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**Brian O’Nolan’s Comic and Critical Reconception
of Narratives of the Embellished Past in
Independent Ireland, 1938-1966**

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Brian O’Nolan: komisch-kritische herschepping van verhalen over Ierlands opgehemelde
verleden: zoals verteld na de onafhankelijkheid, met bijzondere betrekking tot de periode
1938 – 1966
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Introduction

Myles na Gopaleen never actually existed, but all the same he was living in the past. Specifically, he claimed to be living in a house called “The Past.” Myles’s visitors think it is a strange name for a house, but he wonders whether it is “so queer after all? Is it not better than, say, “The Present”?” “The Present” seems to imply that the house is the gift of some friend rather than the result of my exertions as secretary of the Gaelic League, a post which I held at a time when the language was neither profitable nor popular” (*Cruiskeen Lawn* 3 Dec. 1942).¹ He loses his temper then thinking about the struggles of those times, roughly in the 1890s, but quickly composes himself and returns to the topic of his house: “But about this house of mine. I often hear people saying: “Ah, that poor man. Sure that poor man is living in ‘The Past.’” (3 Dec. 1942).

Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966) was the man behind the masks of columnist Myles na Gopaleen and Flann O’Brien. The former was the pseudonym that he used for his column *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the *Irish Times* from 1940 until his death in 1966, and under the latter he published four of his five novels and is better known today by this pen name than his birth name. His work was comic, satirical and light-hearted, but it was also philosophical, socially engaged and could at times be utterly spiteful. His newspaper column and his fiction each explored in different ways the tension between the past and modernity in post-independence Ireland, often by bringing disparate historical periods together in a single framework. The past features as a revenant or ghost throughout his work, often appearing where it is least expected and unsettling the temporal and historical focus and structure of his work. The fragmented temporality that characterises his writing confronts readers with a synthetic and self-conscious perspective on history which forces them to rethink the stability of their own perceptions of the course of narrative history.

Throughout this study, I will refer to this writer either as O’Nolan, or at times Myles, to differentiate the personas behind his fictional work and his journalism. Other pseudonyms he used throughout his prolific career included George Knowall, Lir O’Connor, Brother Barnabus, Count O’Blather, John James Doe, Matt Duffy and possibly Stephen Blakesley and Seán Ó Longáin. The work of the compound of pseudonyms attributed to Brian O’Nolan is the main subject of my research.²

¹ Parenthetical references to *Cruiskeen Lawn* will be abbreviated to *CL* where necessary. If it is clear that the column quoted is *Cruiskeen Lawn*, only the date will be provided. All references are to the *Irish Times* unless otherwise stated. Columns that have been reprinted in collections such as *The Best of Myles* or *Myles Away From Dublin* do not always provide the original date. I have provided the dates in the references, where possible.

² John J. Burns Library at Boston College has the largest Brian O’Nolan collection of all research libraries, including

This study aims to analyse O’Nolan’s critical and comic response to the way narratives of the Irish past were invoked and deployed in the (newly) independent Irish State after 1921 in the service of making or imagining modern Ireland’s future and crystallising a sense of shared, national identity. Throughout his career as a journalist, novelist and civil servant, O’Nolan comically, disdainfully, and constructively criticised the way that (literary) historical narratives of the Irish past were harnessed by the government, cultural institutions, literary writers and the masses, to validate and shape their various, often competing, visions of modern, independent Ireland from a presentist historical perspective.

My main focus will be on the years 1938 to 1966, when O’Nolan wrote most of his work. Within this temporal framework, the 1940s will receive the most attention, but I will also necessarily be referring back to historical developments that predate the establishment of the Irish Free State in December 1922. The 1937 constitution saw the name of the Irish Free State replaced by Éire or Ireland. If the current title of the Irish state is relevant to my discussion, it will be given, but in the main, my references will be to the independent state or to Ireland.

In “The War Against the Past,” Declan Kiberd examines how the past in Irish literature and politics was used and abused either to vindicate the past or forge the future. He argues that too often, the choice between vindication and creating the future have led “the fighter of Irish bulls” to take “one step back only to be impaled on the horns of the past and never” recover sufficiently “to deliver the mortal blow” to his present problem (33). This explains the pathology of revivalism in Ireland, Kiberd argues, and caused the people of modern Ireland to lose the “opportunity to become themselves” in exchange for empty roles in a Yeatsian tragedy which filled “the national stage [...] with the ghosts of dead men insisting that the living simplify and abandon their daily lives, to the point of becoming agents of the dead” (33-4). I will return to the thought-provoking idea of Irish culture as theatre later on, but for now it must be pointed out that while vindication and future-making were perhaps the most common reasons to deploy a narrative of the past in the Irish cultural sphere in early independent Ireland, the choices are not limited to that. I hope to show through my

a number of articles in Irish by Ó Longáin with ‘Myles na Gopaleen’ written in the margin, but the name does not appear in any Brian O’Nolan bibliographies, as Taaffe has also noted (209). Some Sexton Blake detective stories written before 1955 under the name of Stephen Blakesley have been attributed to O’Nolan, who claimed “at various times in his life [...] that he had written or was about to write Sexton Blake stories” but there is no evidence to prove that he did write them (Cronin 198). O’Nolan told a boys’ literature historian researching Sexton Blake stories that he could not remember the titles or what name he used in his correspondence with the publisher. Cronin suggests that some of the Blakesley stories could be O’Nolan’s because “there are more fat policemen on bicycles in them than is usual even in Sexton Blake stories” (200). O’Nolan’s widow Evelyn doubted that her husband had written them because she had never seen him work on them, but this is hardly conclusive proof as he may have written them before they came to know each other.

reading of O’Nolan’s work that there is no limit to what can be done with the past, if you conceive of temporality and linearity differently, or remove them as organising concepts altogether as O’Nolan did in much of his work. Independent Ireland’s deeply complex relationship to the past, as we will see throughout this work, is not only one of our writer’s most fruitful subjects, but has shaped its often paradoxical relationship to modernity.

O’Nolan in Relation to Independent Ireland: Themes and Contexts

O’Nolan may be described as a comically profound writer whose comedy depends largely on pedantic fault-finding and the limits of language and narrative to depict the world and human experience accurately. At various intervals his writing attacks the language of the state, the law and popular cliché. By foregrounding the contradictions inherent to a particular use of language or narrative, O’Nolan’s writing demonstrates and criticises how the new state (among others) positioned itself in relation to the past and the future it had yet to write.

The young Irish state drew on narratives of Irish history to announce to itself and its people what it would stand for in years to come. The most basic grand narrative it drew upon was that of the Irish nation heroically casting off the ties of colonial oppression and striding confidently into a future that would allow it to be a nation once again, but also finally and for the first time. The general nationalist consensus was that the Irish nation had always been there, and its innate spirit and memory only needed to be tapped and given formal expression through political independence and sovereignty. Successive governments could not ignore earlier conceptualisations of Irish nationhood nor could they integrate all of them into their own vision. For decades to come, deep-seated tension would mark Irish politics as different parties found it almost impossible to agree about what shape an independent Irish state should take.³ The Irish Civil War further exacerbated hostilities amongst different types of nationalists. The Free State was a transitional entity and not the final embodiment of independence from England. It was an in-between State that despite continued close political and economic ties with England, took pains to assert its ideological and cultural difference in a purposeful march towards full political independence and national unity. Nation-building in Ireland has been characterised by its unfinished character. In some ways it continues to be, as the goal of securing political independence and unity for the whole of Ireland has

³ The pre-independence nationalist movement was split over the Anglo-Irish treaty, which was rejected by Sinn Féin and Eamon de Valera, who as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and Minister for External Affairs from 1932–48, and Taoiseach from 1951–54 and 1957–59, was in power for most of Brian O’Nolan’s adult life.

not been able to be met. The pursuit of this goal, once all-important now seems to have been at least officially abandoned, as the Republic of Ireland revoked its territorial claim to the North of Ireland in 1999 as part of the Good Friday Agreement, making unification possible only on the basis of the unity by consent principle.

Because this transitional and partial form of independence has been intensely divisive in Ireland, it was essential that the newly independent state find a suitable way of relating the historical past to the lived present and by extension, the future. It had to assert its existence as a temporary solution that was not as good as full independence but was better than nothing. It could not express the relationship of the present to the past in terms of a clean break, nor would that have been desirable. Historical continuity must not be expressed tentatively. Even if it was a transitional state, and its institutions continued to resemble the trappings of British government, it was still markedly different from what it followed. This complex and confused state of affairs posed some interesting challenges to giving expression to the fragmented temporal differences between the Irish past(s), present(s) and future(s).

From 1922 until well into the 1950s, the Irish state was faced with shaping a coherent and continuous historical narrative that linked the past to a hopeful present and stable, modern future. But the past was both a source of pride and pain, and it was difficult to weave the past into the present in a way which satisfied the State's diverse citizenry. D. George Boyce's "No lack of ghosts': Memory, Commemoration and the State in Ireland" examines the "cross-fertilisation of commerce, history and politics," which "raise[s] questions about what 'memory' is and how it is encapsulated, created or rediscovered" (259). Boyce argues that the State was the most important mediator in shaping Irish cultural memory following independence because it articulated the relationship to the past in terms of contemporary political passions. The State's narrative of the past could have a knock-on effect: its version, the dominant ideological paradigm, was reproduced and accommodated by institutions and the media. It could also be met with intense opposition, either by members of the public or opposition in the government. So the State faced a double bind of responsibility when it tried to create a stamped and approved memory of the past for the modern Irish nation to share in.

Grand narratives are essential to political entities to exercise and legitimate their power. However, they never reflect the totality of lived experience for individuals, a fact increasingly evident in postmodern historiography's proliferation of the histories of groups, organisations, regions, institutions and so on. Boyce notes that while historians relish

the dissolution of the old, apparently solid ground of the grand narrative of Irish history (nationalist and Unionist), the state is obliged to stand between the two extremes: those of the fragmented past, which underlines its need for some agreed past that will help direct its future, and the necessity not to surrender to a narrative about the past that will interrupt or jeopardise its efforts to modernise itself. (265-6)

Trying to do justice to the fragmented past has always been a highly fraught process in Ireland. In “Commemoration in the Irish Free State: A Chronicle of Embarrassment,” David Fitzpatrick has shown how intensely difficult it could be to satisfy, let alone please, all the different political factions and their supporters when it came to commemorating the Irish past and its many dead heroes because the heroes of one group were the traitors of another.

The narrative of the past that became the dominant paradigm in early post-independence Ireland was based on the pre-colonial, Gaelic, rural idyll. In many ways, given the more contentious and divisive political past, this was a relatively uncontentious chapter of Irish history to promote and it was hoped that different people in Ireland, regardless of their politics, could agree on the Gaelic past as a common past and source of pride.⁴ This will be developed further in Chapter 1, where I analyse O’Nolan’s ambivalent relationship to the Irish language revival and show that over-emphasis on restoring the Irish language and the values associated with rural Gaelic community life in fact placed a burden on Irish education and the Irish economy that was only partly alleviated by educational and economic reform in the 1960s.

The language question is only one example of a conflict between the past and tradition on the one hand and the present and modernity on the other. In Chapter 2 I will discuss O’Nolan’s depiction of how this conflict affected the development of modern institutions, such as the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS), established on the brink of the Second World War to promote higher level research into Celtic Studies and Theoretical Physics – two opposed areas of study if ever there were. My analysis of O’Nolan’s critique of DIAS and the science debates in contemporary Ireland explores how narratives of the Irish past were called upon by both those opposed to, and those in favour of increased scientific research and education in Ireland.

Furthermore, in the creation of a national literature, we again see the past collide with the present, not only in debates about which language Irish Literature was to be in, but also in discussions of what constituted appropriate and national aesthetics and content. This will be a recurring theme here, mainly because of Brian O’Nolan’s important contribution not only to

⁴ For a perspective on the relative strangeness of the predominance of Gaelic Ireland and the Gaelic myth in nineteenth-century nationalist narratives, see Leerssen 143-148.

cultural debates about literature in general, but also to specific debates about what made a particular work nationally appropriate.

O’Nolan’s work as a journalist is particularly valuable to consider for a number of reasons, in light of the State’s creation of a narrative of the Irish past, which I will discuss below. For now though, it suffices to point out that the dialogue that he effectively had with the readers of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, many of whom also worried that the State’s preferred narrative was too backward-looking to bring the nation confidently into modernity, gives us unique insight into the contemporary cultural climate of mid-century Ireland. As a sounding board for his society, Myles responds directly and indirectly to readers’ letters as well as other articles in the *Irish Times* and various other publications circulating in the public domain. He absorbs and reflects popularly held attitudes and reactions to (narratives of) modernity and the past. The column is an excellent starting point for gaining perspective on how people in Ireland reflected critically (or uncritically) on the State’s invocations of narratives of the past and how people agreed or disagreed with these.

The structure of the debate about what course independent Ireland should take, a regressive one towards restoring the safe and cosy past or a progressive one towards the unbridled, modern future, was often polarised in terms of the rejection or the embrace of the modern. *Cruiskeen Lawn* registers the contradictions and absurdities that underlie the selective truths people invoked to support their pro- or anti-modern ideas. This combination of pro- and anti-modernism is not only typical of Irish modernity in the moment of post-independence, but as Tim Armstrong has shown, “modernity and anti-modernity as pathology and cure are bound together *within* the field of the modern” (4). As an author, O’Nolan occupied an intermediary, transitional and interstitial position in his open acknowledgement and praise of the merits of the past and in his admiration of the benefits of the modern. He neither rejected nor embraced either, but observed and commented from an ambivalent ground in-between.

The Interstitial Writer in In-Between Times

Above I described the Free State as a transitional political entity between a colonial state and a modern, post-colonial republic. It is useful here to invoke Richard Kearney’s term of “*transitional crisis*” (*Transitions* 14). Kearney’s *Transitions* investigates how Irish culture was affected by modernism and distinguishes three sorts of Irish modernism on the basis of the extent to which the narratives he analyses are attracted to the past and the modern, revivalism and modernism. He

describes narratives that “largely gravitate towards tradition and the past [...] paradoxically, as ‘revivalist modernism’” (14).⁵ Narratives that resist “the pull of tradition and its attendant idioms of national revival” he terms “‘radicalist modernism,’” while the third form is called “‘mediational modernism’ – or perhaps ‘postmodernism,’” postmodern insofar as these narratives “[borrow] freely from the idioms of both modernity and tradition, one moment endorsing a deconstruction of tradition, another reinventing and rewriting the stories of the past transmitted by cultural memory” (14). O’Nolan’s work should be situated in the third category – mediational or postmodern. All three indicate what Kearney calls “*transitional crisis*” and are part of a transitional paradigm that “exemplifies the essentially conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience; it expresses the multiple complexities and paradoxes which inform our sense of history” (14).⁶

Situating O’Nolan within Kearney’s concept of transitional crisis helps us to understand the cultural and literary climate that he was writing in and criticising. The rethinking and deconstruction that characterise the mediational and transitional paradigms together put our author in a prime position from which to challenge the dominant ideology of his time and articulate the present perspective from multiple points of view. He comes on to a scene defined by conflict and controversy and integrates these characteristics into his literary mode of celebratory debunking agitation. I maintain that O’Nolan is constantly diagnosing what is wrong with contemporary Ireland without prescribing a cure. Not for him the advocacy of monologic narratives, even as an alternative to the status quo; instead O’Nolan brings the controversies and conflict together and deconstructs them, exposing how their advocates have selectively created a monolithic reading of (literary) history. A pedantic fault-finder like no other, he calls attention to the uses and abuses of language and narrative – by the State, institutions, artists and ordinary people – to describe and define the limits of their world views. Through his own innovative use of language and the multiplication and profusion of various points of view, he shows that if dialogue is initiated between

⁵ Today this sounds somewhat less paradoxical as revivalism is increasingly understood, like modernism, as a reaction to modernity. In “Modernism, Maunsel and the Irish Short Story,” Anne Markey makes a convincing case for including revivalism in modernism: “[i]n its invention, adaptation and updating of tradition as a reaction to the stimulus of modernity, perhaps revivalism, in all its varieties and manifestations, should take its place – alongside the range of contestatory yet complementary movements, cubism, expressionism, futurism and the like – that contribute to our broad understanding of modernism itself” (Keown and Taaffe 62).

⁶ In further support of putting O’Nolan in the category of mediational modernism or postmodernism, it is useful to consider how well O’Nolan’s work fits Linda Hutcheon’s description of what characterises – but does not necessarily define – the postmodern in fiction. O’Nolan writes “historiographical metafiction,” which is “wilfully contradictory” in its critical reflection on history and fiction (ix; xiii). Furthermore, O’Nolan’s writing engages polemically and parodically with “the important postmodern concept of the ‘presence of the past’” (4). Postmodernism contains and contests modernism, but its ironic contemplation of and engagement with history “is not a nostalgic return [to history]; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (4).

these conflicting perspectives, that a potentially more satisfying consensus can be reached, and if not, an interesting and worthwhile discussion can provide more insight into the different perspectives. In this he advocates critical reflection on the narratives we invoke to define our present relationship to the past and our desires for the future.

His interstitiality is one aspect that distinguishes his unique cultural commentary. As a mediational modernist, O’Nolan is reactive and innovative. But he is also a dialogic writer because he initiates and maintains a dialogue with the readers of his newspaper column while also representing and citing discourses and received opinions. In his fiction, profundities emerge from the dialogues between the characters and the subtexts of their conversations. The sharp satire of *Cruiskeen Lawn* mocks the government and cultural organisations for what O’Nolan considered a naively selective and elitist deployment of narratives of the Irish past. His journalism’s satirical blows fall both high and low; not only are they directed at elite culture, but also at “denouncing ‘the herd’” for their popular uncritical acceptance of the national and religious narratives fed to them from above (Taaffe 19).

Carol Taaffe points out that while O’Nolan thought scolding the ‘Plain People of Ireland’ for their foibles “was a legitimate exercise” in itself, it was not undertaken “in the hope of reforming them” (19). This interstitiality is also reflected in popular reception of his work as both Myles and Flann O’Brien. Myles is both erudite and a plain man: his journalism continues to be read and enjoyed for the comic disdain it directed at elites and scholars on the one hand, and popular culture and boors on the other. Flann O’Brien is literary and intellectual while seeking to be a commercial success by pleasing a wide reading public with elaborate puns and scatological humour. Taaffe approaches O’Nolan as a reactive writer in whom the “plain man meets the literary narcissist” (9). Formed by a society conflicted by aspirations to be both simple and extraordinary, but without appearing to want to be extraordinary, O’Nolan owes a debt to both popular and high culture and belongs to both. His work is “responsive to the innovations of modernist writers yet wholly indebted to the oddities of contemporary Irish culture,” including the “ingrained disdain for the kind of social and cultural elitism which was fostered by some branches of modernism and revivalism” (207). In a way incomparable to other Irish writers of his time, O’Nolan “managed a sophisticated accommodation of this populist streak in Irish culture. [His writing’s] humour spiralled from the erudite and the ordinary, scolding the Plain People of Ireland while very much remaining a part of their world” (207). He was able to carry on a dialogue with his society for most of the twentieth century precisely because he did not really belong to either the elite or the Plain People. Were an

opera company looking for a libretto about Irish culture between 1940 and 1966, the first and best place to look would be *Cruiskeen Lawn*, because it is there that O’Nolan drafted the dialogue of contemporary Irish cultural debate, from inside and outside the mainstream.

Critical Concepts

O’Nolan’s in-between relationship to the past and the present and to high and low culture necessitates a few words about dialogism and Menippean satire, two critical concepts that will be invoked, predominantly in Chapters 2 and 3. I employ the concept of dialogism derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to analyse dialogic relations in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Third Policeman*. Inevitably, I will also refer to M. Keith Booker’s *Flann O’Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire*, which has created a good foundation from which to read O’Nolan’s novels as examples of Menippea. The Menippea can briefly be defined as “a kind of philosophical novel, in which an idea is tested out in action; philosophical debate is made three-dimensional as the reader follows ‘the adventures of an *idea* or a *truth* in the world’” (Vice 128).⁷ Menippean satire is comic and politically motivated; incorporates “experimental fantasticality;” uses “historical and legendary figures” inventively; combines genres and modes, often by inserting them with parodic intent; involves carnivalesque “scandals and eccentricities” that refute the “epic and tragic wholeness of the world;” its subjects tend towards unusual states of mind and fragmentation, and resist coinciding with themselves; and interestingly for our current context, was termed by Bakhtin the “‘journalistic’ genre of antiquity” (115-18). These are just a few of the features of Menippea that are relevant in O’Nolan’s work. The openly dialogic structure and content of *Cruiskeen Lawn* make it in this sense a Menippean mode of journalism, something that Booker understandably does not address since he focuses only on O’Nolan’s novels, but which will be developed here.

Unlike dialogue in which at least two speakers respond to each other, dialogism does not necessarily require response to function. Ken Hirschkop has argued that we should not see dialogism simply as dialogue “writ large” (113). According to him, the “pure dialogue” that Bakhtin saw the novel as making possible cannot actually occur, but the novel is able to represent different voices and the discourses they draw from and make them intelligible in an orchestrated whole (111). Hirschkop gives us a modified definition of how to view dialogism in the novel, which actually reveals dialogue’s limitations: “[We should envision] language as unevenly structured, full of forms

⁷ Vice quotes Bakhtin 115.

which don't respond, as in a dialogue, but cite and represent" (111-12). O'Nolan, though, is perhaps an exception in that he does both: he carries on a dialogue with his readers and (often) responds directly to them, which is unique. Also, beyond *Cruiskeen Lawn*, he is highly adept at representing and citing discourses and opinions and bringing them into conflict and colloquy.

Keith Hopper's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* has argued that O'Nolan was a late-modernist before he became a postmodernist. This is premised on his assertion that O'Nolan's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is a "transitional text which critiques both realism and modernism in an openly deconstructive manner" (14). The main object of Hopper's study is *The Third Policeman*, a text which he argues, following Brian McHale, is clearly postmodernist because of its "linguistically structured reality" and ontological bent (15).⁸ It "strives for fragmentation and indeterminacy" in contrast to modernism's epistemological bent and subjectively structured reality, which "sought coherency and form" (15-6). But O'Nolan's writing also tends to undermine even language's ability to structure reality, which leads me to think that it is actually more fruitful to resist the desire to lump O'Nolan in with either the modernists or the postmodernists and accept that he is on a cusp. At different moments he does seek coherency and a form to fit the content – but, fragmentation and indeterminacy so mark his historical moment that his work is forced to attempt to make a coherent whole out of a fragmented experience and sense of temporal continuity. His work belongs to a mediational and transitional historical moment during which the Irish state was actively and conflictually trying to define its relationship to the past and the future. As such, his work reflects on this tension between tradition and modernity.

Let us then, accept the indeterminacy of O'Nolan's being a postmodernist author before postmodernism, and consider Fintan O'Toole's description of Ireland as having become a postmodern society without ever having experienced an interval between pre-modernism and postmodernism (35-40). This claim has found wide acceptance in Irish Studies, which continues to expand its horizons and look for intersections between Irish and international culture for evidence of alternative modes of modernity. Boyce's "'No lack of ghosts'" responds to O'Toole's provocative claim and argues that Ireland's ambiguous experience of modernity meant that "Ireland ended up with [...] a landscape so strange that it had to be interpreted for its people, but [this landscape was] not strange enough to be accorded the 'wary reverence' that is given to the genuinely unknown" (257). Irish interstitial modernity, then, is currently undergoing critical reconsideration, and the indeterminacy of O'Nolan's literary work provides a unique prism through which to consider this

⁸ See Brian McHale's *Post-Modernist Fiction* (1991).

re-assessment. This is also all part of a wider trend towards rethinking and bringing nuance to the opposition between modernity and tradition.

One example of a recent Irish reassessment of the relationship between modernity and tradition and the role of the individual in a society constituted by conflict between the two is Michael Böss and Eamon Maher's *Engaging Modernity*. Looking back at sociological reconsiderations of Irish modernity since the 1980s, Böss and Maher echo O'Toole's claim that Ireland never experienced simple modernity and has only experienced late modernity (23). Late modernity in Ireland is associated with a pluralistic society and the co-existence of multiple world views and ways of life. Early twentieth-century Irish nationalism also tried to base itself on a diverse and multi-cultural conception of Irish society, but this effort was overshadowed by the dominant ideology of the rural ideal in Irish cultural nationalism. According to Böss and Maher, "[a]s the conflicting features of 'modernity' and 'tradition' may co-exist within the same group, so too will the individual mind be characterised by ongoing processes of – at times – mutually conflicting interpretations of life situations" (25).

Characterised by conflict then, only indeterministic conclusions can be drawn about the relationships between modernity and tradition on the one hand and the social role of the individual in relation to them. Because modernist and postmodernist literature embodies "the tensions, contradictions and dynamic character of individual identity and [provides] evidence of the indeterministic relation between the individual and the groups with which s/he identifies," it is highly suited to gaining a better perspective on the complexity of lived experiences of Irish modernity (26). Furthermore, Böss and Maher argue that it is often the most "a-political and a-social of contemporary writing" that is most valuable in coming to terms with the "conditions and predicaments of individual and social existence in modern Ireland" (26).

O'Nolan's work, though not entirely apolitical, is an important example of contemporary writing that tries to reclaim a pluralist view of society and point to the existence of other world views, modes of life, and visions of history within his society.⁹ Before moving on to describe how

⁹ His work certainly engages with politics but does not express a political agenda as such. I would argue that he mainly tried to steer clear of getting involved in political debates out of deference for his civil service job and the requirement that he not write about his government work. Cronin recalls that O'Nolan "did not take part in [the political] wranglings" of UCD's Literary and Historical Society, which only debated history "in the Irish way – as an embittering dimension of politics" (46). His political writing does not take sides as much as it complains about the dreariness and absurdity of politics. Taaffe discusses the political dimension of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in terms of pre-war and post-war, noting that before the war, the column alternated between stances: "At times a more acerbic political sensibility is to the fore; at other points Myles can seem to lack any anchoring seriousness, and his ability to subject anything to his levelling irony produces sometimes brilliant and sometimes disquieting results" (158). After the war the column became more suspicious of world politics, more aware of Ireland's relation to the world and more politically

O’Nolan engages with the themes of conflict between modernity and tradition that I will explore in the current study, I would like to address the general historical context of the constellation of modernity and tradition in early twentieth century Ireland, specifically the role that narrative has played in shaping Irish conceptions of the past and the modern.

Culture, History and the Interface of Modernity and Tradition

Although it is now generally agreed that tradition itself belongs to modernity, when the Irish state was actively trying to deploy a working narrative of the past to legitimate its power and pave the way for modernisation in the 1920s and 1930s, it did not approach the past and tradition dynamically, but tried to stabilise it instead. The State underestimated the extent to which tradition was “one long, ongoing, never-resolved and never-abandoned attempt to impose an imaginative unity on the contradictions of the past” (Leerssen 204-5).

Defining or practising a tradition is a way of performing one’s relationship to the past. It highlights the distance between the present moment of definition and the moment referred to in the past. But what is meant by the past is more than just an amorphous period of time that preceded the present. In the context at hand, the past referred to is always a selective past. It is defined by both remembering and forgetting certain events, people and stories. Those that continue to be meaningful in the present are remembered; some are made traditions, others are commemorated with monuments or processions, while others are recorded for posterity, written down as stories for future generations to read and recall as authentic signifiers of how things used to be.

Attempts to stabilise the past cannot succeed, however. Memory, historiography and historical records are the most important tools we have for relating to the past, and whether we approach the concept of memory from the perspective of cognition or imagination, individual or collective, memory is only deceptively stable. But while it may be futile to try to stabilise the past for once and for all, stabilising it for a moment is never an empty pursuit as it tells us a great deal about how we see the present.

How we remember and interpret the past always depends on how we view the present and what we want in the future. What we stabilise through telling stories about the past, whether historical or literary, is not the past, but our current interpretation of it. Foster’s *The Irish Story* explores the way that Irish historians and literary writers have approached Irish history as a story,

outspoken and embittered. See Taaffe 151-165.

with a beginning and a middle, but with various different endings, depending on the moment of composition and the projected future as seen by the dominant ideology of the time. He supports his claim that our expectations of the future are predicated “on what we think we know about what has happened” with reference to English historian Lewis Namier, who described the ambiguous process of imagining historical time as follows:

‘One would expect people to remember the past and imagine the future. But in fact, when discoursing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past: till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future.’ (qtd. in *The Irish Story* 33)

Foster points out that this statement rings true for historians, who “make their reputations by querying the interpretations of their elders. This is a kind of ‘revisionism’ in its own way, and will go on for as long as people need jobs” (33-4). Similarly, rethinking and reinterpreting the Irish past will go on as long as there are people who are not content to accept the current status quo, be they politicians, intellectuals, artists or drunken builders on a night out shouting demands for the United Irishmen to return and restore Grattan’s Parliament, in the noughties of the twenty-first century.

Viewing history as a chronological story with a beginning, middle and end is in keeping with the sequential bias of nineteenth-century progressive thought, in which tradition would be left behind through a conscious decision to embrace modernity and shake off the superstitions and backward ways that held back the dawn of modernity. Of course, we now know that it is not so simple. The nineteenth-century progressivist idea that modernity was chronologically preceded by tradition was further characterised by several antithetical themes, in which a modern equivalent would come to replace the traditional; community would be superseded by society, the sacred by the secular, and so on and so forth (Böss and Maher 23). But as these oppositions continued to be felt in Ireland even in modernity, the development of Irish modernity clearly requires a different framework. Social science philosopher Peter Wagner has identified four key “problématiques” of modernity, two of which provide a good basis for further discussion of O’Nolan’s work’s engagement with tradition-modernity.

The four problematics that constitute modernity according to Wagner are “the search for certain knowledge and truth, the building of a viable and good political order, the issue of the continuity of the acting person, and the way of relating in the lived present to time past and time

future” (8).¹⁰ These problematics, Wagner argues, “co-merge with modernity” and resist “once and for all” solutions and treatment (8-9). Only temporary solutions with limited stability can be found for these problematics of modernity, which Wagner states must “always [be] interpreted in their concrete temporality, at their specific historic location” (9). O’Nolan is thematically deeply concerned with the first, third and fourth problematics. Considering his work in relation to the temporal context of Irish culture and society helps us to position him as a writer formed by contemporary Ireland. It also importantly enables us to examine how his work actually demonstrates the challenges of maintaining ‘continuous and coherent selfhood,’ not in a concrete temporality as Wagner claims, but in a temporality that is mixed because of the hyper-reflexivity involved in relating the past and the future to the present moment. There can be no such thing as a “concrete temporality” in my view, because of the slippery and shifting temporal demands of the past and the future on the present.

