late 1950s and 1960s he supplemented his *Irish Times* work by contributing humorous columns to various provincial newspapers. The only period of O’Nolan’s career when he was not regularly publishing journalism was between 1935 and 1940 (discounting the spurious letter controversies he concocted in *The Irish Times* from 1938 onwards). In that relatively short space of time, both *At Swim* and *The Third Policeman* were written. Indeed, the piecemeal composition of *At Swim* itself owes much to the skills O’Nolan acquired as a contributor to *Comhthrom Féinne*, and its episodic nature is echoed in the structure of *The Third Policeman* and *An Béal Bocht*. It is surely significant that his literary career began and ended with comic journalism, and the victory which Flann O’Brien posthumously gained over Myles na gCopaleen is a curious distortion of O’Nolan’s reputation – if an understandable one. His career would appear far differently if viewed primarily from the perspective of the journalism, rather than the fiction. For all the inventiveness of the early *Cruiskeen Lawn*, its wordplay and rhetorical self-consciousness, the dominating image of O’Nolan as a self-conscious literary artificer is difficult to maintain in the light of the later journalism. His cultural commentary in *Cruiskeen Lawn* – on the language revival, the critical agenda of *The Bell*, or the state of Irish literature - only serves to emphasise the historical moorings of his early novels. However, this is not to imply that the interest of *Cruiskeen Lawn* lies solely in its capacity to illuminate the cultural agendas of the novels (if any). As a vast, sprawling body of comic writing,
encompassing individual stories and set-pieces, long-running serials, topical satire and much more, it is unique in modern Irish literature and can have few parallels elsewhere. On occasion, correspondences have been drawn with the journalism of the nineteenth-century Austrian satirist, Karl Kraus, but O’Nolan himself made no such comparison; his own frame of reference included his contemporary, Beachcomber, Mark Twain and James Russell Lowell (the latter two being cited with admiration in *Cruiskeen Lawn*). But if there are few enough parallels to be found for *Cruiskeen Lawn*, critical precedents for analysing such a body of work are even more elusive. The daily newspaper column is, by its nature, the worst of shaggy monsters. In the case of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, attending to its topical elements risks neglecting its tendency for digressive nonsense (and alarming inventiveness), and vice versa. Interpretative decisions are further complicated by the bilingual nature of the column in its early years. By alternating between Irish and English, its comedy played off two different readerships; admittedly, these were not entirely exclusive of each other, but the Irish material was certainly inaccessible to most. For all these reasons, it is understandable that *Cruiskeen Lawn* has been largely neglected by O’Nolan’s critics, but the oversight is no less unfortunate for that.

Perhaps Myles’s literary fame could not travel as easily as Flann O’Brien’s, given the extent to which his humour was bound up with everyday life in Dublin. (Although, as chapter two argues, *At Swim* was even more intimately concerned with the social and intellectual climate of 1930s UCD.) O’Nolan’s contemporaries noted that Myles exploited an intimate relationship with his readership; as Thomas Woods astutely (if ungenerously) put it: ‘Myles is our type’. Or in other words, O’Nolan was a typical product of the mid-century Dublin intelligentsia: scabrous, derisory, and ultimately unproductive. But he could also take on the features of the Plain People of Ireland, mocking modernist aesthetics in *At Swim* and the entire literary fraternity in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Too often such contradictions have led critics to cast Myles as a kind of comic chameleon, a ventriloquist of mid-century Ireland in all its guises. But

these contradictions are arguably due more to the complexity of O’Nolan’s comedy - fuelled to some degree by a conservative instinct, but complicated by a disruptive critical intelligence. Myles eschewed allegiances to various cultural factions: language revivalists and their opponents, the anti-censorship lobby and the conservative guardians of the national culture, ‘corduroys’ and the plain people, but he could find common ground with most at one time or another. Crusheen Lawn was not the work of a satirist with a lofty detachment from his readers, but one who shared and derided their prejudices. O’Nolan first won notoriety by performing for a small (but clamorous) student community in the pages of Comhthrom Féinne; given this apprenticeship, it is not surprising that his first novel explored the traffic of influences between writers and readers. For all its inventiveness, At Swim undermines the very notion of intellectual independence. The student narrator manipulates, and is manipulated by, a web of discourses; this Stephen Dedalus is too self-aware to imagine himself flying by any nets. The collaborative novel he produces draws attention to itself as the product of a particular social and intellectual environment. Admittedly, in the sinister world of The Third Policeman, community is more closely equated with entrapment (as it is in An Béal Bocht, another tale of predestination). The narrator is a solitary character inveigled by Divney (whose friendship is peculiarly oppressive) to murder Mathers, and he then fares little better at the hands of the friendly policemen. The atmosphere of the novel is claustrophobic; in contrast, At Swim suggests that the intimacy O’Nolan (and later Myles) enjoyed with his audience was not stifling, but inspiring. After all, At Swim’s student narrator does produce, out of the cultural gloom of the Free State, a wildly innovative comic novel.