Returning to Wagner’s problematics of modernity, we see that O’Nolan denies the possibility of establishing certain truths, most evidently in *The Dalkey Archive* and *The Third Policeman*. *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Poor Mouth* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* all demonstrate the complex processes of remembering the past and relating to it in order to determine its significance to the present moment. O’Nolan also problematises the notion of coherent and cohesive selfhood, exemplified by his “myriad authorial personae,” and the complex biography of Myles na gCopaleen, whose vast life experience spans several centuries and countries (Taaffe 9). Myles’s conglomerate personality is borne of a mixed temporality that enables O’Nolan to mediate between the lived present and the remembered past in a way that lets him stand with one foot in the present and one in the past.

Often, if the past is invoked as a model for the future, it is because the present is deemed in some way unsatisfactory. Irish Ireland cultural revivalism, with the help of the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association, among others, had since the late-nineteenth century proven an able tool for uniting the people in their pride for their distinctive cultural identity. This was, however, a negatively defined identity that was generally opposed to English culture, perceived by cultural revivalists as a corrupt and soulless culture that the Irish had been subjugated to at the expense of their own superior Gaelic culture. The State encouraged distinctively Irish sports, music and literature while it discouraged foreignisms. Terence Brown provocatively states that an “attitude of xenophobic suspicion often greeted any manifestation of what appeared to reflect cosmopolitan

¹⁰ I do not see the need for using the French “problématiques” as problematics is increasingly an accepted word in English.

standards. An almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism [...] was combined with prudery [...] and a deep reverence for the Irish past” (135). While there was much that was laudable about the Irish cultural revival, the narrow view of national identity it prescribed clashed with the modernist ambitions of many Irish artists and intellectuals who felt drawn to European cultural movements. The prevailing ideology of the time expressed a “crude distaste for the dangerous symptoms of modernism,” but by the mid-1930s, this was beginning to be widely criticised, particularly by writers (136). Writers such as Frank O’Connor and Seán O’Faoláin were among the vanguard of critical voices who opposed what O’Connor described as the net result of the dominant ideology:

Ireland became more than ever sectarian, utilitarian [...] vulgar and provincial. ... Every year that has passed, particularly since de Valera’s rise to power, has strengthened the grip of the gombeen man, of the religious secret societies like the Knights of Columbanus, of the illiterate censorships. ... The significant fact about it is that there is no idealistic opposition which would enable us to measure the extent of the damage. (qtd. in Brown 142-3)

O’Connor and O’Faoláin went against the popular grain by claiming that it was a waste of energy to attempt to restore Gaelic civilisation: it had declined naturally in their view and the reality needed to be faced that Ireland could not expect to become a modern nation only by looking backwards. These writers and many others who felt suffocated in the cultural climate of the 1920s to 1940s felt that if the nation’s spirit and culture were truly to be reinvigorated, then imposing limits on where or how far afield to look for inspiration was the last thing to be done. O’Connor and O’Faoláin practised what Kearney would call radicalist modernism, and with their fiction and articles in *The Bell* they sought to represent “identifiably modern Irish culture” not just for an elite and not just for the Gaelic movement (Wills 298). They did so by waving “the flag of realism in the face of what they saw as Yeats’s fantasy-laden myths, focused on the West of Ireland” (Wills 291). They still focused on rural themes, but not the Gaelic rural ideal. For O’Nolan’s generation though, who also thought it was hopeless to attempt to restore the Gaelic past, this was still too conservative and not experimental enough.

It was by attacking exactly these two authors in letters to the editor of the *Irish Times* that O’Nolan and his friends inserted themselves into the cultural polemic of the 1930s by denouncing both the cultural navel-gazing of Irish Ireland and the drab realism and high seriousness of liberal elitist, post-Irish Literary revival writers like O’Connor and O’Faoláin. He and his friends were the first generation to come of age in the new state. As such, they were steeped in both the literature of the Irish Literary Revival and high modernism, Irish and foreign. O’Nolan thought that O’Connor

and O’Faoláin were in some ways almost as extreme as the revivalists in their desire for a cosmopolitan modernism – for him their focus on the narrow provincialism they depicted actually denied that Irish culture had ever produced anything worthy of saving. In retrospect it is unlikely that the *Bell* writers could have avoided being attacked by O’Nolan, who for some time had been cultivating a habit of picking “‘dog-fights’ in the newspapers [...] on any topic from literature to vivisection” (O’Nolan, Letter to Longman’s, 15 Jan. 1939). The readers of the *Irish Times* heartily enjoyed these comic exchanges, especially when people like O’Connor took the bait and carried on a mediated correspondence with the pseudonymous letter writers in the pages of the newspaper.

His contemporaries did not know whether to regard this new voice as a breath of fresh air on the Irish literary scene or as “a balloon filled with verbal gas,” as Patrick Kavanagh disparagingly put it in a letter to the editor of the *Irish Times* on 7 August 1940 (*Myles Before Myles*, 225). Kavanagh meant that the satirical early work of O’Nolan was a vapid answer to the high modernism of predecessors like Joyce, who had actually had something to say, unlike the “dilettantish” O’Nolan, Niall Sheridan and Niall Montgomery, the main culprits responsible for the letter-writing campaigns of 1939 and 1940 (225). Kavanagh’s dismissal of the fake letter writers was a response to having himself been taken to task by them for a review he had written for the *Irish Times* in July 1940. Anthony Cronin points out that while Kavanagh’s review “was not a very polished piece” it “asked a few fundamental questions about the nature of popularity [of art and literature] and the relationship between success and merit” (*No Laughing Matter* 109). In this sense, Kavanagh and the fake letter writers were taking part in a debate that was growing in scope in contemporary Ireland about the role of the artist in society and who was the proper custodian or owner of culture.

This brings me to an important reason for undertaking the current study. The playful and spiteful antics of O’Nolan’s early journalism in particular, but of much of the later *Cruiskeen Lawn* as well, gained him the literary reputation of being a talented and witty jester, but not a serious man of letters who dealt with meaningful themes. Like Joseph Brooker and Carol Taaffe, two recent O’Nolan scholars, I disagree that O’Nolan’s journalism was a waste of his talents, as Hugh Kenner, Declan Kiberd and others have suggested.¹¹ Brooker convincingly argues that the university magazines to which O’Nolan contributed, *Comhthrom Féinne* and the short-lived *Blather*, belong in the tradition of Irish “broadside, satire and parody” and may be considered a “belated, parodic Irish contribution to the European avant-garde” (“Children of Destiny” 16-7). He suggests that a re-evaluation of *Blather* might be a good starting point from which “to construct an alternative cultural

¹¹ See Kenner 257 and Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 512.

history of Ireland in the 1930s. This would involve failure as much as success, laughter as well as misery” (17). Taaffe has recently shown that extended analysis of *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s interventions into contemporary cultural debate provides a fruitful and refreshing insight into the diversity of Irish cultural opinions and attitudes in the mid-century. O’Nolan’s journalism never entirely abandoned the mock-serious tone of the early years, but throughout the 1940s and 1950s, *Cruiskeen Lawn* undoubtedly dealt with very serious themes and became more openly political, in ways which many other writers never dared to do.

Close critical scrutiny of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is under-represented, with only one full-length study of his journalism in existence, Keith Donohue’s *The Irish Anatomist* (2002). Increasingly though, critics are beginning to consider his journalism in relation to his novels. Taaffe’s study is the most thorough in this respect, with several other critics also contributing articles on both the journalism and the novels to recently published reassessments of Irish modernism.¹² Furthermore, O’Nolan’s combined contribution to Irish literature and culture is also more and more referred to in new (cultural) histories of early and mid-twentieth-century Ireland. The current study can also be situated in this recent trend of re-evaluating the critical estimation of O’Nolan as an irreverent jester in favour of a view that also sees him as a serious author whose multivalence and multiple talents “uniquely illuminates the conflicting loyalties of his generation in the new State” (Taaffe 3). Beneath the exhilarating satirical veneer, the metafictional pyrotechnics and self-reflexive tendencies of his fiction, which are the most common themes in studies of O’Nolan’s work, he is a writer who should be read as a critical witness to his historical and cultural moment. Studying *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s diachronic development of recurrent themes in O’Nolan’s work in conjunction with his novels provides a unique insight into tensions between modernity and the past in Irish culture between 1938 and 1966. The columns illustrate the diversity of received opinions which he criticised and indeed the diversity of Myles’s reactions to these is a reflection of his society. The columns may nit-pick about tiny issues, but the larger issues that these are symptomatic of are more fully developed and reflected upon in his novels.

The nit-picking pedantry itself, so characteristic of the Mylesian persona, is a product and reflection of contemporary Irish cultural debate’s dependence on controversy.¹³ If Kavanagh was accusing O’Nolan of dilettantism and vacuity, O’Nolan’s satirical project accuses its targets of the

¹² See, for example, Keown and Taaffe; Ross. A forthcoming collection of essays edited by P.J. Matthews and Jennika Baines should also be mentioned: *‘Is it about a bicycle?’: Flann O’Brien in the Twenty-First Century*. The collection is to be published by Four Courts Press.

¹³ My use of the word ‘contemporary’ is in the sense of occurring at the time in which O’Nolan lived and wrote and not the present moment, 2010.

very same: the column “works by excess to emphasize the vacuity of its many targets” (Coulouma 65). The heroes of his novels appear empty because they are filled with contradictory opinions, hypocrisy, and self-importance, like the targets of his journalism’s satire. The following excerpt from *Cruiskeen Lawn* illustrates well the texture of contemporary cultural debate and O’Nolan’s frustration with his contemporaries’ hankering after monolithic culture. The topic of 10 March 1953 was Radio Eireann’s programming, which was apparently troubled by a lack of native radio talent. Myles thinks the problem lies elsewhere, in the disparity between what can be programmed and what listeners want:

You have various vocal cliques and pressure groups. Not only do they all know what they want, but they insist on NOTHING ELSE BUT.

You have for instance, the Gaelic Leaguers who say that all programmes should be in nothing else but Gaelic: there is a parallel movement which insists that all radio time should be devoted to non-stop *céili* music; your other men want Abbey plays all day [...]. Another congregation want jazz all day AND NOTHING ELSE BUT. [...]

None of these parties will entertain the taint of compromise. [...] Running Russia would be kids’ stuff as compared with running Radio Eireann to the universal satisfaction of the Irish. (10 Mar. 1953)

Registering and criticising a national pastime of demanding that everyone act and think as you, strikes me as quite a substantial and serious theme. If O’Nolan is a vacuous dilettante, it is because he writes about a nation of vacuous dilettantes who never reach agreement because they sacrifice real dialogue for rhetoric that panders to their desires. O’Nolan registers the wealth of words being spent on petty concerns and responds in kind with linguistic exuberance and absence of meaning. Thus he initiates a dialogue with his readers about their own pious claims to having something meaningful to say and wanting to have meaningful things said to them. However, he does not try to show them a model of how to have a serious and better dialogue, and in this respect he is truly a post-modernist agitator. He does not have an agenda or a lesson he seeks to impart, but instead holds up the cracked looking glass of one vacuous dilettante to millions of others and so extends the conflictual nature of Irish cultural debate. His ultimate questions turn on the limits of narrative and language and to what extent either can positively assert knowledge or certainty.

The limits of knowledge and narrative possibility will be addressed throughout the rest of this study. We will see O’Nolan create possibilities one moment and defuse them the next. For O’Nolan, all knowledge is written and as such, it is subject to editing, omission, poetic exaggeration

and so on and so forth. It cannot be reduced to any single pure meaning or rise above its artifice. Richard Kearney describes O’Nolan as an experimental post-novelist for whom there is “no exit from the process of writing itself” (*Transitions* 84). *Cruiskeen Lawn* plays up the artifice of language and writing in condensed form, while his novels or post-novels drag out this process; they foreground the limits of narrative and present orchestrated dialogues that track the life of an idea. O’Nolan dramatises his characters’ failures to make adequate sense of their lives by creating a fictional reality in which the artifice of language is announced rather than concealed.

By analysing four novels and various columns while attending to cultural history and debate of the 1938-1966 period, this dissertation aims to give as comprehensive as possible an analysis of O’Nolan’s criticism of how Irish narratives of the past supported by the dominant ideology deployed to prescribe a shared national identity conflicted with Irish aspirations to a modern present and future.¹⁴ Irish identity seemed officially anchored in the past – and sanctioned by it. Confronted with what Yeats once called “the filthy modern tide,” it seemed at times as though the best parts of the past might be corrupted or even erased by the modern (“The Statues”). But when this did not prove to be the inevitable result, a new constellation of identity needed to be formulated. Perhaps it was possible to cultivate a fragmentary identity and narrative incorporating both the pleasant past and the positive innovations of modernity. The lessons of the past could be mobilised to ward off or negotiate the negative side effects of modernity, like alienation and a loss of a sense of community.

I think that O’Nolan recognised, like Walter Benjamin, that the past could be modified by engaging with it through self-critical remembrance and creative refiguration. He recognised that the past was in the present and would remain so, but not in any fixed and static way. His writing’s mixed temporality (such as the anachronistic presence of ancient Irish heroes in the present) counteracts the dominance of the past over the Irish present by rejuvenating it and changing the way the past is viewed, as well as changing the role of the past in the present. With this in mind, some of the theoretical concepts that will be used to explore O’Nolan’s work in addition to Bakhtinian dialogism discussed above must be introduced – those of haunting, spectrality and cultural remembrance.

Reading O’Nolan’s work as participating in an Irish tradition of seeking renewed dialogue

¹⁴ *The Hard Life* (1961) is the only novel that will not be dealt with in this study because of the focus on the years 1938–1966. *The Hard Life* is set in Dublin of the late nineteenth century and for this reason does not fit in the current framework. The way the novel engages with Irish public and religious life, however, can be discussed from a twentieth-century perspective in relation to a period of socio-cultural reform in the 1960s. I intend to explore this in future as this material is reworked into a book, which will also include a thorough discussion of O’Nolan’s playwriting and short stories, two aspects of his work which are also underrepresented in critical studies of his work.

with the dead can provide useful new insight into how his work relates the past to the present. Facing the ghosts of history and having a dialogue with them in order to come to a better understanding of the past's grip on the present, features to some degree in all of his novels. The haunting past pervades *The Poor Mouth* as the novel's characters are forced to come to terms with the dictates of literary fate as proposed by strong narratives from an amalgamation of ancient and modern Gaelic tradition. Ghosts from the past are compelled to speak with the living in *The Dalkey Archive* and *The Poor Mouth*. *The Third Policeman* is set in hell, where its dead narrator stalks the uncanny landscape and confronts strange beings that exist on the edge of eternity. *At Swim-Two-Birds* foregrounds the movement of characters dead and alive between narratives, taking words from their mouths and putting them in the mouths of others, showing how citation itself can become haunting if the cited begins to speak back (Downum 313).

A fragmentary time, which is what I am suggesting Ireland had in the first half of the twentieth century, is by definition marked by rupture.¹⁵ In other words, the time was out of joint. By now this phrase should bring immediately to mind not only *Hamlet*, but also Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, throughout which Derrida employs Prince Hamlet's formulation of what the philosopher defines as the "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present" (xix).¹⁶ But with the past featuring as such a dominant and outspoken presence in Irish modernity, it is no wonder that people sensed that time, memory and experience did not cohere as they may have expected or wanted them to, and this is important. Indeed, as Foster puts it, "shadowy dead generations impos[ed] their supposed or reconstructed will on the present," making the experience of Irish modernity akin to living in a haunted house (*English Historical Review* 1350).

In recent years a number of critics have begun to explore issues of haunting in Irish literature and culture, focusing both on the appearance of ghosts in fiction in a more traditional sense, as well as on an aesthetic of haunting permeating Irish literature in the modern period. Ireland is haunted by the past, by memory, by the demands of dead generations of Irish

¹⁵ While some periods are perceived to be less fragmentary than others, in fact all time is out of joint. Similarly, all periods are marked by transition, but some are more perceived to be more transitional than others, particularly when transitioning into another age is agreed to be an avowed goal of that period.

¹⁶ It must be noted that Kiberd's "The War Against the Past" uses Hamlet as a metaphor for Ireland, at least eight years before Derrida's influential symposium on Marx. Of course Hamlet is a favourite ghost in Ireland, as Kiberd shows in the following:

The national dilemma was dramatized by the career of Shakespeare's Hamlet, as writers as diverse as Yeats, Joyce, and more recent, Heaney have testified. Yeats's Hamlet was a deployer of masks, Joyce's became his own father, and Heaney's stands by graves dithering and blathering. [...] At the age of thirty, after a protracted education as courtier, soldier, and scholar, Hamlet was about to come into his own when he met a ghost and, henceforth, could never become himself. (34)

revolutionaries, by the loss of the Irish language, by the Famine dead and the displaced migrants: in short, there is no lack of Irish ghosts. In this study, I will analyse a literary aesthetic of haunting as it pertains to O’Nolan’s fiction. The specific ways in which I distinguish characters as spectres or situations as spectral will be made clear in the individual chapters, but for now, I want to explain why I am looking at – or perhaps seeing – ghosts in O’Nolan, and why haunting writ large is an interesting paradigm to consider in his work.

First and foremost, my analysis of haunting here proceeds from Derrida’s proposal that we must learn to live by learning to live with ghosts ethically and justly (*SM* xviii). With this he means that it is necessary to come to terms with the past as an absent presence as well as with “certain *others*, who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, “ in other words, spectres (xix). This is inextricably bound up with the idea of doing justice to the “shadowy dead generations” of which Foster speaks – and beyond. In post-independence Ireland, this idea was hardly foreign, as there was already a powerful sense of living for the dead, of even creating the independent and sovereign nation for those that fought and died to see Ireland free. This motif is also clear in Conor Cruise O’Brien’s description of how veterans of 1916 who became active in the government of the Free State and later the Republic had to contend with the ghosts of Pearse and Tone, two prominent nationalist ghosts, eventually learning to say ‘No!’ to them in favour of heeding the voices of the present (*Ancestral Voices*).

In Derrida’s terms, mourning is the first sign that a spectre is present because it marks loss and begins with an attempt to “ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (9). Spectres are revenants that “*begin by coming back* –” they are dead and of the past but present themselves in the living present, and as such belong also to the present (11). The spectre’s expected return repeats itself, over and over again, which means that spectres belong also to the future. Spectres mark the fact that there is something about the present that is not entirely of itself, or the past, or the future: they are the disruptive markers of ruptured and out-of-joint time, and they cannot be ignored. Not if we wish to “Mourn—and then [move] Onward!” as Yeats’s poem urged (“Mourn—and then Onward!”).

The authors of *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Tradition* note the prevalence of funerary rhetoric in Irish culture and the persistence of what they call the Irish “theatre of the dead” (Witoszek and Sheeran 37). This term captures well the dramatic conflict between the present and the past in Ireland. Witoszek and Sheeran argue that the *sine qua non* of theatre is “a space

which is divided between those who watch and those who perform” (21).¹⁷ An Irish theatre of the dead, then, would consist of a dead “land below” observing the “land above,” but in fact the dead land and the living land are not as neatly separated as the distinction of below and above would at first suggest.

For if the dead constitute an invisible audience which observes and judges the doings of the living, they frequently trespass on the stage of this world. Their ghostly presence is acknowledged by a rich repertoire of symbolic actions – behavioural, gestural and verbal – staged and performed for their benefit. [...] [T]he division into ‘actors’ (the living) and ‘spectators’ (the dead) gives these actions a quintessential theatrical cast. (21-2)

The authors note the abundance of funerary rhetoric in the public sphere during any time of crisis, particularly in journalism. They argue that in other Western cultures, crisis would be more likely to be regarded as temporary, making the Irish “funerary unconscious” unique (22). Further manifestations of the theatre of the dead include a tendency to live for death, witnessed by an overtly expressed desire to, for example, have a decent wake and to be buried in a good suit. The persistence of wakes in Ireland is also an example of a death-focused culture rarely found elsewhere. The nationalist rhetoric of political violence and glorious triumph through failure, death or martyrdom is also a clear example of funerary culture.

Seeing Irish culture as a theatre of the dead with spectators and actors can be conceptually complemented by one of Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal’s philosophical and theatrical concepts: spect-acting. Boal rejects the notion of passive spectators and holds that it is always possible for any spectator to become a spect-actor: “an activated spectator” who changes or has the chance to change the action they spectate by speaking back or getting involved (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 238).¹⁸ In O’Nolan’s fiction, when the spectral Saint Augustine or Maeldoon O’Poenassa are engaged in dialogue with living characters, the traditional border or threshold between the realm of the dead and the living collapses and opens a space of interrogation. The living spectators, such as *The Dalkey Archive*’s Mick O’Shaughnessy and De Selby, come to change the way they view inherited truths and readings of history, they become spect-actors to the scene of

¹⁷ The definition is based on Peter Brook’s definition of the theatrical act: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (qtd. in Witoszek and Sheeran 21).

¹⁸ The spect-actor comes from Boal’s concept of theatre of the oppressed, a form of theatre that is empowering to both actors and spectators in which spectators should not be passive. He emphasises that those who observe, even if they are not intended to be actors in the traditional theatrical sense, always have the option of participating. Philip Auslander notes that “it is not so much in the functions of acting and spectating that Boal sees the essence of theatre as in the (self-)consciousness they imply: ‘This is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves’” (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 125).

Western philosophy, Irish history and the fate of the world. This underlines Derrida's assertion that the spectre has the power to transform, if not the course of history, how we relate to it and where we locate the lost dead.

Time out of joint is spectral time, as the past seeps through into the present. Bianca Del Villano argues that this is another way to describe post-colonial temporality, characterised by multiple narratives of the past vying for inclusion in the dominant view of history (*Ghostly Alterities*). She claims that spectral time ushers in hauntology as a means of reassessing the historical past:

Introducing haunting into the construction of culture means to safeguard the possibility of deconstructing it; haunting highlights the rifts and ambiguities of literary and historical narrations and in so doing makes them open to a multiplicity of viewpoints and interpretations. In this view, the ghost's deconstruction represents an opening to pluralism and a way to put into question what was previously taken for granted. (6-7)

If we situate O'Nolan's writing in a context in which the Irish state and people are involved in coming to terms with multiple pasts in a way which allows them to "learn to live with [the] ghosts" of history, then we can read his work, at least in part, as an exposition of the problems that can arise in the project of nation-building through the combination of pluralistic memories of the past and versions of history. He calls attention to this process and to the temporal rifts in the perception of the past, often by conjuring up characters from different historical times and introducing them into a different time. The effect is confrontational and multiplies different modes of interpretation and representation.

Ghosts and memory are inextricably bound up with each other. So in addition to reading O'Nolan's treatment of these issues in relation to an aesthetic of haunting, I will also be drawing on cultural memory studies to illustrate how he creatively exploits mnemonic processes such as conflation and convergence of disparate memories and narratives. He does so in a comic way, most obviously in *The Poor Mouth*, which to me expresses a desire not to become bogged down by the weight of the inheritance of the past. He calls attention to the selective use and manipulation of memories and narratives in their present contexts, highlighting the differences in perspective in how we regard certain events in the present as opposed to how they were regarded and memorialised in the past, something which is very clear in *The Dalkey Archive*. *The Third Policeman* is sceptical about the extent to which memory should be trusted and presents an approach to testing knowledge that depends heavily on dialogue with Others, including the other(s) within.

O'Nolan self-reflexively registers and tests the ways in which modernity changed the

constitution of individual subjectivity and identity in relation to culture, the role of the artist in society and conflicting perspectives of the value of the past in the present and future. He grapples with the fragmentation of temporality that occurs when the past is vigorously drawn in to the future in bits – not the totality of the past, but the so-called best parts deemed of continuing value in the living present.

His work mediates between the present and the past, modernity and tradition. As a debunking satirical agitator, he gleefully points out alternative memories and modes of reflecting on history and knowledge. At times he attempts to rectify gross historical misunderstandings that result from myopically self-serving views of the past and the present hegemony, while at other times, he simply tries to show that there is always another way of looking at things, even if just for fun. He shows, without being cloying or harping on the traumatic injustices of the past, that pursuing dialogue can result in radical transformation of how we relate, not just to the dead land below, but also to the living land above.

Chapter 1: Bittersweet Gaelic on Their Tongues: Myles na Gopaleen, The Poor Mouth and the Irish Language

After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, it became clear that the future it sought was one that would resume where British colonisation had interrupted the development of independent Ireland and a distinctively Irish culture. The aim was similar to the nativist position in the Irish language question, a position which, viewed retrospectively, turned a blind and disapproving eye to what could be described as stunted Irish linguistic and cultural development under colonialism. Both the State and the language revivalists desired a (partial) return to a precolonial past which they considered better than the uncertain present. The linguistic nativists eschewed the colloquial Irish language that had developed since the end of the seventeenth century as an appropriate vehicle for writing in Irish, preferring to make a return to written Irish as it existed two centuries before a boom occurred in Gaelic prose writing in the late-nineteenth century. In cultural matters, the Irish Free State mimicked this attitude in its cultural protectionism, seeking to plug the holes into which it and the Catholic hierarchy saw English and foreign influence copiously leaking. It sought, with Sisyphean ardour, to erase the marks of foreign cultures and restore what was considered a precolonial essentialist Irish identity and culture, firmly rooted in a long, unbroken and homogeneous past.

The past to which the State desired a return combined key elements of the myth of the peasant, the Irish Literary Revival's romanticisation thereof and the glorification of the heroic struggle of a people subjected to colonial horrors. The State foresaw its backward-looking future as being secured by the official and practical reinstatement of Irish Gaelic, a "special role" for the Catholic Church and a social centre based round cosy rural firesides where "athletic youths," tired from their Irish sports, and "comely maidens," exhausted, apparently from laughing all day, at...perhaps the "romping of sturdy children," could come to convene with their wise elders (qtd. in O'Leary, *Gaelic Prose* 94-5).¹⁹ Philip O'Leary points out that de Valera's vision of a "rural Gaelic utopia" was "very much in the Gaelic mainstream of the 1920s and 1930s" (95). Thus he argues that this famous St Patrick's Day speech of de Valera from 1943 is "[n]ow regularly – and unjustly – cited as an occasion for parody" because it was a widely-held vision. However, to urban writers in later decades, the bucolic paradise de Valera dreamt of seemed absurdly dated. Moreover, given the

¹⁹ The speech, "The Ireland that We Dreamed Of," was given on 17 March 1943. It has been reprinted in Moynihan 466-69 (see De Valera).

fact that de Valera's rural Gaelic utopia was never achieved despite the price paid in its pursuit, it would actually be more surprising if it had not been parodied and frequently inverted in dystopian visions of Irish society, such as *The Poor Mouth*.

The cultural climate of Ireland in the first several decades of the twentieth century was characterised by stringent censorship, both at an institutional and social level. The State had an influential ally in the Catholic Church, which also sought to unite the newly independent state in spiritual brotherhood and protect the vulnerable nation from foreign influence. The Catholic Church's special role entailed strict social control over appropriate forms of entertainment and amusement, the power relations within individual families and the threat of social disciplinary measures for many who deviated from the norm. The Church's role as confidante and advisory to the State was never official, but Catholic social teaching left an indelible mark on the State's social and cultural policy. Taoiseach Éamon de Valera's quintessential family was instrumental in determining Irish economic, agricultural and cultural policy. The family was to be cherished and protected from evil foreign influence, including literature from abroad (but also from Ireland) that, for example, described contraception, abortion and deviant (namely, extra-procreational) sexual practices or that encouraged crime and atheism, or that might otherwise negatively affect the sanctity of the rural Catholic family. But this idealised conception of the Irish family, officially established by Fianna Fáil in 1926 and reiterated by de Valera in his famous 1943 speech, increasingly seemed like an unrealistic and even less desirable goal by the forties.

In the early years of the new State, the Church, the government and cultural practitioners scrambled to protect, restore, revive and imagine anew, elements of Irish society which all parties perceived to be endangered or in the process of disappearing. The real threat was not so much the vanishing of all that was good in Irish society, but the "filthy modern tide" that might take its place (Yeats, "The Statues," 29). The fears about threatened ways of life were often justified, but frequently, as this chapter will argue, what people were afraid was being lost, was actually an idealised, presentist interpretation of a past status quo which had never really existed as it was remembered. Joep Leerssen notes in *Remembrance and Imagination* that at the fin-de-siècle, "notions of decadence and degeneracy" were widespread obsessions, making "recourse to the unspoilt freshness of ancient Ireland" seem like an attractive alternative or escape from "the seemingly inevitable process of decay, decrepitude and cultural entropy" (195). Revival and rebirth, therefore, are "all-pervasive in Irish cultural nationalism of the turn of the century" (195). In fact, revival and rebirth remained ubiquitous in cultural nationalism well into the twentieth century in

Ireland, particularly in language revival discourse where the notion of rebirth was explicit. But, while it is difficult to chart the disappearance of abstract social characteristics and values, it is less so to track the actual decline of a language, and even that is no easy task.

By the time the language revival became official government policy, the Irish language was already beyond saving as the first language of the country.²⁰ However, official and unofficial language revival policy tended to ignore this practical fact, and in the process, worsened the revival's chances of success, even, perhaps, to a more modest extent. Perhaps ironically, at the same time that Irish was disappearing as the first vernacular language of the people, a resurgence was occurring in Gaelic writing and several Irish language courses were also being organised throughout the country. The State encouraged extended learning of Irish, though its impractical language policy ultimately compromised the status of Irish as the first living language of the country, largely because of discrepancies in intentions and practical execution, as we will see below. It also encouraged literary writing and eventually filmmaking in Irish, and while it did not discourage similar cultural production in English, its position clearly intended all art in Ireland to serve its Irish Ireland cultural and political vision. With Ireland becoming politically and culturally more insular, in the cultural scene of the 1940s, writers and artists felt compelled to pay lip service to the State's mythological vision of Ireland while they were also frustrated by it. The overwhelming aim among writers and authors during the war years was to ensure that Ireland became modern and European, and did not turn in on itself completely and suffocate in its own parochialism.

This chapter examines Brian O'Nolan's ambiguous relationship to the Irish language movement and his intervention in it. I will begin by outlining the cultural context of the years leading up to and including the 1940s, in order to situate his *An Béal Bocht* (1941) in its

²⁰ The Great Famine of 1845-9 resulted in the death or emigration of millions of native Irish-speakers. Statistics on numbers of Irish speakers since the nineteenth century are often unreliable. The older ones are now considered an underestimate because it was not fashionable to claim knowledge of Irish, while the opposite is true of many twentieth-century figures. The 1891 census showed that there were 66,000 people who spoke Irish (but no English). Terence Brown examines the statistics on monolingual and bilingual speakers of Irish between 1911 and 1926. He notes that in areas such as Galway, Cork, Mayo and Kerry, the number of people claiming knowledge of Irish had dropped from 98,523 to 80,238 in Galway alone in just 15 years (*Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002* 50). In fíor-Gaeltacht districts, so designated by the Gaeltacht Commission because 80 per cent or more spoke Irish, the 1911-26 period showed a 13.1 per cent decrease in Irish speakers. In partly Irish-speaking areas, or breac-Gaeltacht districts, where 25-79 per cent of the population spoke Irish, the number of Irish speakers dropped by 28.7 per cent in the same period. Brown states that the Gaeltacht Commission's 1926 report showed that "in 1925 there were only 257,000 Irish-speakers altogether in the seven Irish-speaking and partly Irish-speaking areas identified by the commissioners. Of these, 110,000 resided in the partly Irish-speaking districts" (51). This decline meant that more and more native Irish-speakers were bringing up their children in English alone and that "English was making inroads and emigration effecting its slow attrition" (51). Today it is agreed that the Irish language is still endangered, but will live on as a second language thanks to enthusiastic learners and the increasing popularity of primary and secondary schooling entirely in Irish.

contemporary cultural climate.²¹ Understanding the tensions and divisions that marked both the Irish linguistic and literary revivals helps to clarify the complexity of the novel's critical satire, directed not at Irish literature in Gaelic, but at the imposition of contemporary prim cultural attitudes and morals onto translated Gaelic fiction. O'Nolan objected to the presentation of these works as spuriously 'native,' authentic and natural. Brown writes that the language had in O'Nolan "a powerfully gifted apologist whose sensitive awareness of the future that was possible for Irish was singularly prescient. Irish would have to survive as a second language and as a vital cultural catalyst" (182). But while he supported the revival of Irish, O'Nolan denounced the "pathology of revivalism," the romanticised Gaelic ideology that many revivalists vehemently defended.²²

O'Nolan's complex attitude towards revivalism is also evidenced in his journalism, a number of which examples I will discuss below as their diversity demonstrates his occasionally contradictory attitude towards the language revival, a diversity that has no doubt contributed to misreadings of the novel as a satire of the Gaels themselves. Furthermore, I will discuss the novel and the figure of the Irish peasant in relation to a principle of scarcity affecting mnemonic practices. This will show how the peasant as a figure of memory came to be memorialised and how it changed through re-presentation. *The Poor Mouth* challenges the dominant representation of the peasant in the Gaelic movement, and O'Nolan explicitly denounces literary representations of the imaginary peasant that would masquerade as historically accurate depictions of the actual peasantry. The fact that this vision of the Irish peasant was endorsed by the new State was a major thorn in the side of the language movement – one which O'Nolan believed set it up to fail.

Finally, I will examine how the scarcity principle in remembrance practices operates in the novel, arguing that cultural memories of the Irish language's place in Irish culture have been shaped by the concepts of mourning and loss, which I argue hold a special, privileged place in Irish remembrance practices. The importance of mourning and loss in shaping post-independence Irish identity itself equally implies a predisposition to revival. I propose that a notion of *pre-mourning* underlies these practices, paying special attention to how the language's prolonged and extended death over a number of centuries appears to exemplify mourning in advance, mourning for the long term and importantly, mourning *with* the lost object of the Irish language.

Context, Contestation and Controversy: *The Poor Mouth* in 1941

²¹ I am discussing the English version of the book and will henceforth refer to the novel as *The Poor Mouth*. Subsequent parenthetical references will employ the abbreviation *PM*.

²² The phrase is from an unpublished manuscript by O'Nolan called "The Pathology of Revivalism." The typescript is housed at Burns Library, Boston College.

The original Irish-language version of *The Poor Mouth* was published in 1941, making its entrance into a literary climate that was perceived as stifling by a prominent but small number of opinion makers in Ireland. Many liberal authors, members of the intelligentsia and the press, and culturally discerning citizens rejected what they considered an excess of “benighted hyper-traditionalism” in the cultural scene at this time (Wills 263). Two causes of the perceived paralysis, stultification and stagnation in the literary and cultural climate were censorship and a communal self-esteem problem amongst the relevant actors. After the Celtic Twilight of the nineteenth century and the high modernist experimental flourish of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1922, many authors did not know how to begin, or where, or in what language. The Irish Censorship Board, established in 1929, held great sway over authors too. While some authors made it a personal aim to have work banned, others held back or heavily self-edited in order to have their work published. The Irish language revival was also of great importance to the publishing world at this time. While all parties were agreed that Ireland needed its own national literature, the jury was still out as to what it should be about and which language it should be in. Another important factor was Irish neutrality in the Second World War. Publishing in these years was affected not only by limited printing capabilities in Ireland and the more or less total cessation of the publication of books by Irish authors by British publishing houses, but also by institutional proclamations on what was appropriate reading matter in times of war.²³ This section will focus on the cultural climate into which *The Poor Mouth* was launched at the end of 1941, how the state of affairs at that time developed and the novel’s early reception – both the praise and the controversy surrounding it.

The book is a parodic response to what is known as cult of the West literature, which came forth from the work of the Irish Literary Revival and an upsurge in writing in Gaelic thanks to the efforts of a number of groups that shared the purpose of reviving the Irish language, in particular the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaelige). The cult of the West in cultural attitudes and literature entailed that the West of Ireland was the soul of the nation. There, people supposedly lived a simpler life, unspoilt by the terrors of industrialisation and urbanisation, and Irish was still spoken relatively widely. In English, Irish Literary Revival writers such as Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge had helped to canonise the image of the Irish peasant. Their romantic version of the

²³ O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* was rejected in 1940 because it was considered too fantastic for the contemporary Weltanschauung and market. His London publishing house (Longman’s) was also destroyed by Luftwaffe bombs shortly afterwards. O’Nolan mythology overwhelmingly suggests that he preferred to blame its rejection on the bombing rather than the book itself.

peasant was one which the State was proud to embrace, though Synge's peasants, as we will see were considered less desirable. Combined with elements of the Gaelic revival and the vision of Ireland described in the Gaelic literature and Gaeltacht autobiographies of the early twentieth century, such as Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* (1929/1937 in English translation as *The Islandman*) and Father Peter O'Leary's *Séadna* (1904), it was even more suited to their purposes. As we will also see in Chapter Four's discussion of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the State set this mishmash Irishman up as the ideal citizen: Catholic, rural, preferably Irish-speaking, and content with little.

Many younger authors such as Brian O'Nolan, Seán O'Faoláin, Bernard MacLaverty, Liam O'Flaherty and Mary Lavin scorned this "Yeatsian romanticism" (Wills 291). While these authors did write about rural themes and the Irish past, they tended, with the exception of O'Nolan, to focus on the recent past in a mode of documentary realism. Their common aim was similar to that of O'Faoláin's new Irish literary platform, *The Bell*, which was started in 1942 and sought to "record the real life of country and city, rather than the idealized life of peasant Ireland" (292). While the documentary realism pursued by O'Faoláin and others would remain the dominant literary mode in the 1940s, it was not at all to O'Nolan's taste. In his opinion, their work produced only dour portraits of Irish life and he promptly began attacking and mocking the documentary realists in his journalism. However, it must be noted that they shared disgust for romanticised portraits of Irish life, as well as the blind insistence on total Gaelicisation, while supporting a certain amount of de-Anglicisation. O'Nolan criticised the more extreme revivalists for being less interested in re-establishing Irish as the first language of the country (to his mind, an impossible task) than they were in urging the State to "issu[e] decrees" aimed at "abolishing English rather than abolishing poverty, vice and death" ("The Pathology of Revivalism" 5).

The language of cliché in Irish Literary Revival and Gaeltacht writing also disturbed O'Nolan fiercely. He borrowed heavily from both, taking one cliché out of context and replacing it in an inverted style in his (post)modernist combinations of pastiche, parody and palimpsest, a style which expressly underlined the source material as cliché. It was an attempt to subdue what he considered an excessive focus on a fictional past and a stagnated literary representation of particular aspects of Irish history and ways of life.

James Joyce had also already attempted to deflate the cult of the West and expose it as, in fact, very modern in *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and some prose writing on Galway and the West. Both in *Portrait* and "The Dead," Joyce represents the West of Ireland as complex, thriving, urban and industrialised, while also steeped in Irish and European history.

However, his contribution to the discourse of the cult of the West did not become relevant until several decades later. I mention it here because it is important to note that there was more between heaven and hell than the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic revival, although some commentaries may lead one to believe otherwise. O’Nolan also considered this distinction important. Much of his contention with the Irish Literary Revival, Gaeltacht writing, and later with Joyce, is not so much with the actual writing these authors produced, but with the way it was received and critically acclaimed by the literary and academic industries. One of his literary strategies, as this dissertation will illustrate, was to draw attention to the absurdities of any dichotomy, any thinking in black and white, any ‘ism’ set against another ‘ism’ purely to undermine it, or indeed any doctrine which presupposed superiority over others. As Clair Wills puts it, though it may have seemed that O’Nolan was, by virtue of his early writing in Irish in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and his Irish-language novel, a Gaelicist or Celtophile like any other:

If he was against Celtophilism he was also against Europhilism; indeed, he saw them as two sides of the same coin. The war exacerbated the divide between Ireland and ‘abroad’ and in doing so widened the gap between the plain people and the self-consciously liberal elite devoted to ‘the European idea’. O’Brien (the bureaucrat in the middle) became increasingly suspicious of the internationalists. He saw the liberals not as more broad-minded but as more British-minded, jumping at the chance to turn their backs on Irish culture – unable in fact to notice Irish culture as it really was. (290).

It is significant that Wills places O’Nolan “in the middle,” as he was also a writer between and in two languages. He wished to see the Irish language survive, but with dignity, just as he also wished to see English done at least grammatical justice. His desire for dignity and accuracy in both languages made him sensitive to the hyperbole and cliché that were characteristic of the pro- and contra-Irish Ireland debates. O’Nolan was not alone in his recognition of the repeated themes and hackneyed phrases of Gaeltacht writing mentioned above and parodied in *The Poor Mouth*. This will be discussed below in relation to the recursivity effect of a principle of scarcity in collective remembrance. The repetition of themes, phrases and styles common to writing about or from the Gaeltacht caused the clichéd representation to become very well known, even to the point that what was fiction began to be unquestioningly accepted as actual fact or history. Brown and Nolan, the publishers who had considered publishing *The Poor Mouth* but eventually decided against it, commended O’Nolan’s use of the phrase “its like will not be there again” from *The Islandman* and urged him to include more such phrases to balance the effect and so “enhance the book”

“Compendium”).²⁴ They recognised that one of the main sources for *The Poor Mouth* was “[t]he absurd value placed on the autobiographies which have emanated from the Gaeltacht” and identified the main premise of the book as “more or less ridiculous phrases or opinions which appear in one or the other of the half-dozen ‘Gaeltacht’ books [...]” (“Compendium”).²⁵ He did not oblige them by adding more such platitudes, but left it at that, something which confused many readers of the book who immediately recognised the mark of Ó Criomhthain’s autobiography and wondered whether *The Poor Mouth* was intended as a direct parodic attack on it.

In fact, O’Nolan was a fan of Ó Criomhthain’s book. He called it literature and wrote that “[t]here is no book (of ours or of any other tribe) in English comparable to it” (CL 24 Feb. 1942). As he continues, his use of single inverted commas reveals his disdain for characteristics of other Gaeltacht books which others were convinced made them worthy of literary study: “And it is not the ‘speech of the people’ or the ‘nice idioms’ that confer the nobility of literature on it. The genuine authoritative human stuff is there, it is artistic, it moves the reader to tears or laughter as the author chooses” (24 Feb. 1942). The book made a deep impression on him, and if we are to believe him, it immediately inspired him to write *The Poor Mouth*, in just a week: “[*The Islandman*] disturbed myself so much that I put it away, a thing not to be seen or thought about and certainly not to be discussed with strangers. But its impact was explosive. In one week I wrote a parody of it called *An Beal Bocht*” (24 Feb. 1942).

It is in fact unlikely that this was the case, as the Irish version of *An tOileánach* was published in 1929 and translated in 1937. O’Nolan’s parody of it is also very much a parody of the Englishman Robin Flower’s translation of it, which O’Nolan considered too literal and too English-sounding. Anne Clissman perceives *The Poor Mouth* as an Irish parody of an English translation of an Irish autobiography (234).²⁶ Costello and van de Kamp, though unclear on exactly when

²⁴ O’Nolan’s ability to run a cliché into the ground was superb. John Ryan recalls in his *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (1975) how Myles elevated a cliché much-used to describe those in the business of reviving the Irish language [or in Ryan’s words: “the men engaged in writing the hagiography of the saints of the early Irish language revival” (51)] to the zenith of overuse. The phrase was usually a variation on ‘he spoke it [Irish]/wrote it/loved it’ “at a time when it was neither popular nor profitable” (qtd. in Ryan 51). Ryan describes it as reserved by Myles “for impeccable cliché...” and as “a cliché with a vengeance, and so beloved of these unctuous hacks, that it would still be unblushingly presented years after Myles had slaughtered it with mockery, so that for most of us, on hearing it again, the best we could do to conceal our amusement was the timely positioning of a pensive palm athwart the lower face” (51).

²⁵ The source of these quotes is a compendium: “Summary of observations of Persons to whom book was sent by Brown & Nolan,” located in the Flann O’Brien Collection of John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

²⁶ Interestingly, O’Nolan’s brother Ciarán rejects outright the idea that *The Poor Mouth* is a satire, stating that “[c]ommon sense and evidence of the author’s enjoyment of his regular visits to the Gaeltacht preclude any suggestion of a parody on the Gaeltacht or its people” (107). I do not contest this point, as it is obvious that O’Nolan highly

O’Nolan wrote the novel, seem to take O’Nolan at his word and claim the novel “belongs not to 1941 when it was published, but to that short highly creative period during his college years” (77). They claim that the popularity of the column and what he was clearly able to do with the Irish there combined with the parodies he was already working on “led to an invitation from a small publisher for a ‘Myles na Gopaleen’ novel. He had on hand a script which had already been rejected by Browne and Nolan, a prominent Irish publishing firm. This was *An Béal Bocht*, a biting satire on the Irish language movement written in perfect Irish” (77). Whenever it was written, the creative energy of the novel would seem to suggest that it was not written on commission as a “Myles na Gopaleen” novel, but that he had already been working on it or something like it in the late 1930s. He had parodied Ó Criomhthain’s autobiography in *Cruiskeen Lawn* in the 1940s and had also been toying with literal translations as a form of comic writing for many years.²⁷ Costello and van de Kamp’s claim that the novel was written in “perfect Irish” is curiously wrong though. The readers at Brown and Nolan, who knew better than Costello and van de Kamp, commented at length on the errors in the original manuscript. One anonymous commentator went as far as to claim that *The Poor Mouth* was the “craziest piece of Irish I have ever met” (“An Béal Bocht”). He expressed his surprise at the self-assurance of [*PM*’s] author—a man who demonstrates twenty times on every page that he is the veriest tyro in the Irish language. For want of knowledge he cannot begin, or continue or finish a sentence properly. Constructions such as he writes have never before been seen in Irish, and one earnestly hopes that nothing of the kind will ever be repeated. (“An Béal Bocht”)²⁸

Other Brown and Nolan readers simply remarked that they thought readers in the Gaeltacht would enjoy the book and find it humorous. The problem was not that O’Nolan lacked knowledge of the Irish language or that his manuscript was typo-ridden and grammatically inferior, but that the readers ironically failed to recognise the errors as intentional parodies of English translations of Gaelic writing.²⁹

esteemed the Gaeltacht people, but Ciarán has clearly overlooked the possibility that *PM* could be a satire of anything else, not to mention Brian’s own use of the word ‘parody’ to describe the novel. But Ciarán is certainly right to claim that the novel “has its roots in exuberance, not malice” (107). The malice would come later; it characterises the article “The Pathology of Revivalism” as well as several personal comments in letters regarding revivalism.

²⁷ One example of a literal translation from *The Islandman* which describes the catching of fish and the subsequent carrying of the catch back to the home goes as follows: “Owing to the force of two men—my father and Patrick—being at us, there was a fine sight of it in the cabin. That was the first day of mine, I think, completely separated from being a mollycoddle, because a hard straining was taken out of my sides pulling the fish to the house with me in a bag down beyant on my back” (*The Best of Myles*, 276).

²⁸ This text appears in the same Box and Folder as the “Compendium” but is separate from the general readers’ comments. Several years later, O’Nolan quoted this particular reader’s comments verbatim in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column.

²⁹ I am grateful to Declan Kiberd for confirming this in a conversation in July 2009.

The reader's earnest hope that *The Poor Mouth's* own likes would not be seen again is indicative of a certain divisiveness that was not uncommon in debates concerning the Irish language and the creation of a new national literature which was so fervently being pursued by authors and cultural organisations in the young state. This chapter focuses primarily on the years directly preceding and following the publication of *The Poor Mouth* in 1941. Therefore, below I provide a brief overview of the key issues at stake in the Irish language question, the opinions and characteristics of bickering sides, the State's involvement and control herein, as well as the role and reactions of artists and authors in the language question debate of the first half of the twentieth century. O'Nolan was not publicly active in either movement – if he picked a side it was his own. He commented extensively on all sides of the debate, parodying the work of Gaelic revivalists and authors while also meta-critically parodying the commentary about how the arguments were developing.³⁰ He also parodied others who were not actively involved in the Irish language movement, authors such as Seán O'Faoláin, Frank O'Connor and others who wrote in the realist, documentary style of *The Bell*. His general attitude to the language question discourse, as opposed to the actual debate or issue itself, is best described as debunking. Instead of taking the openly pro-revival, nativist side as Séamas Ó Grianna (Máire) or D.P. Moran (editor of *The Leader*) clearly did, or taking the side of those somewhat more loath to the idea of Irish as the sole language suited to describing the modern Irish experience, such as O'Faoláin, O'Nolan moved between sides. He exposed the empty rhetoric of several active leaders in the debate, mocked their arguments and revealed their rhetorical pettiness, which often turned on moral issues rather than aesthetic ones. He pointed out how all the to-do was effectively thwarting any attempt to practically address the more important question of how to ensure that the Irish language continue to be spoken. Such rhetorical duelling obscured the fact that there was little that could actually be done to keep it alive using the current methods.

The above-quoted comments by readers for Brown and Nolan and some early reviews and retrospectives written shortly after O'Nolan's death give an idea of the general reception. The Brown and Nolan readers were generally enthusiastic, but keen to protect the publishing house from negative criticism. In addition to enjoying the send-up of clichés from Gaeltacht books, they considered the book's "second idea" to be "making use of failings or faults in our national character. One can't object to this, if the fault or failing exists in real life, e.g. Cheating the government out of money in one way or another, has never been looked upon as a crime in Ireland" ("Compendium").

³⁰ See O'Leary's *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 1922-1939* for a short list of some of O'Nolan's work in Irish.

However, they objected to the book's treatment of sexuality and the fact that the novel suggested that Gaeltacht people lived with pigs and stole each other's washing in the night. In a letter to "Peggy" dated 16 April 1941, O'Nolan wrote "I have cut out completely all references to 'sexual matters' and made every other change necessary to render the text completely aseptic and harmless." Seán O'Faoláin, always cautious and eager to be on good terms with everyone, wrote that he enjoyed the book, but that he worried O'Nolan might get a great deal of trouble about it if it upset too many people. A younger reader, writing in December 1941 for *The National Student*³¹ under the name of An Pucan Meidhreach ("The Mirthful Pookah") described it as

a delicious parody-cum-satire on the spate of autobiographies of those people 'who,' to quote a learned professor, 'have no lives.' It is Seadhna, The Islandman, Twenty Years A-Growing, Peig, and On My Way all rolled into one and raised to the power of x—x, being the monotonous reiteration of hard times, bad food, marriage customs, etc., always found in this type of book. Myles shows up these invertebrate plots of Gaelic literary work, emphasising the unimaginativeness and vacuity of their characters' lives. In so doing he has done great service to the Irish language. For once since the Gaelic revival many of those who enjoy a lusty, humorous book may well regret they do not know their native language.

The Mirthful Pookah's review is exemplary of how students and liberal thinkers and authors felt about the state of Gaelic literature at this time. They recognised the novel's twee representation of Gaeltacht life from popular autobiographies and regretted the lack of attention paid to literary aesthetics. With more restraint, in August 1966, the *RTE Guide* published a retrospective of O'Nolan's work:

Modern Irish literature comes under the lash in *An Béal Bocht* which is another way of saying that modern literature in Irish has come of age. However, there is a mistaken idea current that *An Beal Bocht* is a send-up of *An tOileanach*. Niall Tóibín in an excellent article on Tomás O Criomhthain's book in the R.T.E Guide felt "retrospectively offended" at this parody of a modern Irish classic. (4)

This author also recognised that the novel's parody was not directed at the authors of the books named by the Mirthful Pookah, but at "those readers and critics in genteel suburbia who grow misty-eyed in admiration of the simple unsullied life of the back-of-beyond. This foolish idolatry [O'Nolan] recognised as an inverted snobbery, a perversion, knowing that such people are not fit to share the lives of na daoine bochta 'san iargcúltacht'" (*R.T.E Guide*).³² The book created a stir at any

³¹ *The National Student* was previously *Comhthrom Féinne*.

³² My rough translation: the good paupers of the back of beyond.

rate, presumably knocking a good few readers out of a bored slumber. It sold exceedingly well and was reprinted within six months, no small feat considering the war and the fact that the book was in Irish. At the time, no other Gaelic novel had ever sold as many copies.

When *The Poor Mouth* appeared in translation in 1973, it did so almost in tandem with a book by O’Nolan’s younger brother Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *Oige an Dearthar* (title in English: *The Early Years of Brian O’Nolan*). One journalist, Con Houlihan, writing for the *Irish Press* (the now defunct former voice of Fianna Fáil), was apparently given the task of writing a double review.³³ He gave it the title “A very bad piece,” a pity for Ciarán’s book since Houlihan gives it a positive review, but most of the article is devoted to attacking *The Poor Mouth*.³⁴ Houlihan appreciates O’Nolan’s contribution to Irish letters, but is deeply disturbed by *The Poor Mouth*, which he attributes to a fourth O’Nolan persona: Myles nAssaleen. While he acknowledges that O’Nolan as Myles had been something of a “freedom fighter” against the “foul...mental climate” of the 1940s and 1950s, he is disappointed to admit that *The Poor Mouth* is nothing but “a cold burlesque” without any nuance at all.

Houlihan is an example of a critic who takes O’Nolan’s parody of the Gaeltacht books and the romanticised view of Gaeltacht life quite personally and in doing so, misses the point of the book. It’s all fine and well for Myles to joke about the president of the university Houlihan attended, whom he incidentally despised, and for Myles to mock the *Standard*, a Catholic newspaper which Houlihan dubs “that relic of the Inquisition,” but as soon as Myles mentions the Irish language or the G.A.A. (Gaelic Athletic Association), two institutions dear to his own heart, Houlihan takes offence and starts looking for a way to discredit O’Nolan. He writes that “[t]o write a satire you must know your subject—and Brian was invincibly ignorant of vast sectors of Irish life.” Certainly that is true, as no one can be entirely cognisant of all aspects of a nation’s life and the same could be said of Houlihan. This weak argument points up the expectations, and for many readers, the requirement, of veracity in writers.³⁵ As examples of his ignorance, he refers to O’Nolan’s “recurring pseudo-jokes about turnip-snaggers” and his “onslaughts on the G.A.A.,” a “mystical body” deserving of criticism but which also deserved respect for having brought “Ireland out of the world of the faction fight and in tempering the bitter aftermaths of the Parnellite split and the Civil War.” Neither example pertains to *The Poor Mouth*, but both are used to support what he sees as an irreverent and therefore unacceptable attitude to peasants. He looks to Ciarán’s book to

³³ Houlihan is currently a very popular journalist in Ireland.

³⁴ All Houlihan quotations in this section are from “A very bad piece”.

³⁵ The expectation of veracity in contemporary literature will be explored in Chapter 4.

understand O’Nolan’s perspective and suggests that *The Poor Mouth* is not just based on ignorance, but “envy of a world from which he was spiritually excluded,” including the “realm of art [...] that spring[s] from the peasant” because he never lived long enough in the same place to develop “the spiritual nourishment that long attachment to a particular place can give.”³⁶ Houlihan denounces what he considers O’Nolan’s peasant-bashing because he doubts that O’Nolan knew enough peasants first-hand to have earned the right to poke fun at them. Perhaps Houlihan himself held a romantic view of the peasant, but he certainly seems to privilege his own lifestyle and rearing over what he sees as Brian and Ciarán’s unfortunately itinerant formative years. In addition to having relocated frequently, they did not attend school until the age at which “most children are finishing primary school. It is a tactic of dubious merit.” This denunciation of their education fails to acknowledge how well the late school-goers performed academically and has no critical bearing on a review of the novel.

Houlihan’s digressions detract from the point that O’Nolan was making with his parody, which was clearly not based on peasant-bashing or irreverence for rural lifestyles. In approaching the book as travesty, Houlihan reveals himself as guilty of the same behaviour which Myles attacked in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Poor Mouth*: prescriptive anthropological stereotyping and the allocation of two-dimensional roles. As we will see below, just as the characters in *The Poor Mouth* must conform to the literary stereotypes set out for them in the so-called good books, for Houlihan, O’Nolan must restrict himself to one version of one of his literary persona and not step out of the mould of “Punman.”

Houlihan’s contention with the book and with the na Gopaleen persona is reminiscent of the acrimony that characterised the Irish language question debates and discussions on the role of the Irish author at home from 1930 to 1960. A common point of contention in the language question debate concerned who was entitled to write in Irish, and who was entitled to dub their work “national.” Irish writers and critics clashed over what topics Irish writing ought to deal with and to what extent writing in either language should be a realistic representation of the experience of Irishness and the Gaelic mind. Houlihan and the Brown and Nolan readers were Irish speakers, as was anyone who commented on the book in the years 1941 to 1973. The few commentaries in English by those who could read both the Irish and the English version of *The Poor Mouth*,

³⁶ The O’Nolan family moved about a great deal in Brian’s early years, finally settling in Dublin in 1925. Though O’Nolan would always feel a special connection to Ulster, he was very much a Dubliner. Houlihan seems to overlook O’Nolan’s more than 40 years in Dublin, suggesting that Houlihan doubts that a spiritual connection to place can be achieved in a city.

however, consistently describe O’Nolan as a native speaker of Irish, despite his parents not having been raised in Irish themselves, something which could be attributed to an accident of geography, but which made him an outsider to groups considering themselves a native elite.³⁷ Those Gaelic commentaries that disparage his knowledge of the language testify to the residual effects of an exclusionist tendency of several native Irish speakers and critics in the early twentieth century, including Máire (Seamas Ó Grianna). A cult of the native speaker erupted in the first decade of the past century, with many claiming that Gaelic literature could only (and indeed should only) be written by native speakers born to native speakers. Máire was wont to express his opinions on the superiority of native Irish (particularly Donegal Irish) in scabrous terms. O’Leary finds Máire’s “considered opinion [...] best summarised in a 1929 piece in which he wrote: ‘All the Irish in Ireland is worthless except for what there is in the Gaeltacht and for the Irish of people who learned it from native speakers’ (*Gaelic Prose* 554). According to Máire’s brother Seosamh Ó Grianna it was “far worse to have an non-Gaelic mind [sic!]...It does not matter if there are people who have bad Irish.” Others even proposed “criminal penalties for learners who wrote flawed Irish” (*Gaelic Prose* 78). This attitude annoyed O’Nolan, who imagined what things would be like were these “new cultural aristocrats” to assume power:

they would not allow anyone to put pen to paper to reveal his thoughts. Their tune is that it is not right for anyone except a native speaker to write anything. If there is a position to be filled it is, of course, a revolt against the civilisation and culture of Ireland to give it to anyone but a native speaker no matter what other qualities he lacks. (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 83)³⁸

Recognising how much slimmer the language’s chances of survival were if the nativist principle were to be fully implemented, O’Nolan believed that if Irish was to survive, it could only do so with the help of learners. This view was shared by a number of prominent Gaelic revival members, such as Father Patrick Dinneen who advised learners to ignore those who would claim exclusive rights to the language.³⁹ Difficult as it proved for authors, publishers, editors and readers to define the terms

³⁷ The discrepancies in language used to describe bilingualism is telling throughout the debate. Note that the Mirthful Pookah was writing in English but declared that O’Nolan’s novel would make some regret they did not know ‘their native tongue.’ Also, the extent to which a speaker of Gaelic is branded native differs according to the author’s own interpretation of what it means to be bilingual. Shockingly few linguists had active public roles in the language revival, and amateurs and enthusiasts tended to exaggerate their knowledge of both linguistics and the Irish language. It is true that linguistics developed greatly in the latter half of the twentieth century, but no-one in Ireland seems at that point to have been in a position to explain how people actually acquire either their first or second language.

³⁸ Original reference is to *Tír*; Oct. 1932, 3.

³⁹ Though he agreed with Dinneen on this point, O’Nolan otherwise enjoyed terrorising Dinneen in *Cruiskeen Lawn* because of mistakes in his Irish-English dictionary, “an enduring comic masterpiece” in O’Nolan’s opinion (Ryan 127-

of linguistic entitlement and ability, it was even more difficult to agree on what constituted the “Gaelic” or “non-Gaelic” quality of a mind, much less measure it.

Despite their differences, critics, cultural authorities and the State all generally agreed that Irish literature in both Gaelic and English should reflect and advocate, if not foster, rural life and ways, understood to be frugal, family-oriented and Catholic. It was considered desirable that literary portrayals of Gaelic life be accurate and veracious reflections of certain, often loosely defined Gaelic ideals. Emphasis on unsavoury or negative aspects of rural life was, however, not desirable. With the national literature’s pre-approved setting came pre-approved subject matter, a combination which paved the way for stock characters to populate its pages. The following sections will examine some of the different guises of the preferred literary Irish peasant as seen by the Irish Literary Revival, the Gaelic League and related Irish language revival organisations, authors and cultural commentators who gave dynamic shape to it throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Subversive or inverted elements and versions of the ideal peasant will also be considered as I move on to discuss how *The Poor Mouth* engages with the trope, and how the book was received by the dominant actors who raised, and later tried to put down, the “spectral monster” of the cult of the West, peasants and all.

A Spectral Monster

“The revival of the language by its translators and by its new race of speakers—the babbling and ferocious *gaeligeóirí*—has raised a spectral monster that is a grotesque deformation of the actual speech and writing of the past”
(Deane 159).

The Poor Mouth was perhaps the first sustained attack in literary form on this spectral monster, that was born of a long tradition in Irish and Gaelic literature that glorified the poor, rural inhabitants of Ireland and made the peasant figure, along with the shamrock and the harp, emblematic of the Irish experience.

This comic parody of Gaeltacht writing and both Gaelic and Literary Revival politics and practice is best seen as a rethinking or recasting of the peasant figure in the Irish psyche and Irish writing. Like *At Swim-Two-Birds* and in keeping with O’Nolan’s debunking style, the novel is an analysis of the problems and paradoxes inherent to national identity construction. The issues it identifies and debunks could be considered as belonging to the diagnosis of a quack doctor who can only identify the symptoms and perhaps give them a fancy Latinate-sounding name, but who is unqualified to give and oblivious of, if not indifferent to, the prescription of a possible cure.