So it is debatable to what degree O’Nolan was a comic writer who challenged the values of his time, or one whose humour ultimately shows accommodation with them. Certainly, some of his more nonsensical inventions can be read merely as escapist fantasies, while the critique implicit in others – like At Swim – can be undermined by its comic self-questioning. Perhaps O’Nolan was finally abandoning the safe haven of ‘erudite irresponsibility’ when Myles acquired a more polemical,

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41 Letter from Brian O’Nolan to A. M. Heath (3 October 1938), SIUC.
satirical tone towards the mid-1940s. On the other hand, perhaps in doing so he was capitulating to the demagoguery rife in Irish culture, and which he had criticised in others. The bulk and variety of O’Nolan’s writing does not lend itself to neat conclusions, indeed a certain inconclusiveness is a feature of the early comedy itself, as can be seen in the open-ended, ambivalent nature of *At Swim* and *The Third Policeman*. O’Nolan is not easily classified as a modernist or post-modernist, as a critic of contemporary Ireland in the vein of *The Bell*, or indeed an unwitting conservative. The complexity of the various comic modes he exploited, and indeed of his own perspective on Irish literature and politics, frustrates the conventional categories of literary history. His commentary on the Irish language is a typical example: himself a native speaker, O’Nolan eloquently defended the cultural value of the language, but decried not only the methods of the state-sponsored revival, but the very desirability of its goals. *An Béal Bocht* merrily travestied a whole corpus of Irish writing, with the implicit complaint that there was little in the modern canon to attract an urban, educated reader. However, despite its success O’Nolan himself made no further attempts to fill that need, and less than two years later he had also abandoned the Irish *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. His response to the Irish language revival demonstrates that while he could be a savage critic of his contemporaries, still his thinking operated within the same cultural parameters. Though his criticism of language activists in the early 1940s and in the later revival manuscript focused on the ills of cultural nationalism, on occasion he himself defended the language on the grounds that it ‘enshrines the national ethos’. O’Nolan’s eventual turn to English could be read as a defiant gesture, but it was also a surrender to a society which notoriously paid lip-service to the Irish language and yet made no place for it in daily life.

Such complexities, or contradictions, are not kind to O’Nolan’s critics. As he liked to point out, Joyce connived in the creation of his own critical industry; it might be said that O’Nolan contrived to frustrate his own. While Joyce oversaw the release of a structural key to *Ulysses*, *At Swim* brazenly flaunts its haphazard construction. Things

42 *CL* (11 October 1943); *BM*, pp. 283-84.
worsened with *The Third Policeman*, whose scholar protagonist is also a murderer (and whose footnotes provide another cautionary tale of deranged scholarship). As Sergeant Pluck observes: ‘The first beginnings of wisdom... is to ask questions but never to answer any. *You* get wisdom from asking and *I* from not answering’ (*TP*, 62). Given the arch playfulness of Myles and company, the ambiguities and ironies of O’Nolan’s humour, his comic writing certainly proved itself more adept at raising questions than yielding answers. But by placing his work in its social and cultural context, this thesis has sought to account for such evasiveness by attending both to the historical forces shaping O’Nolan’s comedy, and to the degree to which it critically engaged with contemporary Irish culture. Myles always astutely pitched his performances to his audience, and O’Nolan’s comedy can only suffer when read out of context. Not only does it lose its contemporary resonances (which would be true of any writer), but his humour can tend to be taken at face value as a body of work that was inherently subversive of contemporary Ireland. This thesis has argued instead that the positions of Flann, Myles and company are more complex than this, and O’Nolan’s doubled-edged comedy more nuanced. Although perhaps this quality was not so much in evidence on the day that he characterised the Plain People of Ireland (that conglomerate of all that was best in Irish life) as an ‘ignorant self-opinionated sod-minded suet-brained ham-faced mealy-mouthed streptococcus-ridden gang of natural gobdaws’.

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43 *CL* (29 October 1941); *BM*, p. 81.
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