The peasant figure became the archetypal representative of rural Irish life through repeated reproduction in fiction and art. It served as a model for dealing with Irish subject matter in fiction and to a certain extent, non-fiction; any narrative that purported to deal with the Irish past had the peasant figure as its focal point. How this figure became so strong can be elucidated in relation to what Ann Rigney has described as the “principle of scarcity” which pertains to sites of memory as put forward by Pierre Nora. In Nora’s discourse on history and memory, a site (*lieu*) of memory replaces a *milieu* of memory “where a sense of historical continuity persists,” despite the fact that some rupture has occurred in time, in which what preceded was a time filled with memory: a milieu of memory (“Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire 7). The rupture is described as occurring at a “turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn” (7). A conscious awareness that memory has been sundered from its proper time is similar to Hamlet’s assertion that “the time is out of joint” (*SM* 18).⁴⁰ The notion of disjointed time will be a recurrent theme throughout this dissertation, which I will discuss in relation to Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. Though Nora was thinking about France, many of his claims are intended to apply to Europe. However, the claim that “repositor[ies] of collective memory” no longer exist and that peasant culture that existed elsewhere in Europe in the nineteenth century has disappeared altogether is a sweeping statement and is inaccurate in both this Irish context and the wider European context (Nora 7). There were pockets throughout industrialising Ireland in Gaeltacht areas where such communities continued to exist, even in print culture, though to say these pockets were thriving would be too positive a qualification. Certainly there was a vanishing occurring, and Gaelic writers were aware of a shift or a tear in memory and experience. O’Leary notes that Alan Titley “argue[s] persuasively” in *An tÚrseal Gaelige* (The Gaelic Novel), “that the principal theme of the traditional Gaeltacht novel in Irish, [...] ‘the communal Gaeltacht novel’...is ‘the change of life...the new life bursting in on the old life, and the old life always a stone’s throw from us in some past time that we can never seize hold of’” (*Gaelic Prose* 97).

Before looking closely at how Rigney’s principle of scarcity operates in *The Poor Mouth*, particularly the attendant effects of conflation and recursivity, I will describe how the spectral monster of the peasant figure and a canonised representation of Gaeltacht life evolved and was rewritten over a period of more than a hundred years until it effectively became central to discourses of cultural and political Irish nationalism. This narrative emerged as the product of linguistic and literary revival practices, popularised at the end of the nineteenth century. If culture or

⁴⁰ Hamlet says this in Act I, Scene v.

a cultural product only becomes meaningful in practice and through constant repetition and its chances of survival are increased when it is reproduced over and over again on the principle that there are few other alternatives to challenge its supremacy, then the peasant figure is indeed one of the strongest cultural symbols known in Irish literature and culture. To understand how the peasant figure became one of the central figures in a complex cultural and political debate about how the Irish people were to be represented in the past and the future, it is necessary to examine the development of the trope in the Irish literary and language revivals.

A Parliament of Peasants

Anglo-Irish writers, Catholic middle-class writers and various stripes of language revivalists all had different interpretations of the peasant as a common foundational element of the narrative of the Gaelic past in Ireland. The different definitions and qualities associated with the peasant in Ireland illustrate what Astrid Erll has described as the central role of “selectivity and perspectivity” in creating “versions of the past according to present knowledge and need” (“Wars We Have Seen”). As a versatile symbol of the past and figure of access to the past, the peasant figure was rejuvenated and reimagined according to presentist needs.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the figure of the Irish peasant was at the heart of many social, literary and political debates in and concerning Ireland. Its significance and representation changed according to the ebb and flow of political relations. Literary and dramatic versions of the Irish peasant had existed on the English stage at least since the sixteenth century, where the stock character of the stage Irishman was a popular figure. Kiberd describes the two major Irish stereotypes that prevailed on the English stage as: “the threatening, vainglorious soldier, and...the feckless but cheerily reassuring servant” (*Inventing Ireland* 12). As Anglo-Irish relations altered, so did the representation of the stage Irishman, then threatening, now a harmless joker. Between 1840 and 1890, as Anglo-Irish relations worsened, unionist writers portrayed the stereotypical Irish peasant more and more as a violent, insolent threat. This was due to the Fenian Movement (a revolutionary secret society, also known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood) of the 1860s, agrarian revolt in the West of Ireland and mass post-famine emigration to English cities where the Irish and English poor fought for jobs under terrible conditions (Hirsch 1119). In Ireland, folklorists and antiquarians took down the songs and stories of the Gaelic peasantry in a last-ditch effort to save the remnants of the dying Gaelic written tradition and what was left of it now in oral

culture. Leerssen argues that the Irish peasantry's "penchant for tales and stories did much to de-historicize and de-politicize" their image (*Remembrance and Imagination* 163). Popular collections of stories, songs and descriptions of rural customs and life were published by folklorists and antiquarians such as Thomas Crofton Croker, William Larminie, Sir William Wilde and Douglas Hyde.⁴¹ Translations of Gaelic myths and stories were also popularised for a scholarly as well as a wider public. Such works were popular among middle-class Victorian readers, for whom the stories were amusing and quaint, reminiscent of a bygone, traditional age that had now been replaced by modern society. For second- and third-generation city-dwelling Irish readers, they were a link to the recent past of their ancestors. In the late nineteenth century imagination, the Irish peasant came to symbolise an apolitical, ahistorical, idyllic life and people uncorrupted by modernity and industrialisation. The peasant represented a communal way of life and a milieu of memory that was somehow purer than modern, urban society.

The peasant's traditional way of life was seen at this time as being on the verge of disappearing altogether, it being unable to withstand the test of time and history under the inevitable march of modernity. Leerssen underscores the fact that an idyllic attitude to country life was widespread throughout Europe in the mid-century (164). The threatened peasant and his memory-rich temporality were likewise endangered in all of Europe, as Nora had already shown in the distinction between milieus and sites of memory. In Ireland, the tension between the social structures of traditional Gaelic life, the "idyllic community," and "faceless, modern society" of modernising Ireland, socially and politically dominated by British and Anglo-Irish elites, was unique. This was also reflected in the narrative structures of the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic movement, as we will see below. In the opposition between high society (Anglo-Irish) and low community (Gaelic-Irish), there "still echoed an originary contrast between conquerors and conquered, colonizers and colonized" (Leerssen 164-5). This tension was also evident in cultural and political nationalism's relationship to literary production and the way audiences and reading publics responded to representations of the Irish peasantry.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that political nationalism became thoroughly intertwined with cultural revivalism, through the success of Gaelic movements like the G.A.A. and the Gaelic League. Cultural revivalism as a unifying sense of nationalism masked old class tensions between the Anglo-Irish and the Catholic middle-class Irish in the Anglicised south. However, as the above opposition between high, Anglo-Irish culture and low, folk culture shows, cultural

⁴¹ See Leerssen 159-164.

nationalism was less class-blind than many were prepared to admit, much less articulate. The fact that the native Irish tend to be differentiated from the Anglo-Irish elite with the words Catholic, middle-class, or peasant also makes this clear. The Gaelic west was not active in contributing to the development of cultural nationalism as its inhabitants were largely disenfranchised and poor, forced by necessity to focus on survival rather than improving cultural and intellectual life, a luxury reserved for the better-off in more urban areas. Nonetheless, the west and its peasants were essential to cultural revivalism and nationalism. The cult of the west and cultural revivalism sprang from cities like Dublin and Cork, symbolically appropriating the West in its rhetoric and literature.

The Irish Literary Revival sought to reinvigorate Irish literature in English with the energy of the Gaelic past by drawing on and adapting folk tales and Irish myths. They sought to create a national literature for Ireland that was distinct from English literature. They rejected earlier English stereotypes of the Irish peasant as drunken, violent, stupid, foolish, effeminate or bestial, and promptly set out to “dismantle [this particular] ‘Paddy’ image” (Hirsch 1119). The Irish Literary Revival writers did so by making “the peasant a spiritual figure, the living embodiment of the ‘Celtic’ imagination, a ‘natural’ aristocrat” (1119-20). The Gaelic language revivalists wanted to reclaim the peasant figure for their own camp, preferring to represent the peasant as the noble, simple soul of Ireland. They particularly objected to flattened versions of the Irish peasant created by either English, Anglo-Irish writers: a rollicking but unthreatening, charmingly non-conformist, impulsive and witty character who was entertaining, but certainly not to be taken seriously as politically independent or self-sufficient. Each revival played a part in creating the “spectral monster” Deane speaks of, the symbolic figure of the Irish peasant in cult of the West literature and thought that would haunt the literary and national imagination until well into the twentieth century. Despite the similarity of their aims and the shared desire for a national literature that expressed and informed a shared, cross-class Irish identity, the new peasants of Irish national literature were highly contested by readers and audiences. The rural idyll propagated by the Anglo-Irish, whether unionist or liberal nationalist, was sometimes welcomed and other times rejected as an inappropriate and supercilious stereotype of Irish identity. Later, the same became true of Gaelic literature’s new peasant. The notion of conservative stability invested in each side’s ideal of traditional society and peasant was shared, but interpreted differently depending on one’s politics.

The Irish Literary Revival

The writers of the Irish Literary Revival, with the Anglo-Irish W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and J.M. Synge at the formative core, abhorred materialism and industrialisation. Internationally they were Ireland's best-known authors in the early twentieth century, and today, along with the Joyce and Beckett scholarly industries, they remain very much at the top of the list of internationally-esteemed Irish authors. Their legacy proved difficult to break with, possibly because Gaelic literature did not travel well for obvious reasons, but ironically, neither did the work of younger Irish nationalist authors, as it did not meet the expectations audiences abroad had regarding Irish art. The Irish Literary Revival esteemed the pastoral, spiritual and mystical, and saw in the landscape of Ireland an uncorrupted wild beauty and innocence. To them, the Irish peasant was the embodiment of the land. Yeats in particular saw in the Irish an unchanging and constant spiritual character that had not been sullied by Victorian industrialisation. It is perhaps here that the notion of permanence of the Irish character took root in a positive sense opposed to the negative permanence of character earlier attributed to the Irish by the English as incorrigible brutes and rebels.

The Irish Literary Revival writers drew heavily on the folklore of Ireland in which they found proud heroes to adapt and modernise for cultural nationalism's literary project of giving Ireland a soul it could be proud of by tapping into its ancient folkloric tradition and writing about it in English. Yeats was at this stage a liberal nationalist, and as Foster notes, liberal nationalism employed and was "reinforced by the antiquarian and romantic view of early Irish history; the capacity of the land to assimilate its invaders, [what had once been] a matter for censure in earlier commentaries, was implicitly now approved of" (*Paddy and Mr Punch* 3). The poetry of his Cuchullain cycle in particular glorified the Irish peasantry and the heroic struggle and violence that had been a formative part of Ireland's ancient past. Yeats believed that there could be "no nationality without literature, no literature without nationality" (qtd. in Leerssen 209). But his work was not received uncritically; it seems that despite his good intentions, Yeats was still seen as supercilious in his portrayal of the Irish folk. His *The Countess Cathleen* was denounced as an example of badly-informed faux-Celticism that was also charged with being too morally ambiguous to be considered Irish (210-11).

Yeats felt that in order to write good Irish literature, it was necessary to commune with the people and the land. He advised J.M. Synge to do just this by visiting the Aran Isles to live among the islanders. Synge did so upon his return from Parisian exile, and *The Aran Islands* (1907) was one of the first books in English written about the Aran Islanders. It eventually gained the now disputed status of an authentic anthropological study of the islanders. Whatever these writers

thought communing with the folk meant, it is clear that there was always a distance separating them from the people they studied and claimed to write for and about.⁴²

While Irish literature's debt to Synge is now fully recognised, it was less appreciated in his time, partly because of Synge's association with Yeats. Synge's version of the peasant was not as rosy as Yeats's. Nor did it appear as high-minded as some of Yeats's peasantry plays, such as *Kathleen Ní Houlihan*, with its elevated diction and supposedly snobby elements of continental European theatre. Synge "subtly revised the way in which the peasant had been previously spiritualized" and also took it upon himself to attack the "urban middle class's flattened portrait of the noble Irish farmer (an inversion of the stage stereotype)" (Hirsch 1127). The subtlety with which he did this is questionable, certainly considering the somewhat histrionic reactions to Synge's plays. However, his revision of the peasant figure was innovative, because rather than being an idealised portrait, it challenged literary representations of the peasant by Catholic, middle-class authors in Gaelic, such as Padraic Colum, while it also subverted the anodyne, happy-go-lucky peasants popularised by Abbey kitchen comedies and their predecessors. The original Myles-na-Coppaleen from Boucicault's comedy *The Colleen Bawn* was an example of such a type, what Leerssen calls the "pleasant peasant," one who is "uneducated but canny [...] with homely speech and impish wit" (215). Synge did not give his audience the flattering representation of Irish rural society that they wanted and had become accustomed to in the Abbey.

Synge's work was also characterised by linguistic extravagance and would later be parodied in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Poor Mouth* by O'Nolan, who was intensely annoyed by it. Many found Synge's attempts to capture the quality of Irish speech in English superior to the Kiltartanese of earlier plays by Lady Gregory for example, a Hiberno-English considered too polished, artificial, and far-removed from the actual rhythms and syntax of rural speech. In the Gaelic movement, many were as disgusted with his language as they were disturbed by his plots. O'Leary states that "[d]uring his life all of Synge's work, with the exception of *Riders to the Sea*, was condemned in the Dublin Gaelic press, and even that play was ridiculed" by two papers (*Prose Literature* 337). Arthur Griffith, founder of the nationalist paper *The United Irishman* and later president of the Dáil in 1922, wrote that "[h]is peasants are not Irish, and the language they speak is pure Whitechapel." In an editorial tellingly entitled "The Passing of Anglo-Irish Drama" written after the *Playboy* riots,

⁴² On Lady Gregory, see Leerssen 205-7, for an insightful reading of her version of the *Táin* and its dedication to the local people, her "friends" around her Coole estate as a "symbolic reimbursement" that was more intended to make her feel better and legitimate her project rather than truly give the stories back to the people from whom she had collected them.

another prominent nationalist, writer and active participant in the Gaelic revival, Patrick Pearse, called Synge's play indefensible but expressed his disapproval of the behaviour of the rioters.⁴³ Griffith's accusation that his peasants were un-Irish was based on the audience's inability to identify with Synge's characters. But while they may have disliked Synge's language and found his plays overly concerned with aesthetics, the audience's major objections were ideological.

Behaviourally, Synge's peasants were wild, cruel, violent and cunning. Audiences called *Playboy*: "an 'unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood'" (qtd. in Leerssen 213).⁴⁴ This, along with the knowledge that it was a reference to undergarments which really got the audience raging, betrays one of the major discrepancies between audiences and artists and between nationalists eager for a Gaelic-Irish national literature and those who thought English could work just as well: the compounding of morals and nationalist ideals with aesthetics. Yeats "spoke out against what he called 'attacks on opinion pretending to be defences of morals' and the dangers of intolerance" (Foster, *The Irish Story* 35). The audience found it unacceptable that the play's hero was a patricide who was liked all the more for this deed by the women in the play. The largely middle-class, Catholic audience were also insulted by Synge's representation of the peasantry as pagan. Synge thought that Catholicism could only play a role in urban cultural nationalism and still saw the rural people as pagan. In the small County Mayo community depicted in the play, a priest, Father Reilly, is mentioned but has no control over his parishioners and hardly merits their respect. He "is so peripheral a figure to these fundamentally pagan people that Synge does not allow him to appear on the stage at all" and with one exception, the characters all refer to him ironically (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 166). Now good Catholics, the urban audience disliked the insinuation that their rural ancestors were not as pious as they were.

Leerssen situates the ambivalent objections to *Playboy* in terms of plausibility and seamliness (214-16). The play confounded their expectations because they found it "both unrealistic and morally reprehensible" (214). Not only did Irish women not act like this, they should not. To the audience, the play did not represent the true life of the people; what it did represent was deplorable. And if it was deplorable, it was because Synge was not in a position to represent Irish life according to the demands and expectations of the audience.

The *Playboy* riots illustrated a rift between Protestant, Anglo-Irish cultural producers and

⁴³ Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* was the catalyst for what became known in the press as 'The Playboy Riots.' After the play opened in the Abbey in 1907, it was days before it could be played out in its entirety, because the audience became incensed by the insinuation that violence was endemic to Ireland so much so that they rushed the stage and began assaulting the actors, while denying verbally that the Irish were violent. (Kiberd 167).

⁴⁴ The reference is from James Kilroy, *The 'Playboy' Riots*. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1971.

Catholic, middle-class Irish consumers. The latter felt subjected to what they saw as the former's condescending attitude towards them. It was starting to seem as if the audience did not want art, but propaganda. The stakes tied up in the construction of a national literature were becoming heavily politicised. The Irish Literary Revival was increasingly in disagreement with the Gaelic revival movement, or rather, becoming more and more the subject of disagreement within the Gaelic movement. Because the audience was often involved to some extent in Gaelic revival practices, they were presented with conflicting perspectives of Irish culture. They felt that the authors of the Irish Literary Revival had no right to represent the rural West in this way, as the people in the West were more their relations and ancestors than the Anglo Irish. Hirsch importantly points out that while the Irish Literary Revival admired and romanticised the Catholic folk, taking them as representative of "some essential Irish identity" its members still saw them as "wholly Other" (1122). For the urban Catholic middle class and its authors, the 'folk' as portrayed by the Irish Literary Revival, were not so Other. The artistic distance that this differing degree of Otherness enabled the Irish Literary Revival to maintain also distanced them from their audience. With the encouragement of the Gaelic League, by the early twentieth century, members of the petty bourgeoisie were beginning to reject the romanticised portrait extended to the middle-class audiences by the self-styled patrons of the Irish Literary Revival and Catholic, middle-class, urban authors were beginning to write back and question this portrayal.

The peasant myth demanded demythologisation. Its false empiricism spurred multiple revisions of the figure, two of which we have seen above. The spiritualized peasant became the pugnacious trickster, and in the hands of Catholic urban writers such as Joyce, Brian O'Nolan, Patrick Kavanagh and others, he took on still more new guises. Hirsch states that the fact that "peasants no longer existed as such by the time they were being fiercely 'discovered' and portrayed by Irish antiquarians and imaginative writers should point up that what mattered to those writers and their urban audiences was not so much what peasants were but what they represented" (1118). For Wills, the very glorification of the peasant was in fact "a tacit confession" of the disappearance of that type of rural life (33). The term itself, *peasant*, was offensive to many recent migrants to the cities, connecting them to a backward and parochial society they did not wish to be associated with. Many were offended by the Irish Literary Revival's obvious scorn for urban, commercialised or materialistic society. They disdained the condescending attitude and felt they were being told that it was better to be a peasant and have nothing than to live in corrupt urban environments and have aspirations of bettering one's social condition. But rather than completely distance themselves from

their rural pasts, the urban middle-classes also chose to view the peasant figure in a way that may not have been accurate, but which was one they could identify with and not be ashamed of. Rigney points out the important fact that loss of accuracy in a memory or narrative is “[the] price of communality” (15). If the peasant figure was to be crystallised into a communally agreed upon symbol of essential Irish identity, then compromises would have to be made.

The Irish Language and Gaelic Literature Revival: “Maimed from the Start”?

The Gaelic League is frequently incorrectly cited as being the founding organisation of the language movement, but in fact, its establishment in 1893 only made the language revival a popular movement. It did become the leading group, but it was not responsible for all language revival activity. Numerous groups and publications championed the cause throughout the country, many of which were devoted to the advancement of a specific regional dialect of Irish Gaelic, either that of Munster, Connacht or Ulster. “Maimed from the Start: Debates within the Gaelic Literary Movement in the New State,” the title of one of O’Leary’s chapters in *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State 1922-1939*, sharply identifies an enduring sense of failure that prevented the Language Revival from ever enjoying a considerable record of achievements in independent Ireland. This section will consider some of the key debates and figures relevant not only to *The Poor Mouth*, but also to O’Nolan’s discussion of the language movement in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The issues that divided consensus within the Gaelic movement will be considered, as will some of the ways that State language and censorship policy dragged the language and literary revival further into the mire.

With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, what had long been a cultural priority (the development a modern literature suitable to the State’s desired image of a nation of humble, rural, Catholic people), became a political goal. The State funded literary projects, donating money for the publication of appropriate reading material dealing with Irish folklore or folkways. It started the Gaelic publishing agency An Gúm in 1925 in order to fund textbooks, translations and literary projects that would further the linguistic spread of the Irish language, including *The Islandman*. The State’s perception of its ideal citizenry was not very different from literary idealisations of the peasant figure. The official peasant cut a more dignified figure than some of his less flattering Irish Literary Revival counterparts, and enjoyed better prospects of upward mobility than the noble farmer-peasant conceived of by language revivalists. Each version of the peasant was produced by conflating pastoralism with an essentialised Irish identity.

While Gaelic literature was still struggling to find its voice, works by Irish writers in English were enjoying international success. Not only the disproportionate achievement of the Irish Literary Revival, but the popularity of younger Catholic writers such as Joyce and Sean O’Casey seemed to validate “English as a, if not the, legitimate voice of “Irish” literature” (O’Leary, *Gaelic Prose* 9). Their achievement worried those who preferred to see Irish fully replace English, and forced writers in Gaelic to face the reality of a small readership of very few books. O’Leary explains that there was so little writing in Gaelic in the early twentieth century because there were very few people who could actually read Gaelic as a native or acquired language (9). Even though it would have been more reasonable to focus energy on increasing literacy and fluency, creating a modern national literature in the vernacular (Irish) of the people remained at the top of a list of Gaelic revival priorities. But with few capable authors, the questions of who was going to write this new literature, and what it should be about, remained unanswered.

Internecine strife affected the revival movement as it debated whether native speakers had sole rights to writing the story of the Gaels or if learners could also contribute. Many critics, readers and writers lamented the repetition of rural themes in Gaelic writing, while they also understood the focus on rural life. Father Lawrence Murray, founder of *An t-Ulach* (an Ulster journal for Gaelic writing), opined that English speakers would have to bring a high-minded literary aesthetic to a modern Gaelic literature because “[t]here are not all that many native speakers now, and most of them are too poor to think about literary questions. The people of the Gaeltacht haven’t seen much of the world” (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 81). Many people felt that Gaelic writing should expand its horizons away from just “the quiet simple life of the Gaeltacht,” and thought that even if that could not be accomplished, then it was not necessary to repeat the same stories about it (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 97). Others thought that the language itself imposed practical and ideological limitations on the subject matter because Irish “was at the time still very much a rural language,” making “the life of [...] rural parishes in the Gaeltacht [...] the most – if not the only – appropriate subject for literature” in Irish (*Gaelic Prose* 95). Rural poverty, matchmaking, marriage, the land, and the small community’s relation to the Catholic faith had proven hardy themes in Gaelic writing throughout the early twentieth century.

With the exception of the presence of the Catholic faith and importance of the clergy in rural areas, O’Nolan parodies all these themes in *The Poor Mouth*, paying particular attention to the “link between destitution and virtue” (*Gaelic Prose* 94). Poverty had been cited as a protective against Anglicisation by some who claimed that it had protected the Gaels against Cromwell, there “being

no plunder for them to take” from the Gaeltacht (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 93). O’Leary states that many of the “virtues for which the people of the Gaeltacht were so regularly extolled were rooted in the endemic and often dreadful destitution of isolated Gaeltacht areas” (93). The inhabitants of the Gaeltacht were praised for their hard work in the face of terrible conditions and the great spiritual life which was seen as their reward. This association of poverty with pious purity was one of O’Nolan’s key problems with the glorification of Gaeltacht stories and the peasant. In *The Poor Mouth* he demonstrates how the conflation of poverty and holiness could work as a deterrent to Gaelic enthusiasts eager to spend time in the Gaeltacht. One of several examples from the novel can be found in Chapter 4 before the organisation of the *feis*. The Gaeligores have been avoiding Corkadoragha as a place to visit and study Gaelic because:

1. The tempest of the countryside was too tempestuous.
2. The putridity of the countryside was too putrid.
3. The poverty of the countryside was too poor.
4. The Gaelicism of the countryside was too Gaelic.
5. The tradition of the countryside was too traditional. (50)

Instead, they are going to Galway and Rannafast where modern colleges have been built with modern amenities, suggesting that even for the most fervent believers in the revival, the literature and lifestyle were often felt to be too monotonous and could benefit from some modern variety.

Criticism of the rural theme was equated by many with English snobbery (*Gaelic Prose* 96). The most influential literary critic of his time, Daniel Corkery, expressed the hope that the “specious cosmopolitanism” in Irish writing in English would pass and that it would return to a focus on the rural and the “qualities of nationality [...] and the qualities of the faith of the people” (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 96). In English, those engaged in the project of forging a national literature were not only interested in the literature being the voice of the nation, but also in its being literature. Literature is an ideal medium for countering politicised and public memory, but in this case the literature itself was politicised even at the grassroots level in service of literary nationalism, “motivated” as it was “by visionary nostalgia” (Hartman par. 26). A number of hopes and goals had been invested in Gaelic writing, including the revival of the Irish language, the creation of a national literature and the expression of the national consciousness. Its efforts were in line with what the State desired and as a result, its aesthetic development suffered. Anglo-Irish literature was seen as being too preoccupied with aesthetics and not enough with the mind of the people. Conversely, the rural literature was not considered literary enough and had degenerated into

politicised nostalgia and corrupt navel gazing. With a lack of “genuinely first-rate writers producing even fewer memorable books in Irish on rural life at this time [1920–40]” and these writers seeming “content to suppress whatever aesthetic judgment they had in order to celebrate that ‘quiet simple life’ of the Gaeltacht,” readers, writers and critics became frustrated with the small progress being made in Gaelic letters (*Gaelic Prose* 97). Gaelic writing too often sacrificed aesthetic innovation for ideological embodiment. Politics came to dominate the movement, the motivation for which O’Leary explains as follows:

The reasons for this abdication, in addition to sheer lack of literary ability on the part of some, was primarily ideological. If the Gaelic West, the soul of the emergent nation, was threatened, the duty of the good nationalist was to defend it, particularly against the misconceptions, whether ignorant or malicious, of those who had no first-hand experience of the Gaeltacht. (97)

‘Like or it leave it’ was the revival’s position on the mediocre state of the art in Gaelic writing. It was for the good of the nation, and snobbish aesthetics would have to wait. There was not much time left before all the oral history and folklore of the Gaeltacht would be lost for good.

The announcement of the impending death of not only the language, but of all the experience only it contained and could ostensibly express was more and more reiterated by the work of the Irish Folklore Commission, which sent out collectors to much of the country to record the stories of older Irish speakers. In 1939, James Delargy, a founder of the Folklore Commission, expressed the feeling that “we work at times with death at our elbow” (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 109). While it was true that every year saw the death of more native speakers of Irish and the birth of more native speakers of English, the frantic focus on the endangered status of Irish filled the project of revival and collection with panicked urgency and dashed hopes that there could ever be enough time to save the dying language and its contents. By the late 1930s, this attitude of desperate nostalgia, combined with a sense of important industry in preservation, began to be openly criticised with greater frequency and better arguments. Gaelic writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain attacked the “Delargyesque lament, the medieval dirge...that is sucking every strand of hope out of the race” (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 109). The alarm bells had long been ringing, and the persistent tolling of this particular deathbed knell was becoming increasingly tedious and injecting a sense of inevitable doom into the revival’s activities.

What Títleý defined as the central theme of Gaeltacht novels, “the new life bursting in on the old life,” became epitomised in Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s (1929) *An tOileanach* (translated as *The Islandman* in 1934) through his emphasis on the passing of one life that will never be seen again.

The Islandman was critically acclaimed and became emblematic of Gaeltacht writing in general, despite the author's insistence that it was a personalised account of life on the Great Blasket. Breandan O Conaire posits that O'Nolan's "reason for choosing it as a central weapon for his satire is clear: it had become, at this stage, more than any other modern Irish work, the God-book of the establishment" (136). A great number of books like it followed, supporting the perception that Gaelic writing could only be about rural subjects. Criticisms like Ó Cadhain's merged with demands for the demythologisation of the peasant myth and the "Gaeltacht myth [,] the most dangerous of all" because it "contains half a truth and it appeals to one of the most dangerous passions—national chauvinism" (Devane 15). Devane contends that the Gaeltacht myth was disabling because it held that the once great civilisation of the Gaels was now lost, having left only fishermen and farmers as a testament to its existence. The idea that Ireland would regain its greatness and achieve "pristine splendour" if it turned its back on all foreign influence and re-established the "humble hearth of Connemara crofters" was a myth that "reduce[d] the civilisation of the Celt and Gael to the level of a farmyard patois; a culture of the cabbage patch" (15-6). The annoyance many felt at the insistence on rural themes was the result not so much of the dissemination of the theme itself, but "rather the crude and unsophisticated way that subject or theme was developed [...]" (*Gaelic Prose* 97). It was a problem with a mode of representation, rather than the represented. *The Poor Mouth* was also a parody of attitudes towards the Gaeltacht and a too narrow interpretation of what literature in Gaelic should be.

Critics of the overemphasis on the Gaeltacht peasant were disturbed that Gaeltacht narratives about Irish folkways had now been elevated to the status of great literary achievement. *The Islandman* was awarded the prestigious Aonach Tailteann prize and had been published with State money by An Gúm. As such, it had also been heavily edited and censored, made "aseptic," to use O'Nolan's word, by the removal of descriptions of the more sordid sides of Gaeltacht community life. All mention of sexuality, violence involving women, and the islanders' taste for alcohol were removed, giving the reading public a glossy version of Gaeltacht life. References to the pig in the house that had featured in the Irish original of *The Islandman* had also been removed in the English translation (O Conaire 137). The artificial character of a book acclaimed for its authenticity is markedly ironic. Critics suspected that Gaeltacht writing presented a fictitious reality as fact. Many people knew about the cleansing and manipulation that was taking place in the profusion of Gaeltacht books and were aware that effective marketing was instrumental in their publication and success. Éibhlin Nic Ghráinne complained that the books were just an exotic

marketing trend, only concerned with “showing the Irish ‘peasant’ and his queer ways to the English-speaking world outside” in translations for the UK and US markets where a profit could be made (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 137). Critics began to debate just what kind of writing books like *The Islandman*, Peig Sayers’s *Peig* and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin’s *Twenty Years A’ Growing* actually were. How authentic were they? Were they autobiographical or fiction? Who was the intended audience? Did Irish people like them? Without disparaging them, O’Leary admits that these books “were very much revival projects, inspired, midwived, and edited by enthusiastic outsiders with cultural agendas of their own” (138). Very different influences and agendas shaped the Gaelic autobiographies and in turn, they were read by an “audience with its own expectations of what the Gaeltacht would say and how it would say it on finding its own voice, we can hardly be surprised if contemporary Gaels were at times as confused as they were delighted when they heard that voice speak” (138). With this in mind, we are able to come a bit closer to understanding just how surprising a book like *The Poor Mouth* would have been to contemporary Gaelic readers.

The Poor Mouth gave audiences plenty of what they had come to expect from Gaeltacht autobiographies, but it also gave them comic and ironic self-reflection on both the books and the readers’ own stereotypes and expectations of them. Almost all Gaelic writing of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to revolve around some type of *Gaelachas* – a term essentially synonymous with “gaelicism” – which should be understood here and in O’Nolan as the idea that Gaels and their literature should be concerned with Gaelic matters, the Gaelic tongue, the Gaelic ways of life, and the Gaelic so on and so forth. The aims of this new national literature were so clear that *gaelachas* required no explanation at the time. O’Leary states that “this apotheosis of Gaelicism could, in its more ill-defined manifestations, unintentionally anticipate the later parody of Myles na gCopaleen” (*Prose Literature* 29). A speech by Pádraig Mac Duibh reported on by Peadar Ó Dubhda in the 12 September 1912 issue of *An Claidheamh Soluis* in fact did find its way into *The Poor Mouth*: “The wide world is watching Gleann Áireamh now and saying that there isn’t a place in Ireland more Gaelic, that the Gaelic spirit is stronger here than anywhere else, that everyone in the Glen, old and young, has great regard for the Gaelic” (qtd. in *Prose Literature* 29). *The Poor Mouth* mocks this speech and the over-emphasis on *gaelachas* content in the following “truly Gaelic oration” delivered by the president of the Grand Feis of Corkadoragha:

- Gaels! he said, it delights my Gaelic heart to be here today speaking Gaelic with you at this Gaelic feis in the centre of the Gaeltacht. [...] If we’re truly Gaelic, we must constantly discuss the question of the Gaelic revival and the question of Gaelicism. There is no use in having Gaelic, if we converse in it on non-Gaelic topics. He

who speaks Gaelic but fails to discuss the language question is not truly Gaelic in his heart; such conduct is of no benefit to Gaelicism because he only jeers at Gaelic and reviles the Gaels. There is nothing in this life so nice and so Gaelic as truly true Gaelic Gaels who speak in true Gaelic Gaelic about the truly Gaelic language.

(54-5)

Not to address the stereotypes soon became impossible, and the focus slowly shifted from criticising the stereotypical peasant to criticising those who would misrepresent or represent peasants at all. A number of letters, essays and stories began to reflect on the notion of Gaelachas as an aesthetic goal and the limitations it carried with it. By 1941, the motifs and modes of Gaelic writing were being openly criticised, experimentally and comically illustrated by *The Poor Mouth*.

Criticism from different parts of society about the narrow scope of the content of Gaelic literature showed that the reading public were tiring of romantic or depressing portrayals of poverty-stricken peasants and the translated *ruralese* of simple Gaelic fishermen with a penchant for writing. Compounded with the fact that the Irish Literary Revival had also lost much of its earlier cultural sway by the late 1930s, there was a developing sense of hope that Gaelic writing could now be the vanguard of Irish literature, if only it could start looking for more original or thoughtful subject matter.

Both revivals became less concerned with what language the national literature was written in, and more in content and aesthetics. The Church, the State and the literary industry realised that Gaelic writing and revival could never succeed if it continued in this manner, but the power of the spectral monster of the West and its Gaelic peasants would prove difficult to shake.

Collective Remembrance and a Principle of Scarcity

In addition to having repeated and refigured the figure of the peasant, the two revivals also refigured the “necessary urban fiction” which had helped bring them into existence in the first place: “[t]he very idea that some nonindividuated or typical Irish peasant existed” (Hirsch 1126). This section will discuss examples from *The Poor Mouth* in relation to some of the effects of the scarcity principle described by Rigney in “Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory.” The previous section has already shown how two effects of the scarcity principle, selection and recursivity, enabled the figure of the peasant to emerge as a strong figure of memory that was so essential to any narrative of Irish identity that it became a defining element in the State’s ideal representation of Irish identity. It was also a force that had to be reckoned with by later generations of Irish authors. *The Poor Mouth* is a canny analysis of a number of the dominant views

and perspectives pertaining to the symbolic importance and meaning of the Gaeltacht, the peasant figure and the Irish language in independent Ireland. I will also discuss some *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns from the 1940s and 1950s on the subject of the language revival to illustrate further O’Nolan’s critical representation of the negative effects of concretising or canonising a particular figure of memory as the quintessential characteristic of national identity.

It has often been argued that the Irish nation existed before the Irish state. A collective mindset was certainly forged in the years following the Easter Rising in 1916 so that by the time the Free State was founded in 1922, the Irish nation did exist, even if a great many rough edges remained to be smoothed, if not removed. O’Nolan joked about Ireland’s precarious national status in *Cruiskeen Lawn*: “(Funny how true a thing sounds if you just say it! Like ‘Ireland is a nation’ or ‘That’s an extraordinary genius that fellow Myles’)” (26 Apr. 1946). Cultural nationalism was in many ways a safer and more attractive alternative to (violent) political nationalism. Rather than split hairs about pro-Treaty, anti-Treaty or even just anti-pro-Treaty views, many people preferred to express their “Irishness” or pride in the country through cultural channels, such as the creation of or interest in literature, music, sports and language revival. J.J. Lee, with only a hint of a sigh, describes the national priorities in cultural nationalism well:

There is, in present circumstances, no substitute for the language. However exhilarating gaelic hurling and football may be at their best, however exuberant the beat of the bodhrán, however enriching ‘the great resurgence of traditional music’, these are only details in the overall design of a distinctive culture. The language is now, for practical purposes, the design. (666)

Lee was writing about the 1980s, but language was the design forty or sixty years earlier too. Though divisiveness was a frustrating characteristic of the language revival and cultural nationalism in general, it was expressed with less obvious belligerence. Political nationalism may aim for consensus, but its life force is opposition. For this reason, cultural nationalism and revivalism were more suited to creating consensus in terms of national identity.

Of course there were many diverse and important political concerns in the early twentieth century in Ireland. The Free State had yet to mature as a fully functional governing body, and to many in Ireland, it was not a legitimate state much less a satisfactory one, but a piecemeal compromise because Northern Ireland was separated from the greater part of the island by partition. The revolutionary goal of establishing a republic still had to be realised and this was no easy task. Political sentiments were divided when the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed and creating consensus proved extremely difficult and contentious. Decisions had to be made about what democratic form

the Irish state would eventually take – a thirty-two county united Ireland or a divided island made up of a twenty-six county Southern state and a separate Northern Irish state. The Free State government had yet to find a practical way of proceeding and governing the fledgling state with its diverse people and their diverse demands, and the Second World War, or the Emergency, as it was known in Ireland, was still going on when *The Poor Mouth* was published. But language remained a main priority for the government, at least in principle – and a relatively unobjectionable priority at that – despite some government members’ open disdain of the movement, particularly of the monies being invested in it. Lee sums up the wariness felt by those opposed to it: “Why waste time on so chimerical a cause when there were far more important matters calling for attention?” (672). O’Nolan also frequently adopted that tone, illustrated in the “The Pathology of Revivalism,” which denounced the favouring of revivalism above the abolition of “poverty, vice and death” (5).

Still, politicians recognised the political potential of the revival and some were even quite sincere. Fianna Fáil, the largest party in the Free State by the early 1930s, had designated in their constitution of 1926 as one of their seven aims to be “to restore the Irish language as the spoken language of the people” and this remained a central aspect of their image for many years (Coakley). But in practice, the government’s implementation of their plan to restore Irish was largely unsuccessful due to a lack of experience and understanding of the magnitude of the task. Lee convincingly argues that despite the popularity of the movement and the lip service paid to it by the institutionalisation of language revival, successive governments failed to realise the restoration of the language because they immediately passed all responsibility for it to the Ministry for Education. By refusing to set an example by speaking the language themselves, writing it and reading it, “the political administrative, ecclesiastical, commercial and academic elites [...] doomed the revival” through excessive focus on “compel[ling] school children to learn to read or write Irish” (672). People were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the practicability of political nationalism. This was exacerbated by the difficulty Fianna Fáil had in securing another central aspect of their image which increasingly seemed doomed, the unification of Ireland. With the forced deferral of full political independence, securing the unity of the nation was attempted through cultural channels.

Cultural nationalism and the language revival in particular helped to create an objectivised culture that conceived of itself as a nation. Jan Assmann writes that such a culture has a “structure of knowledge” that indicates the “‘concretion of identity.’ With this we mean that a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative

impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity” (128). In the nineteenth century, the emerging nation of Ireland looked at itself and the narratives it had about its past and people and determined, rightly or wrongly, in either case syllogistically, that it was a great nation, and as great nations have great pasts, it too had a long and great history that had only been interrupted by British colonialism and the suffering that occurred under that regime. If it could break free from British rule and rid itself of foreign political influence, (most importantly, English influence) and embrace its Gaelic, rural roots of greatness once again, the new independent Ireland would be a great European nation once more, with a great literature to accompany it. By the 1940s, Ireland had proved its political difference to England, and by remaining neutral during the war, it was proving it to the rest of the world. Now its cultural difference remained to be proven to the rest of the world (particularly England), and even to the Irish themselves.

The peasant myth and the cause of reviving the Irish language informed this desire and helped to crystallise a shared national identity in the minds of the people. These two things dominated Irish working memory. They were selected from the archival memory to “derive [...] formative and normative impulses,” which gave their shared sense of nationhood symbolic meaning through the concretised working memory.⁴⁵ It is not that this was *all* there was in the archives; what was taken from the archives was repeated so frequently that it stood out as a stronger figure of memory that remained relatively unchallenged until the post-war years. The peasant myth so dominated working memory that it seemed to exclude anything else. So much energy was invested in memorialising it and its connection to the all-important Irish language, that it occluded the emergence of other memories from Irish archival memory.

Cultural memory, argues Rigney, is working memory that is maintained and (re)enacted on a continual basis by the members of a mnemonic community (17). The language revival debate, as we have seen, had long been an integral part of the national imagination. The peasant myth and the various guises it took was central to the debates on the revival. The representation of Ireland as a nation made up of rural, (at one point) Irish-speaking people was the common frame of reference shared by a majority, despite the increase of urban migration, the decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht and considerable contestation of both aspects of this representation.

Importantly, though, it was a representation that was repeated and restructured by those people in a position to restructure and advance their own view or that of an institution: writers and

⁴⁵ The distinction between archival and working memory is Aleida Assmann’s, described in *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*.

politicians. Aleida Assmann argues that time, taste and posterity determine which texts continue to be read and thus which texts will survive. Cultural institutions are vital to this process: if texts and traces of memory were not memorised or praised, appreciated, recommended to or imposed on new readers, they would cease to be significant and would no longer impact the dynamics of cultural remembrance (“Texts, Traces, Trash” 128). As sites of memory, the peasant figure and the Irish language revival “elicit[ed] intense attention on the part of those doing the remembering and thereby [became] a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment” (Rigney 18). Most of the intense attention manifested itself in writing or speeches. This relates to the third effect of the principle of scarcity, recursivity, which entails that the repetition, reproduction, transformation, replication and interpretation of things remembered – a text, a song or an image – increases shared memory. Rigney states that “it is through recursivity – visiting the same places, repeating the same stories – that a cultural memory is constructed as such” (20). She argues that texts and images enjoy a privileged role in constructing shared cultural memories because they are easily reproduced and transmittable. We have seen how the literary representation of the peasant was restructured and reappropriated by diverse groups and writers. Reproducing the trope ensured that it was reinterpreted and invested with more value in the dynamic process of rewriting and rethinking what the figure of the peasant and the notion of rural life as essentially Irish meant at a given moment in Irish history. That the figure evolved and changed is undeniable, whether it occurred through repudiation or amendment, or even the insertion of a corrective finishing touch. O’Nolan makes rewriting a part of his style, thus confronting readers with stereotypes that came into existence through writing and recursivity.

Many writers reinvented the peasant to serve their own purposes and initiate a discussion about how essential the peasant was to Irish identity. Writers like James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh and O’Nolan attacked and satirised the literary peasants as handed down to them by previous generations. They moulded a new figure “in opposition to the idealized peasant of middle-class Catholic Dublin” and “each justified his project” of rewriting and satire by “positing his own as an empirical reality” (Hirsch 1126). However, if Bonaparte O’Coonassa is O’Nolan’s version of an empirical reality, it is an ironic one. His main aim was humour and an important secondary aim was to confront readers with the fact that the literary Paddy or peasant was a written invention.

It is true that in one sense he presents his version of the Gaelic peasant as an empirical and thus authentic reality in *The Poor Mouth* when he claims in the preface that “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” (7). This is in fact the ironic and self-conscious deployment of a literary convention, used to present the text as an authentic document which just happened to come into his hands. Sue Asbee remarks that his use of this “time-honored literary tradition” recalls “Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, *Journal of the Plague Year* and *Moll Flanders*,” texts presented as “supposedly ‘firsthand’ accounts [...]”. But the fiction of authenticity that is conferred in such cases is, in *The Poor Mouth*, evoked merely for the pleasure of sending it up” (72). O’Nolan’s faux-authentic editorial note is a playful way of forcing his audience to face the fact that many of the essential elements of national working memory were fictions. By signposting the fact that the book has been edited, he superficially undermines his own claim of authenticity while elliptically undermining the authenticity ascribed to *The Islandman*, a book which while heavily edited, was spuriously presented as unedited and authentic. He has had to remove supposedly improper subjects from the document to make it fit for readers’ eyes. He suggests thus that his book is more authentic precisely because it has been edited and admits so openly, instead of creating a false sense of authenticity as many Gaelic autobiographies did, which had been silently edited to better fit readers’ expectations of authenticity. O’Nolan frequently points to the editing process in his fiction and his journalism, making it impossible for the reader to forget for a second that everything he reads has been edited for his protection and understanding. The mention of editorial exclusion also allows O’Nolan a joke at the expense of the Censorship Board and the original readers who objected to some of *The Poor Mouth*’s topics. At the same time, the author washes his hands of all responsibility for the text by stating the book has been edited, protecting himself from possible repercussions. Casting himself thus in the role of editor, he can promise the audience a clean read and “ten-fold” the material “if there is demand from the public for the present volume” (7).

Examples of O’Nolan’s attitude to the role of fiction in forming narratives in general and specifically narratives of national identity are ample (this will be treated in detail in Chapter 4). He revelled in the knowledge that people found it difficult to step out of their own comfortable reality and made this the butt of many Mylesian jokes. However, in practice he may have overestimated his readers’ sense of irony. The inclusion of the preface by ‘The Editor’ to the first edition of *The Poor Mouth* would suggest this: “It is understandable that anything mentioned here concerns only Corkadoragha and it is not to be understood that any reference is intended to the Gaeltacht areas in general; Corkadoragha is a distinctive place and the people who live there are without compare” (7). The frank preface also makes it clear that readers who interpreted the book as an insult to Gaeltacht

inhabitants either lacked a sense of humour or simply were not careful readers.

As early as 1933, O’Nolan had written of the privileged role of writers and writing in forming public opinion of the Gaeltacht and rural life. O’Leary describes the plot of O’Nolan’s short story “Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh” [“The Journey of Peadar Dubh”] in which

the Gaeltacht characters ask their priest why God had created them for a life of such unceasing misery, only to be answered: ‘It wasn’t God who did the creating, but Parthalán Mac an Dubhda, the writer, and Feidhlimidh Ó Casaidhe, the poet – two Dubliners.’ Ó Nualláin’s protagonist sets out for the capital with his shotgun, deals with the guilty litterateurs, and introduces normalcy to his Gaeltacht townland: ‘There are shops on the bog now, and one can get a bus ticket, a cigarette, and the daily mail there. There are ordinary people on that bog today.’ (qtd. in *Gaelic Prose* 98) ⁴⁶

This early story is one illustration of his awareness of the importance of writing in developing opinions and stereotypes of people in Ireland. With mock-idealism, it implies that if writers showed their fictional characters more respect, the real circumstances of real people would improve. Should that prove impossible, his overwhelming attitude seems to be that realism should be avoided, as it only confuses people. If O’Nolan ascribes to the Wildean axiom that life imitates art, he may like to add to it that people are just not aware of it. In any event, his writing demonstrates an awareness of how processes of representation and dissemination spur each other on, rightly or wrongly.

O’Nolan wrote to the playwright Sean O’Casey on 13 April 1942 to express demure thanks for his compliments on *The Poor Mouth*. He explained how he intended the book to be an attack on “the Gaelic morons here with their bicycle clips and handball medals,” emphasising that it was “an honest attempt to get under the skin of a certain type of ‘Gael,’ which I find the most nauseating phenomenon in Europe. I mean the baby-brained dawnburst brigade who are ignorant of everything, including the Irish language itself”.⁴⁷ His makes his point clear partly through his articulation of his personal disgust with those who would celebrate their own Gaelicism without being properly informed, or who would dismiss otherwise reasonable ideas because they were not Gaelic in origin. The imaginary, written Gael was a fiction that through mass representation in fiction, poetry and official writing had gained the status of a concrete fact in working memory. Whether such a figure ever existed was irrelevant, because cultural remembrance had made it a firm yet flexible emblem

⁴⁶ The story was printed in *Inis Fáil*, Mar. 1933, 64.

⁴⁷ The “baby-brained dawnburst brigade” strikes me as O’Nolan’s equivalent of what Yeats described in a letter to the *United Irishman* in October 1903 as “the more ignorant sort of Gaelic propagandist, who would have nothing said or thought that is not in country Gaelic.” Yeats heaped scorn upon that sort of propagandist’s “hatred of ideas” and on politicians “who would reject every idea which is not of immediate service to his cause.”

of the “illusion of the past” (A. Assmann, “Texts, Traces, Trash” 130). Countless numbers of slightly different copies existed in Irish cultural memory, and in the heyday of the language revival, many of them were actively reproduced and altered. The most prevalent and well-recorded narratives were those of heroic suffering, the Gaels’ having always had nothing but bad times (which was an ironic clash with the narrative of a long history of valuable creative production) and the idea of a strong Catholic heritage that was always already there, as if Christianity had not been introduced to Ireland but had fallen out of the sky with the rain. The ample textual evidence of these figures of memory facilitated their selection for the transition to working memory, clichés and all. Importantly, the peasant figured in all of these, it was a common thread throughout Irish history and imagination.

Rigney derives the notion of a principle of scarcity in cultural memory from Michel Foucault’s notion of *loi de rareté*, developed in *L’Archéologie du savoir* (1969), which claims that culture is cultivated, created by a scarcity rather than a plenitude of input or symbols, and given meaning through interpretation (16). Ideas about the Gaeltacht and the Irish language necessarily were textualised and transmitted through literature and anecdotal writing to urban areas. If they were not native speakers, most people had little or no first-hand experience of the Gaeltacht. This was particularly true of politicians and anyone in the upper and upper-middle classes as well as many urban revivalists. While not true Gaels themselves, they did recognise the political and cultural importance of the Gaeltacht and what it represented to newly independent Ireland. They identified with the mediated representations of the Gaeltacht and rural Irish lifestyles. But their memories were “by definition a matter of *vicarious* recollection” because they were not shaped by personal experience, but by numerous representations the experiences of others (15). Rigney explains that the degree of vicariousness increases as the recollected events become further and further removed from the mnemonic community’s present (15). As a result, in the remembrance practices of writing, organising Gaelic *feisanna* or ceili dances, the members of the revival community who vicariously recollected a Gaelic way of life changed the thing remembered throughout years of reproduction, remediation and further politicisation.

In the process, accuracy was inevitably lost. Nonetheless, accuracy was claimed by many of those doing the remembering. Different writers and groups justified their refiguring of certain memories and made claims to empiricism, regardless of the impossibility of preserving truth over an extended period of remembrance. The pedantic nitpicking that characterised much of O’Nolan’s writing fed on these spurious claims to truth, totality and realism. The success of his work partly

depends on the reader's complicity in a playful literary pact: he advances a claim to truth but both parties – writer and reader – understand it to be false. O’Nolan takes for granted that his readers are in on the joke and that they should know by now that everything is in some sense written. In *Cruiskeen Lawn* of 30 October 1946, Myles stressed the worthiness of his intentions in 1881 when he and two friends (John Fleming and Michael Cusack, one of the founders of the GAA) started the Gaelic Union:

I sought to preserve what was dignified, urbane and adult in the remnants of the gaelic civilisation then subsisting. At no time did I authorise the revolting manifestations and exercises which go by the name of ‘gaelicism’ today. Nothing was further from my thoughts than a ‘gaelic revival’ that connoted the atrophy of Irish intellects nor did I dream that the publication of a few old tales should become a base pathogenic influence on the minds of the young and the innocent. I did not foresee that my labours should in due time lead grown men who were apparently sane to denounce many ideas and practices on the sole ground that they were ‘foreign.’ (30 Oct. 1946)

The criticism of the degeneration of intellect as a direct result of Gaelic revivalism and the philistinism that came to characterise conservative revival philosophy underlines O’Nolan’s view that false claims to truth and accuracy only thwarted the successful restoration of Irish as the main spoken language. By making his own exposition of this idea completely historically impossible, by conflating a long period of history into one lifetime, he demonstrates the effect of conflation and convergence.⁴⁸ Convergence is the second of five effects of the scarcity principle designated by Rigney. Memories have the tendency “to converge and to coalesce” in one spot, on one site of memory (Rigney 18). Symbolic meaning is invested in one such site, because it is not possible to remember everything. Just as too many cooks can spoil the broth, too many disparate memories can confuse what they aim to represent. This is called a “principle of economy in cultural memory” which helps to limit the number of conflicting or simply different memories and prevent them from spiralling out of control (18). Working memory is by nature finite, it can only hold so much before it has to oust something into oblivion, and the first effect of the scarcity principle, selection, leads to convergence.

Memories can be conflated around a particular place or a site of memory, such as a book, a

⁴⁸ Myles was present at an astounding number of formative moments in Irish and European history. In this particular column of 30 October 1946, he also claims to have founded the Royal Irish Academy in 1786. In his column of 23 May 1947 he also claims to have assisted Zeuss [sic] financially when he was looking to publish his “famous Old Irish dictionary” as well as having funded the periodicals *An Claidheamh Soluis* and *Fáinne an Lae* solely out of his own purse.

song and so forth. Rigney gives the example of Ouradour-sur-Glane in France, a site of a Nazi massacre which became a national memory site where all victims of Nazi atrocities were remembered through state practice, making the town a “symbol par excellence of Nazi injustice” (19). An Irish correlative can be found in the official Gaeltacht areas, which were given that label in the first place because Irish speakers lived there. Eventually though, the Gaeltacht areas became synonymous with Irish-speaking Ireland in general, causing the smaller and more sparsely populated areas that are by definition Gaeltachtaí (plural) to become conflated with larger Gaeltacht areas. There is the political Gaeltacht, which receives state funding and “protection” from the forces of modernisation, and the linguistic Gaeltacht. The political Gaeltacht is always bigger than the linguistic Gaeltacht and has been conveniently redrawn from time to time to include not necessarily more Irish speakers, but more inhabitants. The conflation of the Gaeltacht areas, which actually comprise at least three different dialects spread across seven counties and three provinces, is hyperbolically centralised in *The Poor Mouth* as Corkadoragha.

Although the novel’s preface emphasises that the Corkadoragha Gaeltacht is without compare, it is made the epicentre of all Gaeltacht areas. The main character’s school caters to children from Dingle (County Kerry, Southwest Ireland), Gweedore (County Donegal, Northwest Ireland) and some children who “floated in from Aran,” the islands off the West coast in Galway Bay (*PM* 29). The poor wretches from the islands were the worst off in this episode. Like the rest of the children in the school that day, they too had been violently christened by the master’s oar with the Anglicised name of Jams O’Donnell and then “had to swim back to Aran that evening [...] without a bite of food or a sup of milk since morning” (31). The geographical conflation continues and the distances from the far northwest and the far southwest become smaller and smaller. In this mini-Ireland with Corkadoragha at its centre, Bonaparte’s grandfather, the Old-Grey-Fellow, can be one day in Dingle to buy tobacco, the next in the Rosses of Donegal selling herring, and the day after in Galway city (34). By placing Corkadoragha at the centre of the West of Ireland (which serves as all of Ireland on Sean O’Sullivan’s comic map that accompanied each copy of the 1941 edition), O’Nolan acknowledges that the West – or the fiction or idea of the West – is the soul or conscience of Ireland, or at least Ireland thinks it is. In the imagination of Dubliners or even Londoners, knowledge of the West comes from books. O’Nolan’s criticism is that they have no idea what they’re talking about, their knowledge being based on a fiction. The bad deed is not in gathering information from fiction, but in the refusal to acknowledge the fictional status of the source.

This is taken even further in the description of the O'Coonassa family home, which is like all Corkadoraghan homes according to *The Poor Mouth*:

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. [...] 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 was 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 on the right-hand side as you go eastwards along the road. (17-18)

The novel exploits the notions of destiny and of the permanence of homogeneous culture as described in the so-called good books that constitute “literary fate” in the novel. The purpose is to mock the so-called empiricism and authenticity of Gaelic autobiography and the repetition of similar if not identical circumstances of Gaelic life in revival writing. The characters’ lives are dictated by literary conventions, made ironic by the self-conscious foregrounding of their adherence to the stereotypes that give meaning to their lives. Brooker’s analysis of the pastiche in *The Poor Mouth* and of O’Nolan as a “bookish writer, whose texts refer to other texts as much as to the real life we readily counterpose to them” leads him to pose a very important question:

But in *The Poor Mouth* this trait is set to work against itself: through his knowledge of books, he asks about the distortions that they have perpetrated. This story is made from other stories – but in the process it casts suspicion on their effects, their ability to prescribe the world. The critique of literary merit is also a critique of the national imagination: why can Ireland imagine no other fates for the Gael? (*Flann O’Brien* 67)

Brooker does not answer the question, and I can only suggest that oversaturation with clichés led to a certain cultural complacency and feeling of powerlessness to change the situation. The revival operated on the assumption that the language was on its last legs, and the frantic desire to halt further decline and death emphasised loss more than restoration. But asking this question is more important than answering it, because it already indicates a change in perspective that may be necessary to arrive at an answer. However, there were not very many people trying to answer the question in the 1930s and 1940s, at least not programmatically. Certainly, a number of letters in magazines and newspapers express the odd gripe about the paradigm of the peasant having been written to death. One colourful, sarcastic example was provided by a pre-Mylesian O’Nolan in a letter to the *Irish Times* responding to Patrick Kavanagh’s poem “Spraying the Potatoes,” which the newspaper had recently published:

I think Mr Kavanagh [sic] is on the right track here. 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. (*Myles Before Myles* 207)⁴⁹

This is at once an approval of Kavanagh's having written a poem about the less charming side of rural life and a frustrated sideswipe at the tiresome reiteration of (idealised) portraits of peasant life. Perhaps O'Nolan felt that an antidote had been discovered in playing up the darker and dirtier sides of that romantic life, as seen in the above letter as well as other literary portrayals by Modernists such as Joyce (who brought bad smell to the page), Kavanagh (who dealt with filth, hunger for food and sex, poverty) and O'Nolan (who did all of the above). But as for imagining a different fate, the Gaels in *The Poor Mouth* cannot find anything in the good books that might resemble it. It is just the way things are for them and they express their fatalistic acceptance of fate repeatedly throughout the novel. In fact, no one expresses even the slightest glimmer of hope in the novel. It is almost as if they are comforted by the unique and stable conviction that things will never improve.

Bonaparte's mother consoles him in this fashion after his bad first/last day at school. She assures him that the same thing (being hit on the head and told your name is Jams O'Donnell) happened to his grandfather as a boy, and that "[it] was always said and written" that this was natural, although she laments "Alas! I don't think that there'll ever be any good settlement for the Gaels but only hardship for them always" (34). Throughout the novel, the Old-Grey-Fellow points Bonaparte to the good books to understand what is happening around him. He chastises him for not knowing enough:

- 'Tis clear, wee little son, said the Old-Fellow, that you haven't read the good books. 'Tis now the evening and according to literary fate, there's a storm down on the seashore, the fishermen are in difficulties on the water, the people are gathered on the strand, the women are crying and one poor mother is screaming: WhO'll save my Mickey? That is the way the Gaels always had it with the coming of night in the Rosses. (67)

Bonaparte's ignorance of the mandate of literary fate excludes him from comprehending the situation at school, from knowing how to go about getting a wife, and in the above quote, from understanding why the houses in the Rosses are unoccupied at the time of their passing by. At the same time though, he is deeply aware of being the last of his kind, a tragic irony for one who does

⁴⁹ 29 July 1940.

not know how to live up to his prescribed identity. Brooker argues that the book is “powerfully self-conscious” in the sense that “experienced characters like the Old-Fellow are aware that everything in this world follows literary cliché. Bonaparte’s error, absurdly, is not to have read enough conventional, predictable narratives about his own environment” (*Flann O’Brien* 66). In a torrent of rain that has kept up for days, the sophomoric Bonaparte poses the question begged by all the available evidence:

-Are you certain that the Gaels are people? said I.

- They’ve that reputation anyway, little noble, said [the Old-Fellow], but no confirmation of it has ever been received. [...]

-Do you think, oh sublime ancient, said I, that there will ever be good conditions for the Gaels or will we have nothing for ever but hardship, famine, nocturnal rain and Seacattishness?

-We’ll have it all, said he, and day-rain with it. (*PM* 100)

The dire reality and outlook expressed by Gaeltacht books and autobiographies which made up the cultural framework that was used to refer to the Gaelic experience and background (supposedly shared by all citizens of the Free State (at some remove), is in this sense another example of convergence. Multiple memories and otherwise unrelated stories about daily life in the Gaeltacht became “superimposed on earlier ones to form memorial layers” (Rigney 19). The layers become blurred so that the memory eventually comprises many memories that are not necessarily recognised as having ever been disparate. Literary fate, in *The Poor Mouth*, becomes actual fate. That some Gaels live in lime-white cottages means they all do, that some families in Donegal have a son nicknamed the “Gambler” carousing in Scotland means they all have, all children get the same Anglicised name of “Jams O’Donnell” and geographically, all Gaeltacht areas are conflated into one geographical space, the West.⁵⁰ In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Myles suggested that this conflating practice carries on outside the novel too, as far as prejudice and preconception are concerned. In a famous Synge bash he wrote: “In this Anglo-Irish Literature of ours [...] nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable with Synge. In Synge we have the virus isolated and recognizable” (28 Aug. 1942). He goes on to claim he has seen people in the streets of Dublin who were straight out of a Synge play, imitating the speech of Synge’s characters (28 Aug. 1942).

⁵⁰ On Sean O’Sullivan’s map, all directions point westward. The O’Coonassa home offers an incomparable view of all corners of Ireland. Various parts of Counties Donegal, Galway and Kerry can be seen from the house’s two windows and one door (*PM* 21).

This type of conflation facilitates remembrance practices and the sharing of memories. It is also more efficient than attempting to remember and commemorate all individual memories. Synge's plays create a false memory of the West, but because it refers to a real memory, it becomes involved in the chain or layers of working memory. The Gaeltacht and the West become then, a site of memory that in Pierre Nora's terms contains "un maximum de sens dans le minimum de signes" (*Les Lieux de mémoire* 1: 38).⁵¹ The Gaeltacht autobiographies by Tomás Ó Criomhthainn, Peig Sayers, Father Peter O'Leary and others become not just a few books written about Gaeltacht life, but representative of Gaeltacht life itself. The downside to conflation in remembrance practices is a loss of accuracy in conveying the remembered site. Loss of accuracy bothered many people and is always a risk factor in remembering anything. But the desire for accuracy also elicited more counter memory writing that dealt with everything that could be remembered about a life from an individual perspective, even if just to show disagreement with earlier portrayals or as a futile attempt to set the record straight. The sense that the Gaelic way of life was disappearing, that "its like will not be there again," also encouraged the composition of these narratives and acted as a catalyst for folklorists to travel the country looking for suitable candidates or specimens to make gramophone recordings of their stories, a practice O'Nolan also parodied in *The Poor Mouth* and in other writings. *The Poor Mouth* provides a comic analysis of what he perceived as wrong in the Gaelic literary and language revivals; mainly the apparent disregard for accuracy of those who would make claims to accuracy. Perhaps to set a good example, O'Nolan's *The Poor Mouth* and his other comments on the language revival demand the acknowledgement of multiple accuracies and narratives.

In her discussion of the fourth effect of the scarcity principle, modelling, Rigney notes that "collective remembrance needs to be conceptualized as an agenda or project, rather than something that is always fully achieved in practice" (22). Although he does not express it in those terms, O'Nolan shows awareness of the mnemonic practices related to the revival movements and exploits the process of meaning making and symbolic investment involved in them to full comic effect in *The Poor Mouth*. This points up the dynamic nature of the process underlying a possible answer to Brooker's question of why Ireland cannot imagine a better fate for the Gaels. That fate is still unfolding, and because it will be shaped by interpretations of interpretations, remembrance practices and commemoration, it is very much a project that will never be "fully achieved in practice" (22). The Gaels' fate in the novel has been dictated by history and lived tradition as passed

⁵¹ Rigney translates this as "[A] maximum amount of meaning in a minimum number of signs" (18).

on by the so-called good books. Tradition is “one long, ongoing, never-resolved and never-abandoned attempt to impose an imaginative unity on the contradictions of the past,” itself a “vast and chaotic curiosity shop” (Leerssen 204-5). The novel’s characters, and by extension, real-life revivalists, refused to acknowledge tradition and history as fluctuating and dynamic so they got stuck in a rut they could not imagine themselves out of.

The language revival underestimated the ongoing nature of its project, not unlike the way the newly independent state had failed to fully accept nation-building as an ongoing endeavour, not something that could be realised overnight. It was too hasty and overly eager to set its principles in stone and have them approved and adopted immediately. The revival did not succeed in restoring the Irish language as it had hoped, but it was not all a waste. Instead it became a type of remembrance project, but this was not a conscious decision. The active participants did not have much in the way of models for how to remember the past that was being lost. The models it did access, in the form of fiction, autobiography and oral folklore, focused heavily on the need to record information so it would not be lost, as if recording it would automatically stabilise the meaning of the information too. Although revivalists did look for other models of how to create a national literature or theatre in Hungary, Norway and Finland, and they were aware of the Welsh language revival, they failed to learn any valuable lessons from the few available models. Instead, they referred to the mere existence of possible models to legitimate their Irish revival projects.

The Irish language and literary revivals became the locus of ongoing disagreement and debate concerning shared narratives of the past in forming Irish cultural identity. Above I have referred to panicked lament; an urgent sense of the need to record, memorialise and stabilise; and a sense of being the last of one’s kind, all themes dealt with by O’Nolan in *The Poor Mouth* and his critique of revivalism in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. I have noted also Leerssen’s point about the idea of rejuvenation and revival informing Irish political and cultural separatism. Just as the desire to rejuvenate and revivify is a reaction to (perceived) decline, decay, death and loss, the drive to remember and memorialise responds to forgetting, loss and (the threat of) erasure. For this reason, the following section will consider the pervasiveness of mourning and loss in revivalist discourse, specifically ongoing pre-mourning and impossible mourning for the foreseeable future.

Pre-mourning, Impossible Mourning and the Long Term

Several critics have observed the ubiquity of funerary rhetoric in Irish culture. In addition to an aesthetic of haunting in O’Nolan’s work, funerary rhetoric and the discourse of mourning are also among my main concerns in this dissertation. It seems unnecessary to point out that memory and the desire to do justice to the object of remembrance and the processes of remembrance are closely connected to haunting. Memory itself can seem spectral, a moment of *déjà vu*, the presence in the mind of something which is absent, in a different time that preceded the moment of recollection. The past itself can be likened to the spectre, it is gone, but present; there again while not being there at all. Haunting and funerary rhetoric influenced the remembrance practices that shaped the peasant figure and language question debates. This section will discuss a discourse of impossible mourning which I think determined the structure of feeling of the debates about the centrality of the Irish language and the peasant figure to Irish cultural identity. The leading opinion makers in the debate made an implicit decision to prepare to mourn the loss of the language and the way of life associated with it, arming themselves for the long-term effects of an irreparable loss that would nonetheless be accompanied by a great many positive changes and developments.

Derrida writes that mourning “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead” (SM 9). In a slight reversal, if remains are visible, this can indicate a loss that has not fully been acknowledged – in the case of the language, official recognition of the fact that the language was dying came too late. The remains of the lost object, here the one that is still being lost, the Irish language, point to its actual death or loss in progress. Despite the clear presence of remains, in the case of the Irish language, the dead cannot be localised because death is ongoing and incomplete. In the case of death, once the remains are identified, mourning can begin, the departed can be buried and localised both literally and figuratively. The remains can also point to a failure to mourn successfully, for if mourning had been successful, then there would be no exterior remains. In the Irish literary and linguistic revivals and in the State’s involvement and responses to both, there is an ambiguous form of mourning at work: pre-mourning. Pre-mourning anticipates mourning for the long-term, the long death of the language and possibly the life it represents and contains. Pre-mourning prepares the subject for impossible mourning, of which more will be said below. In acknowledging the remains and traces of a Gaelic language and past that is still dying or only partially dead, the language revivalists and the State frantically attempt to stabilise and localise what is left, to keep it alive artificially, if only in memory. It is as if as soon as the perceived loss that is happening or about to happen is registered, the revivalists and the State do not try to prevent

its imminent death, but instead attempt to stabilise the condition of *being lost*, thereby keeping it in a suspended state of ambiguity, in a rupture in historical time where the significance of the lost object can remain in constant flux and be repeatedly revalued and redefined.

This rupture can also be described by a term used first by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and later Derrida: the crypt. For Abraham and Torok, the lost object that is subject to failed mourning can only be successfully mourned if it is encrypted, localised in a crypt which can be internalised and incorporated in the subject suffering loss. In the crypt, the lost object is both dead and alive. However, the crypt is not always successfully incorporated in the self and mourning may never take place. On the other hand, it may be successful. It may also be both. The crypt's capacity for sustaining both life and death while simultaneously enabling and disabling mourning is always undecided and ambiguous. This aporetic mourning is, like the ghost, both enabling and disabling. Its ambiguity forces consideration of "a space of interrogation" which is opened up by the ghost (Del Villano 14). "In this space, the spectre reveals the complex and controversial nature of cultural and historical manifestations, reflecting or reacting to the dynamics of power, which determines the speaking position in the Western structure" (14). Spectrality allows for complexity and ambiguity, for consideration of alternative systems or histories. In the spectral space, narratives vie for supremacy, but can equally co-exist, or just exist next to one another.

Pre-mourning enables the recognition of loss, but also the inevitability of having to accept loss. It is a readiness to mourn that allows the would-be mourner subjects to prepare for the indefinite loss of the Irish language and the Gaelic past. While that past and the Irish language were important to Irish identity in early independent Ireland, they were also perceived by some as a hindrance to progress and modernity. Even when the loss is accomplished, the memory will remain. It will fail to die fully, as it will live in memory. Its loss will be lived with. Accepting that loss is imminent replaces the question of how to preserve or reinstate the language or the past with two questions: how to (prepare to) live with the loss of it in the future and how to localise it. This is not to say that repeated experiences of loss and having to mourn have made the Irish more willing to lose things that they love, but as one loss followed another with seeming unrelentingness, the Irish became well-practised at mourning. Loss was ongoing, even after independence. The past may have sent out so many spectres in independent Ireland, not because their "belief in modernity's progress was so deeply shaken," as Andreas Huyssen has suggested, but because modernity had not yet been given a proper chance to make progress (30). Fear of the future was as much a catalyst for the scramble to memorialise as was fear of a finalised loss of the past.

The State's failure to take appropriate measures in education to make a prolonged resurgence of the Irish language feasible, suggest that it would rather live with an ambiguous ghost than go to the trouble of making it work. The State likely saw more value in a modern future with reverence for the past than in a future that was so firmly rooted in the past as to make the future a simulacrum of the past. At least then it would know where the lost past and language were: dead and in the past, alive in memory through commemoration. So why go through the motions of revival? Why invest state funds in the promotion of something it was not prepared to carry through itself, the revival of language that had not been able to sustain itself and was thus already doomed?

I have already intimated that the language revival was not a revival at all, at least not in the sense of restoring something to life. In practice it was more like a wake that started too early for a comatose person thought dead, but who started to show some basic signs of life, but not all, during the wake. With the dying person never fully revived, the wake goes on, at times attracting more visitors than others. The feasibility of achieving complete restoration of Irish as the vernacular was not very high, certainly after controversy about how best to revive the language became an integral feature of the revival movement. Myles marvelled at the value placed on revivalism, calling it "an extraordinary foible" but one which was "terribly human!" (CL 23 May 1947). The subsequent explanation of how simple it is to establish a revival reveals some plausible causes and motives for revivalism.

A man is born into a particular age and instantly he begins to examine the records of the past. He picks out this and that from past times—not the thing, which he can never reach, but the record of it—and declares that he would like and must have these things, that they must be 'revived.' He does not want the age or the civilisation in which they were indigenou, or [...] the squalor, disease and terror of those times; he just begs very modestly, to be permitted to pluck the thornless rose, and he will get into a pet if you tell him it cannot be done.
(23 May 1947)

The metaphor of the rose illustrates the yearning nostalgia for the best remnants of the past while it also expresses Myles's doubt that it can ever be achieved in practice. Later he claims that if everyone were to go about reviving this, that or the other, "*we would have no past at all! No memories, no histories, no museums [...]. And, remember, fair is fair—no past means also no future!*" (23 May 1947). Seen in this light, revivalism is itself a project of remembrance, which aims to preserve the most meaningful objects from the past for future generations. As a pragmatic form of remembrance, revival can succeed, but revivalist politicisation in Ireland shows that as a project charged with the actual restoration of the past or a lost object, it is not very feasible. Revival as a

form of pre-mourning, however, helps to equip the mourning subject for facing the fraught possibility of successful mourning.

The reasons for this remembrance ritual of revival are due to what Derrida calls “impossible mourning,” mourning which is constantly deferred and based on commemorative performance. Impossible mourning is at once a failure to mourn and a marker denoting that mourning is still possible. Building on Freud’s ideas on the work of mourning and adapting his early notions of incorporation and introjection, Abraham and Torok accept that the lost object/spectre does not necessarily have to come from within the subject. It can also be exterior, coming for example from organised commemoration ceremonies or from an Other who prevents the mourning or melancholic subject to introject successfully and eventually disassociate the lost object from the self (namely, mourn and move on). Melancholia is marked not only by a failure to mourn, but also by a refusal to mourn. The persistent compulsion to restore the past or the lost object is an aspect of melancholia that is frequently identified in the Irish context. Irish nationalism’s refusal to leave the dead and the past behind in the way it relates to the present and the future of the nation, is therefore a deliberate form of wallowing in the past and licking the wounds of its dead. In Irish nationalism’s approach to mourning, successful introjection and moving on amounts to a betrayal of the dead. While this discourse enables the State to define and vindicate its existence, it hinders it from moving on and creating a future unpopulated by ghosts of the dead and the past. Ghosts must populate the future if justice is to be done to the past. The remembrance and revival practices effectively keep the to-be lost object in a suspended state of loss, in a hospice that will become a crypt.

Failed mourning is in fact the very “condition of possibility of mourning, as well as the condition of its impossibility” (Greenlaw 127). In *Mémoires*, Derrida claims that the aporetic characteristics of mourning originate between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. Where *Erinnerung* is an “interiorizing memory,” which seeks to restore and to contain the lost object, *Gedächtnis* is an “exteriorizing memory,” which is incapable of containing the lost object entirely (Greenlaw 127-8). The two types of memory are interdependent, but *Gedächtnis* “renders mourning a project of deferred identity, presence, and signification” (128). The subject cannot mourn and move on, as it is repeatedly confronted with the lost object from without. Moreover, the subject’s relation to the lost object is constantly re-inscribed with new meaning. The public face of this exteriorising memory, through revivalist commemoration for example, makes its projected representations of the lost object so visible that the lost one becomes a familiar, a familiar that is constantly present through its absence.

Duncan Greenlaw argues persuasively that impossible mourning even constitutes Irish identity. In his “‘Preying on Foresaid Remains’: Irish Identity, Obituaries and the Limits of Mourning,” he identifies a discourse of impossible and commemorative mourning in Irish nationalism, obituaries and constructed cultural and national identities. The Irish discourse of impossible mourning is “an ambiguous rhetoric that both buries [...] and exhumes” the dead while it contributes to “affirmative revaluations of Irishness” (123-4). To illustrate the development of this discourse, he refers to foundational narratives of Irish identity, including the “insistence on sacrifice and remembrance” in the 1916 “Proclamation of the Republic” in which Patrick Pearse “called for rebellion and sacrifice ‘in the name of God and of the dead generations from which [Ireland] receives her old tradition of nationhood.’” (124). In Pearse’s and indeed Irish nationalist discourse, the dead cannot be forgotten, and their memory must be fought for. The “ghosts of dead men [...] have bequeathed a trust to us living men,” claimed Pearse on Christmas Day, 1915, and it was for these ghosts that the living future of the sovereign Irish State was to be wrought. Greenlaw writes that “the dead, who cannot be completely contained, function together as an absolute other that enables the formation of national identity by a relation of difference that also prevents the nation from closing in on itself” (125). The dead, the Gaelic past and the Irish language must be kept alive after loss through pre-mourning and *in* memory and crypts so that present and future generations never forget them, but can move on, into the future *with* the lost objects as lost. The lost ones must be localised and therefore ontologised upon the understanding or acceptance of their (provisional) proper place. Their meaning will be the basis of foundational independent identity, their location in the past and in memory. It is a learning “to live *with* ghosts,” a negotiation between the past and the future that necessitates communion, “conversation[,] companionship” and “*socius*” with ghosts from either the past or the future in order to give the present meaning, in order to ontologise (Derrida, *SM* xviii). As a “*politics* of memory,” Derrida’s sense of the necessity of “*being-with*” spectres makes sense at this pivotal stage in Irish history. Independent Ireland relies heavily on narratives of the past in order to legitimate its existence and to make sense of the violence and strife that midwifed its independence. But at the same time it must be future-oriented and invest in that future in the present moment, which entails distancing itself from parts of its past. The ambivalent present must therefore negotiate its position between an unknown past and future, basing its knowledge of the past (which can only partially be known) on snippets of preserved information now being interpreted to fix the past (for now), explain the present and plot the future.

To Greenlaw's statement that Ireland's impossible mourning enables "affirmative revaluations of Irishness," it should be added that impossible mourning itself becomes a characteristic of Irishness (123). In the Irish context, a patent desire to live with ghosts is even evident, a non-pathological refusal to let go of them entirely, because they are a part of the present and the future, despite their relative pastness. This suggests an Irish preference for affirmative melancholia. Referring to the dead brings them back, if even for a moment. The neither here nor there quality of this impossible mourning, the built-in aporia of it, enables multiple revaluations of not only Irishness, but history in general. If mourning is impossible, it is replaced by an ambivalent and "peculiar melancholic attitude," a mourning which aims to "make [the dead] live again in one's memory, accepting that menace [otherwise represented by the dead and otherwise a source of the desire to mourn and expel the spectres] as an ethical interrogation" (Del Villano 21). Here, the aim is not to expel the spectres but to learn to live with them, perhaps, but not always, by even doing the thing they ask of you. Irish affirmative melancholia allows the ghosts of the dead to survive as a reminder of the lost past and accompany the subjects into an unknown future. In revivalist discourse, the proud lament and the compulsion to remember lest something be lost are apparent and reiterated. The recursivity of the compulsion to simultaneously prevent and memorialise the loss of the language makes that very same loss, separation and suffering an integral part of the grand narrative of the past in the modern narrative of Ireland. So in living with spectres, Ireland can constantly rewrite its history and allow conflicting narratives of history to live side by side. Effectively, it can play on a loop the question posed by Maeldoon O' Poenassa in *The Poor Mouth*: "And what narrative would give thee pleasure?" and each time respond differently (109).

The Spectral Shanachie of Hunger-stack

This section will examine some of the effects of haunting in *The Poor Mouth*, focusing on Bonaparte's journey to Hunger-stack mountain and his encounter there with Maeldoon O'Poenassa. I read Maeldoon as a ghost who challenges the limits of mourning and memory and humorously illustrates the tendency in Gaelic writing and revival discourse to recycle a few strong narratives of Gaelic life. Bonaparte's brief meeting with Maeldoon is an example of the prolonged presence of the past in Irish storytelling and of the strange durability of stories in *The Poor Mouth*. Storytelling has such a strong effect in the novel that it pushes listeners to adhere to literary fate. Bonaparte hears the story of Maeldoon O'Poenassa from the Old-Grey-Fellow when the two are discussing

how the weather has become incrementally better throughout the ages, in the sense that it was always worse in the days of their fathers.⁵² The incessant downpour which Bonaparte complains about and which makes it possible to catch fish in the fields and piglets in nets, is a light drizzle compared to the rain that fell in the Old-Grey-Fellow's younger years, or the Deluge-like "sky-crucifying" that was common when the Old-Grey-Fellow's father was a boy (*PM* 99-101).

The Old-Grey-Fellow relates that the only survivor from those times was Maeldoon O'Poenassa, a clever and industrious man who built a boat and gathered up all the valuables floating about the flooded Corkadoragha and escaped to one of the White Bens, now called Hunger-stack in his honour. Maeldoon never returned, the mountain being too steep, but, "himself and the boat are there since—if the sign of their remains is to be noticed there now" (102). Even if Bonaparte's great-grandfather was a very young man when the Old-Grey-Fellow was born, it is highly unlikely that Maeldoon, presumably an older man himself in the great-grandfather's childhood, would still be alive on the mountain top. The Old-Grey-Fellow concedes this and more in his comment that the remains of Maeldoon and his boat might no longer be visible. Bonaparte is more interested in the treasure Maeldoon took with him and asks if it too is still there at the top of the mountain. The Old-Grey-Fellow tellingly responds affirmatively, provided that "what we have in Corkadoragha of storytelling-gems and next-door-folklore from our ancestors and ancients is true and believable" (102). While his response allows for the possibility that it is untrue, both Bonaparte and the reader are led to believe that the story is true for this frame of reference.

As it goes, Maeldoon and his treasures are atop the mountain and the authority of the storytellers of Corkadoragha is confirmed, suggesting that their omniscience is not confined to this one story and that literary fate holds true. Bonaparte sets out after some long deliberation with the goal of taking all the riches for himself so he can be "henceforward exceedingly rich, bellyful, frequently inebriated" (103). His climb to the summit is perilous, excruciating and hyperbolically wet, with "trees, large stones and small farms of land" sliding down the slope in rain so torrential that his "hair was being plucked rapidly from [his head]" (105). The journey leaves him in such bad form that he thinks he is dying. At the apex he surveys his surroundings, finding them without "a normal appearance," what with the "unearthly" and "mysterious" noise of the strange yellow rivers there (106). As soon as Bonaparte reaches his destination, the landscape is described as spectral. He discovers a narrow opening to a cave, which he enters, unnerved, to discover Maeldoon and the

⁵² The source of this character's name is *Immram Curaig Maíle Dúin*, (The Voyage of Mael Duin) and dates from the eighth century. O'Poenassa's voyage to Hunger-stack is a distant inversion of the legend in which Mael Duin goes looking for the murderer of his father by boat, only to encounter years of tribulations and adventures.

treasure relatively intact. He finds the “old person, half-sitting, half-lying by the flames [coming up from the floor of the cave] and away from me, a species of chair beneath him and his appearance suggested that he was dead” (107). Maeldoon is dressed only in a “few unrecognisable rags” and has “an appearance totally unnatural about him,” so that Bonaparte is terrified and begins to tremble (107). The emphasis on negation in this section is instrumental in creating the spectral atmosphere as Bonaparte’s expectations, whatever they were, are entirely confounded and he feels there is something uncanny going on. Bonaparte does not know what Maeldoon should look like or how he could recognise him. He identifies him easily because no one else should be there; Bonaparte is the first man to have reached the top since Maeldoon himself. His earthly garments no longer identify him and he looks unnatural. He is neither seated nor supine, his skin is not like a human’s but like “wrinkled brown leather” (107). Rather than address his surprise at finding the ancient man there, though apparently dead, Bonaparte remembers the purpose of his trip and sets to collecting the golden pennies, gems and other loot. He “had no desire whatever to look towards the dead man” and starts to leave the cave until a “luckless thought” causes him to turn back to investigate the source of the fire (108). He wonders who tended it if Maeldoon was dead. Discovering that the fire is fuelled by streams of whiskey in the cave, Bonaparte realises Maeldoon could have survived on the same fuel. He tosses a stone which hits the old man, but Maeldoon does not move. Bonaparte still thinks he is dead and pronounces “half to [himself] and half aloud”:

-He has nothing to say [...].

My heart faltered once more. I heard a sound coming from the corpse which resembled someone speaking from behind a heavy cloak, a sound that was hoarse and drowned and inhuman which took my bodily vigour away from me for a little while.

- *And what narrative might give thee pleasure?* (109)

Maeldoon’s muted and eerie voice comes from far away. Bonaparte addresses the voice of the past in addressing Maeldoon, but when the past replies, it is surprisingly eager to please. Maeldoon’s question suggests he would be happy to tell him whatever story he would like to hear. Bonaparte has no chance to answer before he “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” (109). This recalls move for move the actions of the shanachie in the Rosses, Ferdinand O’ Roonassa, and is the way storytellers and old men behave in the novel. The veracity of storytellers established by the Old-Grey-Fellow gives Maeldoon’s narrative truth value. A translator’s footnote points out that the Irish he speaks dates to

A.D. 1000-1250, further establishing the perpetual non-passage of time. The ancient Maeldoon conforms entirely to the dominant stereotype of Bonaparte's time, as if there were not at least three generations separating them. There is not exactly a perceptible rupture in time here; time does not even pass.⁵³ This reinforces the notion of permanence and homogeneity in Gaelic history. However, when Maeldoon begins to speak, Bonaparte "almost die[s] with terror" (109). The story Maeldoon begins to tell is exactly the same as the story told by Ferdinand in the Rosses, concerning a man called Captain who lived in "a little lime-white house in the corner of the valley" and who divided his time between carousing in Scotland and Ireland (109).⁵⁴ The "ghostly words" spoken by Maeldoon terrify him to such an extent that he flees (109). The ancientness of Maeldoon's Irish combined with the time-tested, unchanged content of his narrative and the fact that its content is identical to the story still told in the Rosses, illustrates that nothing has changed in the Corkadoragha Gaeltacht for hundreds of years.⁵⁵ There is also little indication that significant change will occur, apart from the repeated claim that the like of Bonaparte and the others will not be seen again. The Gaels have been following literary fate and living the ways of the 'guid buiks' to the letter, with the result that their stories can no longer be told apart.

Bonaparte is too much of a buffoon to note the similarity of the stories and runs off simply because he had expected Maeldoon to be dead and say nothing. Perhaps he runs because he instinctively knows that there is no way to make a dead man stop talking, or keep a good story from being told.⁵⁶ The question of which narrative would provide pleasure is rhetorical; though there are numerous tales to tell, the same one is always told, despite minor additions and changes to detail. The immutable story of the Captain's carousals is treated by the storytellers as if it is applicable to any setting, time or plot. In this way, the spectral difference of the locale at Hunger-stack becomes uncannily similar to Corkadoraghan reality where temporal boundaries do not hold up and the (apparent) immutability of time and tradition thwarts any possibility of progress or release.

In the episode at Hunger-stack, Maeldoon functions as a spectre that embodies the unchanging and homogeneous Corkadoraghan past. Here we see how storytelling transcends an apparent gap between past and present. The novel's living storytellers relate and repeat narratives

⁵³ The concept of time not passing, but people passing through time is a common one in O'Nolan's writing, seemingly derived from J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment With Time* (1927). This will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

⁵⁴ Cf. 68-71 for Ferdinand O'Roonassa's telling of the story.

⁵⁵ Just as the proof of a good pudding is in the tasting, the proof of a good story is in the telling. Ferdinand's version is different in that it is told in the Donegal dialect. Bonaparte only stays long enough to hear that the protagonist and his occupation are the same.

⁵⁶ Witness Søren Kierkegaard: "A living man is certain to start talking. But once a dead man begins calling out (instead of keeping quiet as is usually the case) – who is to silence him?"

which have remained in circulation for hundreds of years. When Bonaparte visits Hunger-stack, he finds the living proof of one such story in Maeldoon O'Poenassa. Presuming that Maeldoon's life was not actually sustained by whiskey but by being remembered and having his story told, pre-mourning facilitates the acceptance of impossible mourning. Indeed, it almost obviates the need to successfully mourn the loss of the language at all, because through actively memorialising it, it never dies. Not only is the past alive and well in Maeldoon, albeit somewhat pickled, but by asking what narrative would please Bonaparte, it presents itself as willing to meet the demands of the present in order to sustain itself. This part of *The Poor Mouth* demonstrates and crystallises the effects of the scarcity principle which effects cultural remembrance, while it also shows how a strong figure of memory can be transformed into a spectral presence that is always lurking in the wings of the stage of the present.

This chapter has explored a constellation of conditions, events and attitudes pertaining to the Irish language question, in order to situate *The Poor Mouth* in the contemporary cultural, social and political context. I have tried to illustrate some of the ways in which politics drew on the literary and language movements to legitimate government policies of censorship and language education, as well as a less official programme to fix and prescribe an idealised Irish cultural identity. Brian O'Nolan's particular set of skills may have been better put to use in the Department of Education instead of Local Government. Better than any leader of the Gaelic League or politician responsible for drafting language policy, he understood not only the practicability of reviving the Irish language and the diverse cultural demands that were placed on it, but also had a more realistic view of its social relevance and applications in modern Ireland. This is evident from his insightful criticism of official and non-official language and literary revival practices in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and his exposition in *The Poor Mouth* of the absurdities attending to the cultural aim of regaelicisation.

This chapter has also argued that a discourse of loss and mourning permeates discussions of Irish identity and the rhetoric of revivalism in particular. The constant conceptualisation of cultural loss and decay as purely the net result of British colonialism and nothing else, created a sense of unavoidable victimhood. The loss of the language and customs were rarely viewed as the result of numerous historical factors, among them, real socio-economic contributing factors which were persistently overlooked or denied. Even with the language still alive, the revival's rhetoric of inevitable loss and the urgency with which the need to remember it to prevent total loss was expressed, effectively meant that the revival could never accomplish its stated aim. But it was not

all a waste. Instead, the revival became a State-approved remembrance project which sustained the language's condition of being lost, without fully dying. It helped to concretise the shared importance of the language to Irish cultural identity. This aspect of its success is partially due to the melancholic state of what I have called pre-mourning. Rather than make a real return to the language and the past symbolised, and rather than abandon the language all together, revival and government policy kept the death of the language in a suspended state of ambiguity, where identity and the symbolic value of the language can continue to be developed and debated in an ongoing process.

Annoyed by the internecine strife in the literary and language revivals and the irrational ways each tried to fix the meaning of the peasant myth, O'Nolan was in a class of his own when it came to his stance on the language question and what constituted appropriate material for a modern, national literature. His view of the Irish language question was as ideologically ambiguous as it was pragmatically straightforward. It was fine and noble to express enthusiasm for the Gaelic past and language, but delusional to pursue it as anything more than an edifying hobby. The idea that the revival could ever reinstate the Irish language as the modern vernacular was to him absurd. He rejected claims of truth and accurate representation made by Irish Literary Revival writers and their Gaelic movement counterparts because he thought they aimed to (mis)represent the Irish peasant and set it up as definitive of the Irish condition. He lambasted the notions that Gaelic literature should focus only on rural themes and that these themes could only be properly dealt with through the medium of the Irish language. With equal if not surpassing zeal, he also denounced claims that foreign influence would ultimately corrupt Ireland.

In addition to having explained O'Nolan's stance on the language question and revival, I have also shown how cultural memory and the language revival provided O'Nolan with the tools to create this parody of Gaelic autobiography. I invoked the scarcity principle of collective remembrance, particularly the effects of convergence and recursivity, in order to illustrate how the figure of the peasant emerged as such a strong figure of memory that future generations felt driven to demythologise it. But each reimagining of the Irish literary peasant reinscribed it again with new symbolic importance. I believe that *The Poor Mouth* and O'Nolan's critique of the peasant and Gaeltacht myths demonstrate an acute awareness on his part of the mnemonic processes involved in creating and crystallising a shared sense of identity and community. As a parodic assessment of what was wrong with revivalism, the novel rethinks the peasant myth and the glorious loss of the Gaelic past in exchange for independence and modernity. O'Nolan's representation of these

necessary but largely fictional elements employed by the cultural and political hegemony to define Irishness in the early years of independence highlights their presentist agenda and reading of the past. Bonaparte has all the essential Gaelic traits of the State's ideal citizen, but he is still no better for it and remains trapped in a cycle of failure which O'Nolan intimates is the logical outcome of the State's prescribed identity and preferred interpretation of the Irish past.

The Poor Mouth marks the beginning of a transitional phase in discourses of Irish identity characterised by openness to ongoing debate about what it meant to be Irish in a newly independent country that derived its sense of legitimacy and Otherness from the pre-colonial Gaelic past. Often misread as a travesty, the extensive debates the novel provoked underline the volatile fragility of Irish identities and narratives of the past well after political independence. By debunking the peasant myth, the novel is in keeping with O'Nolan's literary project, which always demands acknowledgement of multiple narratives and truths while disparaging claims to all-encompassing truth.

The novel's comic exaggeration of the dire aspects of the Gaelic past – the poverty, squalor and hard times – serves to lift the wool from the revivalist's eyes. O'Nolan shows that the revivalists wanted to pluck “the thornless rose” and abandon the less attractive parts of the past they sought to revive. This is strikingly in line with Titley's retrospective explanation for the schizophrenic appraisals of Gaeltacht life in the first half of the twentieth century: “the wretched, lost organic community was always a linguistic ideal only, and not a social or cultural (in the broadest sense) ideal, nor an ideal for a way of living life” (qtd. in O'Leary, *Gaelic Literature* 163).⁵⁷ The more zealous revivalists may have been convinced that a complete return to Gaelicism was what they desired, but both Titley and O'Nolan show that revivalism is not a way of life, but an ideal and a form of commemoration. As a form of collective remembrance, language revivalism in Ireland helped facilitate an ongoing discussion about what it meant to be Irish in the past, present and future, but was ultimately unable to transform society as radically as it purported to. O'Nolan illustrates that official and non-official revivalism confused a linguistic ideal with a socio-cultural one, thus asking what might be lost were the ideal to be realised absolutely. The gravity of that potential loss is best illustrated by Myles's retort to the president of the “Gay Leak Ethyl Attic Ass O'Cciation, B.D., H.Dip in Ed.” (G.A.A.) who insisted on the importance of eschewing “foreignisms . . . brought in to the detriment of . . . old Irish customs:”

I agree generally, of course, particularly as to the baneful effects that would ensue if

⁵⁷ Original reference is to Titley 267.

foreignisms like public transport, education, etc., were introduced; [...] I only say that there are one or two imported foreignisms that I'd like to see given a chance—the Christian faith, say, or the republic as an idea in civic organisation. Also the English language, plumbing, the bath idea, and persons of my own class— notwithstanding the fact that I am in a class by myself. (*CL* 26 April 1946)

*Chapter 2: ‘Banjaxed and Bewildered’: Popular Understandings of Science, Cruiskeen
Lawn and The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies*

I said to de Valera, very early in the war,
You are neutral, by the book, and to the letter,
But diplomacy alone is not sufficient any more
Some sub-atomic physics might be better.
[...]
An amateur enthusiast advises me, it’s true,
And you can’t imagine what a help he’s been.
What genius dilettante am I so beholden to?
Why, obviously Myles na gCopaleen.

Erwin Schrödinger⁵⁸

Just before the outbreak of war in 1939, Dublin began to show signs of becoming a cosmopolitan centre as artists, writers, returned émigrés and others left Britain and the continent for less volatile climes. By 1942, the city was abuzz with foreign visitors. Some were airmen whose planes had gone down over Ireland and were being interned (somewhat loosely) for the duration of the war, some had managed to scrape together a few days’ leave from military duty in England or the continent and had come to eat steak and enjoy electric light after dusk. Wills claims that the international atmosphere fostered by these “refugees, conscientious objectors, artists and musicians” was “boosted by an elite tourist trade, made up of wealthy Britons” who could no longer travel freely to their preferred destinations in the south of France, as well as American military personnel, journalists and officials stationed in Northern Ireland (282). The “good food, entertainment, and the absence of blitz” along with the presence of diplomats and “foreign (‘enemy’) legations” lent an adventurous and sophisticated flair to the Irish capital (282).⁵⁹ Wills mentions several contributions to this vibrant cultural scene, and amidst the list of artists and writers, one theoretical physicist stands out: Erwin Schrödinger.

Perhaps unexpectedly, among the refugees and visitors to Dublin were also scholars who had come to practise hard science and take part in colloquia on the newest developments in

⁵⁸ Two of the fictional Schrödinger’s verses in the song “An Ingenious Device” in *Improbable Frequency* by Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter (66-7).

⁵⁹ A “raffish gloss” was attributed to wartime Dublin by US press reports on the mix of “Americans Britons, Italians, Germans, and even Japanese mingle[d] in the crowded streets and dance-halls.” (Wills 282).

theoretical physics. The same atmosphere that drew cultural practitioners and enthusiasts also made the city a safe(r) place for scientists from the continent and Britain to pursue their research. The epigraph to this chapter is taken from Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter's 2005 musical comedy *Improbable Frequency*. The play includes several historical figures, including the poet John Betjeman as a British spy, Erwin Schrödinger and Myles na Gopaleen.⁶⁰ The plot, involving double agents, Nazi-supporting IRA members, bad puns, excessive drink and dancing, concerns Faraday, a crossword puzzle adept-cum-British spy, whose mission is to determine whether Ireland has an atom bomb or is controlling the weather. Communicating through codes in maudlin songs broadcast on a popular Dublin radio programme, Myles and Schrödinger conspire to keep Ireland neutral by means of PAT (Probability Adjustment Tank). Their collaboration as represented in this 2005 play is one example of how the two are joined in Irish cultural remembrance, more than sixty years after they actually interacted with one another. Both stand out as figures of memory from Ireland's neutral Emergency, with *Improbable Frequency* depicting Myles as an alcoholic humorist who risks revealing their plot because he cannot resist a good pun, and Schrödinger as a brilliant scientist whose womanising leads to the uncovering of PAT ("I like the pleasures of the mind,/But equally I treasure your behind") (Riordan 40).

Historically, it is unclear whether Schrödinger and O'Nolan were in fact personally acquainted, but Myles mentioned him and other scientists frequently in *Cruiskeen Lawn* throughout the 1940s, this connection culminating in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies suing the *Irish Times* for libel. *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s combination of serious topical subjects such as politics and science with its convoluted comedy and absurd departures was a favourite feature of Emergency Dublin's heavily censored reading material. It may have been the ideal (if not the only) journalistic setting for conveying the dislocated and slightly surreal atmosphere of Ireland during the Second World War.⁶¹ As a cultural commentator, O'Nolan used the column to discuss important issues of the day, including both arts and science, and the place of what C.P. Snow called the "two cultures," both in Irish daily life and, importantly, education.

On 3 August 1942, Myles na Gopaleen expressed his grave reserve towards a remark made by Sir Arthur Eddington at a colloquium held in Dublin earlier that summer. Sir Arthur Adding-One

⁶⁰ John Betjeman was stationed in Dublin as a press attaché during the war. He had worked for the British Ministry of Information before coming to Ireland, and was thought by the IRA to be a spy. The story goes that they cancelled their plans for his assassination after having decided he could not possibly be a spy because he was a poet whose work they liked (F. Gibbons).

⁶¹ The *Irish Times* was subject to a stricter level of censorship than other newspapers due to its editor's outspoken support for the Allied war effort and the newspaper's tendency to resubmit (unchanged) material that had already been rejected by the censor. For more on censorship and the *Irish Times*, see M. O'Brien 101-121.

of Eddington number fame, expounding on Einstein's theory of relativity, announced that "There are less than a thousand people in the world who really understand the Einstein theory of relativity, and less than a hundred people who can discuss it intelligently." (qtd. in *CL* 3 Aug. 1942).

This disturbing statement [...] is nice news for those of us who have to fork out every year to maintain our grandiose university establishments. We have perhaps 30 or 40 well-paid savants whom we have always taken to know all about physics or mathematics or whatever kindred subject they profess. Now we are told that these people know nothing about Einstein's discoveries, and cannot make head or tail of his sums. What would we say if a similar situation were obtained in relation to, say, plumbers? [...] That would be bad, but not at all so bad as this relativity mess, because leaking taps constitute only one [...] compartment of plumbing practice, and complete ignorance in regard to it does not necessarily impair the plumber's competence when he is faced with a ruptured cistern; whereas Einstein's discoveries entail the radical revision of conventional concepts of time, space and matter, and a person who undertakes to discourse on such subjects while ignorant of Einstein must necessarily rely on premises shown to be inadmissible: he must, therefore, be held to be talking through his stetson. (3 Aug. 1942)

While the Myles-Schrödinger affair is referred to topically in a few critical studies of Brian O'Nolan, it has not been dealt with in any detail. Most recently, Mark O'Brien's *The Irish Times: A History* (2009) mentions the affair as the last item in a list of sensational incidents arising from the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in the 1940s and 1950s, but O'Brien does not treat it in detail as he does other comparable incidents (130).⁶² However, this is more than just another sensational folksy anecdote in the legend of Dublin's favourite pun-man Myles na Gopaleen. Its history is rooted in cultural debates regarding the role of science in independent Ireland. I will consider the background of the establishment of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and the controversial texture of the debates regarding its establishment, both in the Dáil as well as more public forums. Attention will also be given to discussions on what role science should have in Ireland, if any at all. I will show how O'Nolan actually intervened in the debate through his column and had an accurate sense of what was at stake in it. This will show that the debate was actually concerned less with the question of what role science should play in Ireland, and more with which Ireland it was to play a role in: the rural Gaelic utopia described and debunked in *The Poor Mouth*, or the neutral Ireland of the Second World War that aspired to full modernity by the end of that conflict?

⁶² Such as Noel Browne's Mother and Child Scheme in 1951 or the dramatic exchanges between Myles in the *Irish Times* and Professor Alfred O'Rahilly in the *Irish Times* and *The Standard* regarding O'Rahilly's criticism of the *Irish Times* and its supposed "tradition of episcopophagy" (M. O'Brien 141-143).

Furthermore, considering O’Nolan’s intervention in this debate in this way will provide invaluable information for a better understanding of the interface between science and culture and the status of empirical scientific knowledge in *The Third Policeman*. I will briefly discuss the novel as a product of its time in relation to the Irish science debate below, and will deal with this in more detail in the following chapter on *The Third Policeman*, which was written just a few years before the Myles-Schrödinger affair, between 1939 and 1940, only to be rejected by his publishers in 1940, and finally published posthumously in 1974.

Myles na Gopaleen as Experimental Provocateur

In *Flann O’Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire*, Booker argues that *The Third Policeman* is “above all else a detailed exploration (and deflation) of traditional Western epistemological systems like science, philosophy and religion” (46). Booker’s study, like Keith Hopper’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Postmodernist*, is exemplary of the usefulness of applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s critical concepts of the carnivalesque, heteroglossia and Menippean satire to a reading of Brian O’Nolan’s novels. In a detailed appendix, Booker outlines the fourteen characteristics which Bakhtin identified with Menippean satire and shows how O’Nolan’s novels are an example of this politically motivated form of satire, which tends to employ fantastic imagery and situations to fabricate extraordinary situations that then serve as a testing ground for philosophical ideas. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the Menippean mode of O’Nolan’s journalism and its dialogic contribution to contemporary 1940s debate on the role of science in Ireland.

Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* underscores that the incorporation of the fantastic in Menippean satire is “a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and most importantly *testing* it” instead of a mode “for the positive *embodiment* of truth” (114). The previous chapter already began to show that O’Nolan’s discursive position in *Cruiskeen Lawn* is that of provocateur or agitator, and this is one of this dissertation’s fundamental conclusions. He does not prescribe a cure for what he perceives as ailing Ireland, but usually presents his apparent advice as an educated guess from his position of diagnostic griper. Although he does not abstain from giving advice or pretending to know how to solve a particular problem, after putting his finger on the sore spot, he tends to move on to explorations of the potential side effects and complications inherent to his prognosis. In this way, O’Nolan is always provoking and testing possible truths. My view of his work as an extended diagnosis and prognosis of what’s eating post-independence Ireland supports

Bakhtin and Booker's hypothesis about the testing function of Menippean satire. The following chapter will look closely at Bakhtinian dialogism in *The Third Policeman*, but the same testing function that is evident in his novels is clearly also a feature of O'Nolan's journalism which merits closer examination. Examining the ways in which he tests and provokes scientific truth(s) through his treatment of contemporary debates and attitudes to science in Ireland enables me to consider how the many masks he wears in the Menippean mode of his journalism work together to provide an accurate representation of views of the role of science in Irish culture in the 1940s.⁶³ This will also provide important background information for my discussion of *The Third Policeman* in the following chapter.

The Future is Green...and Catholic

The idea of Menippean satire being a dialogic testing ground for ideas and philosophies circulating within a particular culture is highly applicable to Irish society in the 1930s and 1940s, as it was itself a testing ground. New policies were invented or imported (mainly from Britain) and implemented with varying degrees of success. While on the one hand, the Irish Free State declared a preference for creating its own distinctively Irish institutions for its own distinctive people, to many, including Brian O'Nolan, in practice it seemed to favour copycat policy, or the modelling of Irish policy on British policy, as in the case of the Beveridge Plan or children's allowance schemes proposed and developed between 1939 and 1944.⁶⁴ The social reforms proposed to health care, education and labour were intensely debated in government and in the public sphere. Often this involved intense oppositional dialogue between proponents of conservative Catholic social theory and liberal modernisers who supported the proposed social reforms in reference to the successes of socialised medicine and the advances of science. I do not intend to reduce the structure of the debates on science to Religion vs. Science, but this is often, as we will see, the outward semblance

⁶³ Clair Wills posits both the novel and its rejection as products of the era, the latter claim being relatively common in criticism of O'Nolan. As Hugh Kenner wrote of the limited success of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 1939 was "a bad year for a comic novel to get noticed" and it is safe to assume the same of 1940 and *The Third Policeman*, "a more radical and involved metafictional fantasy" than *ASTB* had been (255; Hopper 47).

⁶⁴ For more on O'Nolan's position on copycat policy, see Steve Curran's "'Could Paddy Leave Off From Copying Just For Five Minutes': Brian O'Nolan and Eire's Beveridge Plan." Curran discusses O'Nolan's treatment in *Cruiskeen Lawn* of proposals to make an Irish Beveridge Plan based on the December 1942 British *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services*, published by a committee chaired by Sir William Beveridge. The Beveridge Report, as it came to be known, furnished the framework for Britain's social welfare system. As the title of Curran's article betrays, *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns dealing with the subject expressed frustration and annoyance at Ireland's willingness to copy and implement British policies in Ireland rather than develop new ones. They also point up the irony of the Irish tendency toward copycat policy, given the state's insistence on creating Irish institutions and Irish policies for Irish society.

and structuring principle of many of them. In practice the divisions and alliances are numerous and far more subtle, as this chapter will show. In more ways than one, the debates reflect the competing requirements of an obligatory mix of modernity and tradition.

The successful creation and implementation of distinctively Irish institutions and policies was, as we will see in relation to science, more than simply a question of painting the letter boxes green after independence, but at the level of institution building, Irishness remained a priority.⁶⁵ Kiberd describes two methods employed by the apparatus of state to symbolically rejuvenate things like money and letter boxes in a distinctive Irish way. Irish coinage was redesigned with images of Irish animals (pioneered by a government committee led by W.B. Yeats), an example of breaking with the past and taking a leap towards the new. Painting the letter boxes green is an example of giving continuity a new face: “...the pillar-boxes in which Paudeen posted his letters still bore the insignia of the British monarch under a light coating of green paint and the state apparatus went largely unmodified” (*Inventing Ireland* 265).⁶⁶ The paradox of modernity and tradition in post-independence Ireland is described alternatively by Brooker in terms of rupture and continuity as necessary features of post-colonial state-building that must find a way of co-existing (“Estopped” 17-19). While I am more concerned here with the cultural effects of institution-building, the rupture and continuity paradigm is nonetheless useful to consider in terms of Irish debates on science in society. Brooker states that too much rupture or change can risk a loss of sympathy among those who would otherwise support the new state (22). He notes that a change like painting the letter boxes green “may reasonably provoke the nationalist reflection that society has stayed fundamentally the same” despite having been given a new and much needed coat of paint (22). But other changes were felt to be excessively oppressive. Coupled with culturally-protectionist Free State censorship laws, Free State writers and intellectuals who were generally supportive of the State felt suffocated by the new state’s censorious and prescriptive “triumph of the Gaelic and de-Anglicizing ethos” (22). The science correlative to this is found in religiously motivated resistance to science, which seemed to have little continuity with the metaphysical determinism of Christianity. For many believers, the march of modern science and technology threatened the

⁶⁵ Lee writes that the “main British institutional legacy was the civil service. Irish public administration closely and consciously imitated the English model” (89). Brooker also presents the civil service as an illustration of how an existing institution was kept relatively intact but with an added Irish flair: “[t]he civil service itself is a good enough illustration of this process [“the persistence of pre-revolutionary processes and institutions”], with its Gaelic requirements and residual British structure” (22).

⁶⁶ See Basil Chubb’s *The Politics of the Irish Constitution* (1991) for a discussion of how the Irish constitution “largely confirmed what already existed [before 1922] so far as the machinery of government was concerned” (10). See also “Consolidation: 1922-1932” in J.J. Lee’s *Ireland 1912-1985* for a more political and ambiguous appraisal of why the Irish “[chose] to domesticate certain British influences more than others” (88).

continuity of Irish spirituality.

As I argued in Chapter 1 concerning attempts to create a distinctively Irish and modern literature, the priorities of holding on to Irish traditions and forging ahead into modernity, while not wholly incompatible with one another, have not always been easy to marry. From 1939, De Valera's government not only sought to modernise Ireland and prepare it for the post-war world, but had also carved out a substantial niche for the Gaelic, rural past and some of its attendant traditions, albeit in a form modified for the present and future. The same is true in the case of science in Irish society. The conflict arising between these two priorities was in many ways a catalyst for innovation. Before moving on, let us briefly consider how the stakes of reviving the Irish language encouraged dialogue on the value of teaching the sciences in Irish schools.

Fianna Fáil's language policy is perhaps the most telling example of the party's successive attempts to introduce radical changes in education and the lessons they learnt – or did not learn – from the mistakes made in implementing policy, and adapt the policy accordingly. Although Fianna Fáil had made some adjustments to their original Irish language policy from the 1920s, the party had effectively done “little to elevate Irish but much to demean education” (Lee 135). Throughout this period and beyond, they continued to pursue the dual dream of deanglicisation and (re-)gaelicisation, deemed this unachievable, abandoned it, re-discovered it and pursued it anew. The Minister for Education from 1932 until 1948, Thomas Derrig, unwaveringly resisted demands from the government and teachers' unions for an inquiry into the method of implementing Irish language policy, and the already bad situation in the schools was only worsened by what appeared to be a preference for sticking one's head in the sand and hoping it would all just blow over (671).

Implementation of Irish language policy was not the only problem facing schools and educators, but was certainly a high-profile one which appealed to the general public's interests. Compulsory Irish in primary and secondary schools was proving ineffective and enraging to many people. It also problematised the creation and maintenance of a balanced curriculum and took valuable time away from other important and arguably more economically useful subjects, such as mathematics and science. By the 1940s, frustration with Irish language policy in both education and day-to-day government usage of the language was widespread. More and more, people called for inquiries and reforms and debated the situation in newspapers in letters, articles and editorials. There was at this time a great deal of grassroots support for vocational education,⁶⁷ and many gripes

⁶⁷ The Cumann na nGaedheal government had promoted secular vocational education in 1930 and it was reluctantly accepted by the churches. By 1940, the Catholic bishops were having second thoughts about its success and non-denominational influence, and if “they could not contrive to have the act repealed and the system abolished, the bishops

concerning the disproportionate place given to Irish language and history were expressed in articles arguing for the implementation of a form of education that would prepare pupils for the occupations open to them. But while the Church to an extent reluctantly accepted vocational schools, it also saw them as a threat to what was more or less its educational monopoly. I will consider how the Church responded to calls for more focus on so-called hard subjects below, but it is important to note for now that clerical resistance to balancing the curriculum and accepting vocational education as a viable system that could either exist parallel to a more traditional classical education, or, as they feared, replace it. This created friction between the laity and the clergy, and between the laity, the clergy and politicians. The majority of citizens were increasingly concerned primarily with everyday issues, such as the aggravation of problems of urban migration, foreign emigration and job shortages. The Vocational Education debate in some ways formed the first cracks of a growing fissure between what ecclesiastical and political leaders thought was acceptable, desirable and necessary for the people, and what people in general were actually demanding. This fissure, particularly where education was concerned, was to expand in the next two decades.

Understandably, the letters sections of newspapers during the Emergency became filled with pleas to politicians to attend more to the realities of daily life. These letters began to outnumber the previous two decades' clarion calls for more attention to the concerns of cultural nationalism. Frequently, these were very personal realities. For example, "Mother of deaf mute" complained about "the modern welter of schemes and projects" which had overlooked a section of the community, namely "the deaf and dumb, and the epileptic" (19 Sept. 1944). While her name and concern clearly show that the issue is important to her personally, it is hardly unsurprising that the government had failed to initiate a scheme to target specifically this particular section of the community. However, the cause of this oversight in her view was excessive spending on compulsory Irish: "Why is the State so busy teaching our children to speak Irish (and spending £8,000,000 on it), while it can find neither time nor money for those who cannot speak at all?" (19 Sept. 1944).

This is just one example of popular criticism of the State's ideology and its "harnessing of the [educational] system to linguistic revival," (Garvin 176). Since the 1920s, the State's protectionist ethos in matters of culture, education and industry had been markedly Catholic, rural-

felt that they could at least ensure that religious instruction was included on the curriculum" (Garvin 172). Garvin writes that with the help of Church "spies in the [government] camp, partly by means of its network in the Knights of Saint Columbanus," the Church imposed changes and limitations on the vocational education system which had a negative impact on the system's reputation and further development (173).

centric, wholly supportive (at least in theory) of linguistic revival, as well completely driven to imprint the nation with patriotism and a love of Irish history and culture. This drive complicated the State's desire to modernise national industry and economy in particular. In its attempts to preserve the above-mentioned protectionist ethos, inevitably, problems arose. Irish political and ecclesiastical leaders were largely conservative and suspicious of anything that might compromise their vision of the nation. The combination of trying to modernise certain aspects of education and industry to foster economic growth and while preserving the status quo was highly problematic.

De Valera was also anxious about creating more vocational schools. Tom Garvin calls this an example of "his wish to slow down the process of social change" and the migration and emigration that went with it (176). However, de Valera realised full well that rooting the independent Irish state in faith and the rural past alone would not be enough to establish and allow flourish the first new state in twentieth-century European history. The way forward, for Ireland, was both partially interrupted and enabled by the outbreak in 1939 of the Second World War. This necessarily slowed the process of social change and allowed the government to take some small steps towards increased industrialisation, not because it was desirable, but because it was necessary. Oddly enough, the Irish parliament was already beginning to discuss post-war planning in November of that year, focusing on the contribution that Ireland would be able to make to the world once it was all over. Determined to remain neutral during the conflict of 1939-1945, the Irish state and Irish industry looked ahead to that as yet indeterminate date when it could (partially and modestly) drop the veil of censorship and protectionist insularity that the war had helped to necessitate and show the rest of war-racked Europe and the United States how industrious it had been during its own Emergency, hopefully then to emerge as a modern nation with science in a vanguard position.

The Idea of an Institute for Advanced Studies

As early as 1938, de Valera, a keen amateur mathematician and ex-maths teacher, announced his intention to set up an Institute for Advanced Study in Dublin, modelled on the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton (where Einstein headed the Mathematics Institute). The first stage of the Institute for Advanced Studies Bill was passed in July 1939. President Douglas Hyde signed the Act in June 1940, making the establishment of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

inevitable.⁶⁸ The Institute was operational by January 1941. The DIAS was to comprise two main schools – one for Celtic studies one for Theoretical Physics. De Valera thought that a school for Theoretical Physics was not only cheap (it did not require expensive laboratories or materials to conduct its research), but also extremely desirable in Ireland, the home of Sir William Rowan Hamilton and other noteworthy nineteenth-century Irish scientists active in mathematics, physics and astronomy, such as John Tyndall, William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) and George Francis FitzGerald. Eventually the DIAS added a third school for Cosmic Physics. The mix of schools poetically exemplifies the Irish state’s desired image at this time as well as the modernity-tradition paradox in independent Ireland. On the one hand, in the Celtic studies school, the link with the rich past is solidified and validated, while on the other hand, careful explorations are made into the unknown future with that most modern of sciences, theoretical physics.

It was also hoped that such an institute would return to Ireland some of its lost scholarly reputation. This was evident in the way de Valera repeatedly referred to Ireland’s history of mathematics and astronomy, particularly just by dropping the name of Hamilton. Reference to the nation’s glorious scholarly past served to legitimate de Valera’s desired Institute. In April 1940, he told the Dáil that he believed mathematical physics was “peculiarly suited to Irishmen” (Dáil Debates, 10 Apr. 1940, col. 1082).⁶⁹ Later he would be criticised for trying in vain to re-establish Ireland as a nation of saints and scholars.

De Valera assured the government that he could secure big European names to head the school for Theoretical Physics and hoped that the school for Celtic studies would enable scholars of Celtic studies to continue their research and make better use of their particular expertise by helping to translate and analyse old Irish manuscripts. This, he argued, would be a better use of their skills than what most of the graduates in Celtic Studies were doing – joining the civil service or other trades in which knowledge of Irish was required. Brian O’Nolan was illustriously among this group.

The existence of DIAS was also intended to encourage young people to pursue university courses that would help them to repair the post-war world. Unfortunately, scientific or technical courses for that purpose were scarcely available in Ireland. They were also discouraged, if not officially, by social ignorance and peer pressure, as we will see below in the discussion of the place of science in Ireland from 1930-50.

There was also an aura of noble endeavour about the establishment of the DIAS, as if only the Irish were plodding away at important questions concerning wave mechanics, astronomy, and

⁶⁸ Hereafter referred to as DIAS.

⁶⁹ References to Dáil Éireann Debates in the List of Works Cited can be found under “Dáil Debates”.

the principle of the first cause, while the rest of the world was at war . Certainly, these were important questions worthy of scholarly investigation and advancement, but to sceptics in the US and UK who disdained Irish neutrality, it must have seemed luxuriously unimportant at such a critical historical juncture. Nor was the rest of the world entirely convinced of the Irish credentials to carry out this work effectively.

De Valera did secure his big names. In almost heroic fashion he contrived to get Nobel Prize Winner (1933) Erwin Schrödinger (and his wife and his lover/maid) into Dublin to head the School of Theoretical Physics. Schrödinger met de Valera in Geneva at the League of Nations in 1938. While he had hoped to continue his research in Austria, as time went by it became increasingly difficult for scientists and scholars to continue their work unhindered by National Socialism so he happily accepted de Valera's invitation. Before moving to Dublin in 1939, Schrödinger worked in Ghent, Belgium until the Dáil had approved the Institute for Advanced Studies Bill and de Valera could assure him that all was going to plan and he could take up residence in Dublin and begin his work.

I want to consider the position of science in early independent Ireland before looking in more detail at a scandal that arose in 1942 when Myles allegedly insulted the DIAS and Schrödinger, causing the DIAS to sue the *Irish Times* for damages. The *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns dealing with DIAS and science provide useful insight into contemporary interest in science and to its place in Irish society during O'Nolan's lifetime. The thematic treatment and conflict of these issues in *The Third Policeman*, which I will address in the following chapter, in some ways foreshadows O'Nolan's journalistic presentation of the different sides of the science debates in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Of course this can only be observed retrospectively due to the posthumous publication of the novel, but O'Nolan's continued interest in science is evident in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, as is the continuation of ideological conflict in Irish society as regards the rightful role of science. Examining his critical and comic response to this ideological conflict will further underscore what I perceive to be his general distrust of accepting too willingly any theory or grand narrative that would purport to explain the meaning of life in an over-simplistic manner.

Science in Irish Culture

Despite the publication in recent years of several books on science and culture in Ireland, still too little is known about the history of science in Ireland in general and certainly in post-independence

Ireland. The few extended studies on the subject tend to stop in the early- to mid-twentieth century or focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The critical reception of these books differs among humanities scholars and science scholars, but it is noteworthy that the most recently published books on the topic focus on the cultural and social significance of science in Ireland and the role the sciences and scientists played in shaping modern Ireland.⁷⁰ Nicholas Allen argues in fact, that in the Irish intellectual revival from 1900 to 1930, science was “a directing discipline whose terms, of evolution, electricity, and the atom, informed the logic of cultural debate” (“States of Mind” 150). Allen makes a strong case for regarding science in this period as a discourse which actually facilitated the articulation, if not the emergence, of “Irish controversy in the decolonizing moment” (150).⁷¹ To illustrate his argument, he points to the popularity and presence of scientific debate in Irish literary journals as well as other periodicals which provide the broadest historical view of the Irish public sphere in this period. Science was seized as a progressive discourse by modernising nationalists such as George Russell in the journal he edited, *Irish Homestead*, and playwright Padraic Colum in his short-lived *Irish Review*, “A monthly magazine of Irish literature, art and science”(155). Science was in the air and was a stimulating topic of debate for radical thinkers of a wide variety of creeds and callings. Nationalists regarded science as “a knowledge base necessary for independence,” unionists promoted it “as the empirical bond between two nations” (155). UCD’s Jesuit quarterly journal *Studies* also published articles on scientific subjects. According to Allen, *Studies* “pursued a joint vision of science and culture throughout its first decades” and regarded physical science as the source and basis of future economic wealth (153). Though praised and regarded as a progressive and necessary development, science was not uncontroversial, nor was it at the top of the agenda.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin’s work on evolution had already spawned some popular theories of social Darwinism. Nationalists referred to evolution to support their claim that Ireland and England were not suited to union or cohabitation. Across the Irish Sea, similar legitimating claims were made from a different perspective. Political cartoons in England and Ireland may have varied in the chosen subjects and manner of depiction, but it was not an

⁷⁰ See Bowler and Whyte; Wilson Foster; and Whyte.

⁷¹ Greta Jones’s “Catholicism, Nationalism and Science” challenges the colonial connection that Allen and others, such as Sean Lysaght, make with science in Ireland. She suggests that the terms “colonial” and “post-colonial” only confuse a discussion on the role of science in Irish society. Jones insists that calling this process “colonial” or “post-colonial” diminishes the fact that Ireland made “choices about the direction of intellectual and scientific work” for better or for worse (57). She argues that Irish nationalism’s privileging of linguistic and religious distinctiveness in its cultural vision in fact “jeopardised Ireland’s link with a wider intellectual community” (52). However, it can also be argued that nationalism’s insistence on this cultural vision was itself necessitated by the conditions created by the colonial past.

uncommon for popular pictorial journalism to portray Anglo-Irish conflict in terms of evolutionary theory, pseudo-scientifically illustrating it in cartoons according to one's nationalist sympathies.⁷² Evolutionary theory and later, atomic theory and Einstein's theory of relativity were the most controversial and popular scientific debates of the period in Ireland. Though partly due to the revolutionary impact these ideas had on the way people viewed the world, the controversies in Ireland were also driven by the way this thinking clashed with and challenged spiritual ideologies and grand narratives propounded by the Catholic church.⁷³

The scientific revolution of new physics, for many practitioners of serious literature, philosophy and art, seemed to confirm their suspicions and affirm their dissatisfaction with conventional form. Friedman and Donley's *Einstein as Myth and Muse* (1985) provides an aptly illustrated and thorough account of the importance of, in particular, Einstein – both his work and the man himself as a cultural icon – and the influence of the new physics on cultural production and thought in the twentieth century. Among the many occurrences of scientific ideas and principles in modernist literature that their book traces are alternative realities, multiple dimensions, vortexes, explosions, time travel and so on. As we will see in Chapter 3, science also appealed to contemporary interest in the occult, with scientific discoveries often being likened to occult experiences and vice versa.

Science, like religious experiences, produced revelatory experiences in people, expanded their world view and caused them to question the limits of perception and experience. It is therefore no wonder that the vocabularies of religion and science interacted so much. Explaining the close ties between spiritualism and science, Tim Armstrong writes that “scientific writers had deep interests in borderline phenomena; and spiritualists interpreted the findings of science as confirming their own ideas about spiritual substance, telepathy and action at a distance” (122). The possibility of consciousness after death seemed guaranteed by relativity theory to some, such as the Irish-born J.W. Dunne, whose theory of “serialism” was inspired by psychoanalytic dream analysis and relativity theory. Dunne's books *An Experiment With Time* (1927) and *The Serial Universe* (1934) both influenced *The Third Policeman* and were part of the cultural fare of O'Nolan's day. *An*

⁷² Foster points out that the practice of portraying the Irish as simian or otherwise bestial, and thus inferior to the English, existed more than a decade before the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 “and the debasement of Darwinian typology” (*Paddy and Mr Punch* 176).

⁷³ Some scientists even tried to explain the new physics in philosophical terms, such as James Jeans and Eddington, who contended that “the new physics gave free will to humanity” (Friedman and Donley 9). Popular interpretations and misinterpretations of the impact of the new physics on daily life were widely published in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The attribution of humanity's free will to the new physics, as opposed to God, was a cause for concern for many people.

Experiment With Time argues that time is multidimensional, and tracks Dunne's dream diaries, which he presents as evidence of being able to see the future in a dream state. The book was extremely influential in the British Isles and was reprinted throughout the 1930s, despite some scepticism regarding the soundness of Dunne's theoretical exegesis, not only among scientists. J.W.N. Sullivan, a prominent reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*, claimed Dunne's description of his experiences were at least "sufficiently convincing to necessitate a radical alteration in our notion of time" (659).⁷⁴ Anthony Cronin writes that Dunne's books "read like fairly classy hokum now but perhaps because they gave the illusion of discussing the problems which Einstein, whom nobody understood, had dealt with, they were popular in O'Nolan's circle and among Dublin intellectuals generally throughout the 1930s and 1940s" (103).⁷⁵ A specific feature that may explain the popularity of Dunne's books is that they basically make the Christian idea of an afterlife compatible with relativity theory.

Indeed, the relationship between Christianity, Catholicism in particular, and science was a key point of worry. Many Catholics thought scientific speculation was dangerous and in competition with religious truth. Others worried about how far was too far when it came to scientific investigation – surely there were ethical limits? A June 1913 *Studies* review asked woefully whether "the science of Galileo" was worth more than "the faith and happiness of thousands" and admonished readers not to attach too much "unmerited glamour to the popular proflusions of the laboratory worker" (A. O'Rahilly 61; 52). To many members of the clergy and lay sympathisers, science seemed to be pitted against religion.

Foreshadowing if not shaping de Valera's 1930s view of science, Arthur Griffith's weekly newspaper *Sinn Féin* argued that with Ireland's cultural achievements in literature and art now being acknowledged internationally, the new task, as they saw it, was to achieve similar recognition in the world of science. Where the language of evolutionary theory had earlier served to legitimate Irish claims to independence and incompatibility with Britain, contemporary science was presented as a fact of modern life, to which a valuable Irish contribution would be necessary if Ireland was to be taken seriously as a modern European state. In a *Sinn Féin* article entitled "Wanted – A Scientific

⁷⁴ Sullivan was an "important exponent of the new physics of relativity and quantum theory within both the modernist avant-garde and the more traditional recesses of English literary culture" (Bradshaw 189). Victoria Stewart's "J.W. Dunne and Literary Culture in the 1930s and 1940s" points out that Dunne is discussed in Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (1994), "within their assessment of the impact of Einstein's work and its popularisations" (62). Stewart's article focuses on Dunne's influence on the plays of J.B. Priestly and the novels of H.G. Wells, and John Buchan.

⁷⁵ Cronin speaks with the benefit of the biographer's hindsight. Born in 1928, he was significantly younger than many of his literary friends in the 1950s and 1960s who may not have found Dunne's books as pseudo-scientific as did a later generation of readers.

Revival,” the author proclaimed that the time had come for the establishment of a School of Science in Ireland, arguing that such a school was necessary “if our country is to take her proper place among the nations of the world, for it is only on the tripod of art, commerce, and scientific enlightenment that a country can stand firmly” (7 Sept. 1907, 3).⁷⁶ Ireland was not entirely bereft of a school of science at this time, but there was a problem with its name: the ‘royal’ in the name of the Royal Irish Academy or the Royal College of Science did nothing for their credentials in Ireland.⁷⁷ This nomenclatural problem; the national Gaelicisation project that had been made official with the declaration of the Free State; the State’s tendency to establish new, Irish institutions; and the clear economic need for more and better industry in Ireland (particularly future-oriented industry which could combat emigration) led to the general consensus that a new scientific research institute was in order.

This short overview of the role of science in Irish culture has been given in order to depict the cultural climate from which the idea of DIAS arose, as well as the role science played in the public sphere in which its founder de Valera’s political and intellectual personality had been formed. As stated above, amidst growing dissatisfaction with the view that Irish education’s focus on Irish history and the language was sufficient for producing educated and useful citizens, it was widely acknowledged by the beginning of the 1940s that science was the way of the future, and after the war began, this seemed more imperative. Although a deep interest in and understanding of scientific theories would not have been the norm amongst the Plain People of Ireland, many people were familiar, if not conversant, with scientific developments and it was generally accepted that to join the ranks of modern states Ireland would have to make some contribution to the sciences.

Science in Education

For years already, the place of science in primary education had been a subject of debate and controversy. Science may have been the way of the future, but Classics were the way of the respectable, and Classics are what the schools, controlled by the Church, taught and deemed to be the basis, along with Religion, of the Irish child’s “‘education’” (Brenan 202). Yes, those are single inverted commas around education, taken from an article in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* on

⁷⁶ Tellingly, the only other concrete demand made in the article is for an Irish scientific vocabulary. Members of several different institutes replied to this article pointing out how German would be far more useful to scientists and that translating scientific terms into Irish would be pointless if you didn’t know what they represented.

⁷⁷ The Royal College of Science was forced to drop the Royal from its name in 1922.

Vocational Education and the value of what was known as Nature Science in primary education and (projected/prospective) secondary education. The Church ran the majority of schools that were paid for by the State and ferociously guarded what it saw as its right to control the schools and to determine their curricula. Indeed, it was instrumental in complicating government policy and holding back any plans it deemed too radical, liberal or communist. A government informed by and structured according to Catholic social theory had become officially entrenched in Irish society by the 1937 Constitution. The special role enjoyed by the Catholic Church in Ireland (and assigned them more or less officially by the 1937 constitution) meant that the State had recourse to the Church, and to Dublin's other ruler, Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, throughout the long teething period of its early years. McQuaid, the Church in Ireland, and the secret society the Knights of Columbanus were to a large extent responsible for thwarting almost all ideas or proposals for radical social change in Irish politics and society until after Vatican II in the 1960s.⁷⁸ De Valera and other senior government officers made no secret of their close advisory ties with Church officials and their general agreement.

Educationalists – both lay and clerical – and the State agreed that primary education should prepare young people for jobs. As Ireland's economy was based on agriculture, it was only logical that pupils were to receive an education that would prepare them for life on the farm.⁷⁹ Tom Garvin notes how several ministers openly showed their support for the idea that “education for the modern world was unnecessary and even dangerous,” prone to give people ideas and aspirations above their station and job opportunities (168). Patrick McGilligan, Minister for Industry and Commerce in the mid-1920s wrote:

[...] if a nation is to depend on agriculture it must produce mainly a population of farmers: men of patience, endurance, thrift and modest intellectual aspirations. If it produces other types it must export them at an early age if it is not to risk the continual inner ferment of disappointed and distorted minds denied by circumstances their adequate exercise. (qtd. in Garvin 169)⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Tom Garvin notes how pro-clerical concern about vocational education was “shared by key senior officers in the state's Department of Education; effectively, the Church had spies in the camp, partly by means of its network in the Knights of Saint Columbanus. Some of these people would certainly have been in breach of their legally binding promise to obey the Official Secrets Act had they been sharing policy matters with senior clerical officials. Some evidently were doing so” (173). See also James Murphy's 1993 M. Ed. Thesis: *The Establishment and Development of Vocational Education in Ireland, With Particular Reference to Teacher Training Courses, 1930-1960* and Seamus Ó Buachalla's *Educational Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland* (1988).

⁷⁹ Secondary schools were less standardised at this time and therefore difficult to discuss here. The national school curricula had to some extent been outlined by the Department of Education but this is was not the case for secondary education.

⁸⁰ The original source is the Patrick McGilligan Papers, housed in the Archives Department of University College

McGilligan continued to harbour such ideas well into the 1940s, and Thomas Derrig (Minister for Education 1932-48) thought along similar lines. Garvin reports that “Monsignor Michael Nolan has reminisced to me that Tom Derrig...privately expressed the view that education beyond the elementary level destroyed children’s ancestral cultures” (309).

Ecclesiastically, the view was very much the same as it was amongst government ministers and policy makers. The *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* article in question considers the value of introducing agricultural science into the national school curriculum in order to help slow migration from rural areas. Its author, Rev. M. Brenan, M.A., Ph.D., Professor of Education, wrote that “almost half the total occupied persons in the Twenty-Six Counties and three-fourths of our total productive workers are still engaged on the land” according to the 1936 Census (193). While it was acknowledged that people were also needed to work in the trades and the civil service, it was a truism that these jobs were reserved for a small part of the middle-class elite, who generally if not always went on to secondary education and where possible, third-level education. Therefore, the fundamentals of the (male) Irish child’s education as Brenan saw it, and I take his view as representative of Catholic educationalists, were considered to be the following: “Standard European practice interprets this preliminary and fundamental ‘education’ of the child as including the teaching of religion, the mother-tongue, history and geography, mathematics, drawing, singing, science and some manual occupation” (202-3). Brenan is not convinced that teaching people about agriculture will make them stay on the farm. In his estimation, only love of the land can achieve this and this is what should be imparted to young children. Until education truly begins to “[transmit] to the younger generation the real (not the fictitious) ideals and values of the adult society to which it ministers” rural depopulation will remain the norm (194). His suggestion is that if the Irish truly love the land, they will teach their children to do the same. Science’s low ranking in the list of what pupils should be taught accurately reflects independent Ireland’s core social values. But for all Brenan’s awareness of the country’s dependence on agriculture, he still opposes the introduction into schools of “agriculture, theoretical and practical, on a scientific basis” because a) it is not taught in other countries, even agricultural ones,⁸¹ b) “pupils of elementary school age are not mature enough to digest scientific agriculture” so its introduction into the curriculum would be doomed to fail, c) agriculture “affects only a proportion of the school population,” so would

Dublin. (P35b/10).

⁸¹ This is untrue, and it was also well-known that Denmark was an example of “an advanced small-farm agricultural economy allied to an extensive and advanced educational system emphasising systematic approaches to farming at high scientific levels” (Garvin 168).

therefore be useless to a lot of pupils and steal valuable time from other subjects, ultimately causing “serious retardation in other necessary studies,” and d) the required equipment was not available, especially in rural areas (203).

The irony of his objections to agricultural science when compared to other arguments against increased Irish language instruction is inescapable. Furthermore, the claim seems completely illogical in its simultaneous recognition of the centrality of agriculture to the Irish economy and its assertion that agriculture only affects a part of school-goers. How teaching pupils Irish, classical languages and religion could make good farmers of children, I cannot begin to imagine. It is easier, sadly, to imagine national school pupils in rural areas being taught all the names of crops in Irish but never being taught how to deal with potential diseases of these same plants. Brennan instead argues that “Rural Science or Nature Study” would be more advisable, as it would teach children particular fundamentals that could, where necessary, serve as a basis for further agricultural education after primary school. However, since 1934, Nature Study of this kind had been made optional so as to make more room for Irish language instruction. Other subjects which were made optional included algebra and geometry; these subjects were compulsory only in larger towns (207). Science was considered valuable – but not valuable enough to be a staple of the Irish child’s basic education. Supposedly, whatever brief introduction to science they were given would have had to suffice for the majority, and been sufficient encouragement to those who proved predisposed to it to continue their studies at third level.⁸²

The ambiguity and debate concerning what constituted a balanced and useful education carries over into the political debates on the foundation of the DIAS. While there is awareness that science is necessary, fruitful and under-represented in education at this time, there was simultaneously a great deal of suspicion towards increasing its presence in the syllabus and in society at large, as the above-quoted *Studies* article illustrates. These conflicting viewpoints are also discussed by Myles, as will become clear in the examples from *Cruiskeen Lawn* below. The generation in power, shaped by pre-independence education and debates in the public sphere regarding the modernising discourse of science, wanted to avoid too radical a change. To them, the idea “that priests should control education appeared natural, inevitable and desirable” (Garvin 167). Later, in the 1950s, General Richard Mulcahy, surprisingly enough the Minister for Education in both Inter-Party governments (1948-51, 1954-57), expressed the dominant Irish view of Catholic social teaching with regard to education when he said that “the State approach to education in the

⁸² Third-level refers to education at college or university.

Irish Republic is one which unreservedly accepts the supernatural conception of man's nature and destiny. [...] It accepts that the foundation and crown of youth's entire training is religion" (Ireland, *Council of Education: Terms of Reference and General Regulations* 12).

However, despite claims that teaching more science and maths was actually a waste of the pious Irish child's time, the same generation was genuinely concerned with the future of the nation, which, after all, would be the inheritance of the young. Ironically, the dispensation did want more science, but not too much, lest the young become alienated from their spiritual upbringing, which along with patriotism was the only thing that truly mattered.

The problem seemed to lie in how to strike a balance between the classics, spiritual welfare and economics of the future, which were increasingly dependent on modern science. In 1960, de Valera received a letter from Professor William Bedell Stanford, who inquired whether he had ever sought comfort and wisdom in classical literature. De Valera replied that though he was not very strong on his classics, he had once been "renewed in energy and spirit" when a Latin phrase popped into his head whilst in prison. He concluded by saying that:

...[the Classics] leave a lasting impression, moulding the outlook and character of those who study them. [...]

I regret the modern overwhelming invasion of science... The classics and science together helped to make the all-round man. Science alone will, I fear, leave us lop-sided, until time, once more, brings a true balance.

(qtd. in Ferriter, *Judging Dev* 310)

De Valera was thus convinced by 1960 that science had gained the upper hand in education and he worried that the country was already lop-sided. This seems almost incredible, considering the limited measures actually taken to integrate science into school curricula. His reply also highlights that he may have believed that his own generation was more of the all-round type and that modernisation in Irish science had been achieved. Moreover, he also suggests that time, not politics, is the only thing that can truly restore balance, a digression that casts a curious light on the State's strenuous political efforts to force a balance.

It is also significant and somewhat surprising that the classics referred to by both Stanford and de Valera are strictly Greek and Roman classics, not Irish classics. By the 1960s, Irish classics were integrated in school curricula and their importance was felt to be self-evident – but in the grand scheme of things, it would seem that de Valera had inherited the Catholic Church's idea that Latin, Greek and religious knowledge were at bottom more important than Irish classics and neo-Gaelicism (Garvin 167-68). Despite acknowledging the economic value of teaching science, modern history, modern languages and the social sciences, for de Valera, the waning importance of

a solid foundation in the classics was something to be lamented. The regret he expresses at science's overwhelming presence is already anticipated in the political debates on the foundation of the DIAS between 1938 and 1940. In the following section I will consider the tone and scope of the debates before moving on to address the role DIAS eventually played in Dublin and Irish society.

A Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

The first reading of de Valera's Institute for Advanced Studies Bill took place in July 1938, just before parliamentary recess until October. Opposition to the bill, voiced by Fine Gael TDs, was mixed.⁸³ Some TDs (Members of Dáil Éireann, the principal house of national parliament) opposed it on financial grounds, others objected on educational grounds, while others preferred a personal attack.

The financial objections are fairly easy to understand. In the main, these are related to monies already being spent on educational ends.⁸⁴ Millions of pounds had recently been invested in the National universities. The Royal Irish Academy also received government money and the opposition simply did not see the point in adding yet another institute to the list they already funded. Many TDs did not understand why such an institute was needed when the universities were meant to be putting that money to good use, primarily in educating the young leaders of the future, as well as conducting research. De Valera countered this objection on the grounds that the universities simply did not have time to conduct specialised research. Research was secondary to their teaching responsibilities, and whatever research professors could do, would take much longer in the universities than in a specialised research institute. Furthermore, he argued that times had changed; knowledge had been increasing so rapidly in recent years that the universities alone could not carry the burden. An advanced institute would complement the work being done in the universities. It would also fulfil a reciprocal function in that talented graduates could continue their studies under specialist supervision in the DIAS, which in turn would provide highly skilled professors for the universities.

The educational objections are more interesting and reveal something of the state of primary and secondary education in Ireland as perceived by members of government. The most vocal opponent in the DIAS debate was General Mulcahy (FG), whose attitude to the new institute can

⁸³ Fine Gael was formed in 1933 through the combination of Cumann na nGaedheal and the Centre Party. FG is the abbreviation used to mark affiliation here.

⁸⁴ Proportionately, Ireland spent much less than England, Scotland or Northern Ireland on education (Garvin 172).

plainly be summed up in four words: “What is the point?” Mulcahy took up a large amount of Dáil time on the subject expounding this view: a) de Valera’s references to Irish mathematical giants like Hamilton were wasted on the “Pat Murphy’s” of the country; what did they care about mathematical concepts such as quaternions? b) mathematics was no longer a compulsory subject in the majority of schools so there would be no one to study mathematics or physics at third level, c) there were already enough bodies engaged in Celtic studies, another would only be superfluous, and d) agricultural science was the only science worth pursuing in Ireland for obvious reasons. James Dillon (FG) was actually quite supportive of the bill, and said he would vote in favour of it if only the school of theoretical physics were to be removed. He was thus wholly supportive of an advanced institute for Celtic studies, but thought that researching physics in Ireland was ridiculous. De Valera, however, insisted there was good reason for an institute. As he saw it, DIAS would benefit Ireland’s international reputation and the universities.

De Valera disagreed with Mulcahy and other TDs who were concerned that the DIAS would remove research from the universities, seeing the DIAS as an addition to university education. The most outstanding professors in the Institute would give public lectures at Trinity and the Dublin College of the National University. These would benefit university students and interested members of the public with sufficient expertise to follow the lectures. We will see below how Myles responded to these public lectures.

Personal attacks on de Valera’s intentions suggested his motives were entirely pretentious. As his opponents saw it, his intended school of theoretical physics (also referred to in the Dáil debates as “mathematical physics”) had been included in the bill just so he could show off his own affinity with mathematics. Frustration was also expressed at de Valera’s refusal to reveal the big names he had in mind to head the institute. Another point of friction was the last-minute introduction of the bill just before summer recess, which prevented further discussion of it until October.

In fact, a second reading of the bill was postponed until April 1940. Other business took precedence, particularly neutrality and the Economic War. This time, opposition was limited, but the wording of the bill was called into question, notably with Dillon objecting to the word “Dublin” in the name of the Institute instead of “Irish” (Dáil Debates, 17 Apr. 1940, col. 1356-57). However, after its establishment, it became clear that de Valera was not necessarily planning for it to be a distinctively Irish institute in the sense that many of his contemporaries would have expected. He thought that a “Dublin Institute” would actually be less prone to the nationalist connotations that

may have accompanied an “Irish Institute”. As for securing big names, de Valera found many were no longer available, due to the length of time that had passed since the bill’s introduction and the movement of these persons due to the war. But, in the end, the bill was passed and President Douglas Hyde signed it in June 1940. The governing board met for the first time in November and Erwin Schrödinger was officially appointed Director of the School of Theoretical Physics. Dublin’s newest institute was born.

Schrödinger Makes Waves in Dublin

Schrödinger arrived in Dublin in late 1939. De Valera had arranged temporary work for him in UCD, through the auspices of the Royal Irish Academy. The Establishment Order of the School of Theoretical Physics stipulated that DIAS professors would lecture publically at UCD and Trinity in alternating years. Schrödinger would take on that task in 1940, but his first public appearance and lecture in Ireland was given on 14 November 1939 to the Dublin University Metaphysical Society in Trinity College. Entitled “Some Thoughts on Causality,” the address drew a huge crowd. Not only philosophers, but also scientists and laymen came to listen to the man whom the *Irish Times* later described as “perhaps the most eminent physicist of our time” (“Irish Culture”). The paper Schrödinger gave dealt with the difficulty that quantum theory posed to the concept of rigid causality, or “absolute predetermination by the initial data” (“Some Thoughts”). Walter John Moore provides a plain and clear description of the themes dealt with in Schrödinger’s address, far clearer than that provided by the *Irish Times* report:

(1) the impossibility of prediction even in classical physics due to experimental uncertainties in the initial conditions, (2) the teaching of general relativity that matter is an inherent property of space and time and hence is not something predictable in space and time, (3) the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics, which introduces indeterminism into the behavior of microscopic objects. He concluded that causality is not a necessity for logical thought, but he announced this view tentatively [. . .]” (Moore 359)

The *Irish Times* report on the address added that the “sometimes alleged necessity” of causality had, according to Schrödinger, been forced on humanity by its misunderstanding of the “true nature of physics and chemistry—a misunderstanding which the physicists had actually removed a long time ago [. . .]” (“Some Thoughts”). The tentative aspect lay in Schrödinger’s introduction, when he quoted from a conversation he had had with Spanish philosopher and poet Miguel Unamuno, a man who ““could not forebear people who were all too convinced of the truth of their own convictions,”

and who considered that ‘a man who succeeded in never contradicting himself was to be strongly suspected of virtually never saying anything at all.’” (“Some Thoughts”). O’Nolan/O’Brien/Myles could not have said it better himself. His attitude towards intense belief of any kind that was not self-critical is one of suspicion and derision, and we will see shortly how this suspicious and derisive attitude works in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.⁸⁵ Schrödinger and O’Nolan both held that an open mind to all matters was essential for any kind of new insight or knowledge to be discovered. And unlike the man Unamuno could not endure because he never contradicted himself and thus said nothing at all, Myles the Erudite constantly contradicted himself and others; he always revealed meaning dialogically.⁸⁶

Schrödinger’s first Dublin presentation to the Metaphysical Society as well as his some of his later work in the DIAS provided Myles with material for *Cruiskeen Lawn*. It is from this talk that O’Nolan conceives of the idea that the scientist’s argument about the indeterminacy of initial conditions means that there is no first cause and therefore no God, and perhaps more imaginatively, that quantum mechanics actually seeks to negate any belief in God. O’Nolan seems to disagree with the theory, as we will see in the following section, but that does not prevent him from playing with the idea in *The Third Policeman* and in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

Once the DIAS was operational, Schrödinger began to give lectures to research scholars and university students on introductory wave mechanics and quantum mechanical systems. He also gave higher level seminars that “provided an introduction to research that was being performed in the School; for example, a course on Einstein’s general theory of relativity was given preparatory to an exposition of Schrödinger’s unitary field theory”(McConnell, par. 2) . Despite the difficulty of organising international colloquia during the war, a first colloquium was held in July 1942, featuring lectures by P.A.M. Dirac (Quantum Electrodynamics) and A.S. Eddington (Unification of Relativity Theory and Quantum Theory). These lectures, published by the Institute and translated into several languages, were widely available for those who were interested. Schrödinger’s 1943 series of public lectures called “What is Life?” was later turned into a book of the same name, one of his well-known works. In later years the book version was highly influential on molecular biology, which was surprising and important to physicists who had not considered that quantum

⁸⁵ The narrator in *The Third Policeman* commits a crime and receives an ironically appropriate punishment not only for his crime, but for his beliefs, which led him to commit the heinous murder of Mathers. Despite the narrator’s own inability to criticise himself or view his actions objectively, ironically, he still criticises the fictional scientist de Selby for the same fault (3P 54).

⁸⁶ The narrator of *The Third Policeman*, in contrast, is oblivious to his personal contradictions and hypocrisy, but like Unamuno’s man, is completely convinced of the truth of his perspective and ideas.

theory could be useful to biology.⁸⁷ Schrödinger also encountered resistance, mainly from Catholic leaders and opinion makers, when he tried to publish the book in Ireland. His close friend and colleague Monsignor Patrick Browne “was alarmed at the materialism implied” in its ideas (G. Jones 53). Occasional polemicist Alfred O’Rahilly was instrumental in denouncing *What is Life?* for being in direct conflict with the Church’s position on science.

Certain implications of Schrödinger and other physicists’ work on the way people perceived the world are worth considering in order to better understand how literary authors responded to the new physics. Perhaps as evidenced in the title of *Improbable Frequency*, probability, improbability and waves spoke to the public imagination. Schrödinger’s wave function formula, for instance, can describe “all aspects of observable physical reality” (Friedman and Donley 117). While it has no physical reality in itself, the wave function can make predictions about observations and provide kinds of knowledge that “are *possibilities* and their *probabilities*” as opposed to deterministic or predictive kinds of knowledge (117). Friedman and Donley claim that our language is not capable of describing the new world view necessitated by quantum theory, a world not of “unambiguous facts” but of “probabilities, lacking demonstrable causality” (117). This is one of the most significant intersections of the new physics with artistic expression in the twentieth century. It is also omnipresent in the language of *The Third Policeman*, whose narrator also faces the problem of inadequate language. Niels Bohr claimed in 1955 that we still did not have the language needed to describe indescribable phenomena that we were nonetheless able to observe. However, I think O’Brien makes significant headway in the linguistic transmission of the unthinkable and indescribable in *The Third Policeman*, despite its narrator’s claims to the contrary.

The discontinuity of space-time described by Schrödinger in his address to the Metaphysical Society is clearly another major theme of *The Third Policeman*, one which fascinated O’Nolan enough to propose that if you got rid of the idea that time actually passes, as J.W. Dunne had proposed, then you could orchestrate any number of obscure, hilarious and bizarre situations in a novel. Michel Bitbol has suggested “that Schrödinger’s ideas anticipate in part several of the interpretations of quantum theory that have developed since Schrödinger’s time, such as the many worlds and modal interpretations” (Whitaker 196). Multiple worlds and interpretations are a central organising concept in O’Nolan’s literary project. Indeed, there are ample parallels in the work of Schrödinger and O’Nolan to suggest that the latter was influenced directly by the scientist’s work.

⁸⁷ The research Schrödinger discusses in these lectures “raised the possibility of what would be called a *genetic code*, determining the nature of an individual organism” and suggested that new physical principles might be needed in addition to quantum theory in order to understand the nature of life (Whitaker 195).

However, the impact of the new physics and changes in world view brought about by science in the first three decades of the twentieth century extends far and wide and has varied and shared origins. It is more likely that O’Nolan and other authors who attempted to address the impact of science on humanity in their literary work were influenced not so much by the specific work of certain scientists like Schrödinger, Einstein or Heisenberg, but more generally derived their interest and information about science from a wider public sphere that was also heavily influenced and preoccupied with scientific themes.

“As the brother would say, Einstein’s very HARRD, but he’s very INTERESSTIN” (CL 3 Aug. 1942). This quote from *Cruiskeen Lawn* appropriately illustrates how these lectures may have been regarded by the average Dubliner, who would have been able to attend them had he so desired, and indeed, several were given twice due to enormously high attendance. Even if one did not comprehend what a quaternion was, or how quantum mechanics radically confused and inspired scientists in diverse disciplines, the implications of what was suggested or made to seem possible was certainly incredible and indeed, very INTERESSTIN’. The notion of other worlds, modal interpretations, the basic yet radical thought that what your eyes saw was not what the mind perceived are all concepts which are common features of O’Nolan’s fiction. These ideas also changed the way that people had generally perceived the world. They also posed a number of new challenges to, for example, Catholic dogma.

In the following two sections, I will show how O’Nolan, as Myles, represents at least three commonly held attitudes to science and the DIAS. Generally, these are critical attitudes. Often, they are reflections or versions of attitudes that we have already encountered, against the establishment of DIAS or a more prominent role for science in schools or industry on the basis of religious or economic objections. O’Nolan, as we will see, tests these different attitudes dialogically; he sets them up against each other, sometimes in columns of different dates, a process which enables us to see intersections and divergences within various attitudes. This provides insight into how O’Nolan criticised and contributed to a debate on the desired role of science in Ireland.

Myles the Erudite Tests Attitudes

Myles, ever the pedant, could not resist dissecting Arthur Eddington’s statement about there being less than a hundred people in the world who can discuss relativity theory intelligently and possibly only a thousand who actually understand it (see page 86-7). His deconstruction of the claim

Eddington made in a public lecture exposes three mainly negative attitudes towards science and one positive attitude. In keeping with the compartmentalised persona of Myles na Gopaleen, he dons each attitude like a different hat on different dates, or at different places in a single column. The first attitude I distinguish *what's the point?* The second is *suspicion and derision* and the third is *science is eccentric*. The positive attitude that seeps through his sarcasm and complements the negative attitudes is that of keeping an open mind.

Eddington's claim that there are very few people who really understand the radical new theory is controversial. As such, it is a good jumping-off point for Myles's humorous deconstruction. Myles's response to Eddington's statement falls into the category of the "what's the point?" attitude I described above, the one General Mulcahy exhibited in the Dáil debates on DIAS.⁸⁸ Exponents of this attitude consider more science in Ireland unnecessary and even evil in some cases. Often, this stance is supported in reference to Irish economic dependency on agriculture, an argument advanced to deny that Irish agriculture could benefit from technology that was more mechanised and thus more scientific, or, to stave off the filthy modern tide.

In Myles's estimation (of 3 Aug. 1942), this situation in fact expands the futility of scientific investigation or practice to include the absurdity of lecturing on quantum theory to an up-and-coming generation of dyscalculiacs, and the equal absurdity of having those who hold that the earth is flat lecture on gravity to twentieth-century astronomers, all of them with doctorates. In other words, he argues that it is futile to teach the incomprehensible to people not fit to comprehend it in the first place: contemporary pupils who have not been taught the fundamentals necessary to comprehend a theory even half as complex as relativity theory. All would agree, it seems, that it is pointless to teach theories that have been proven untrue or unsound to the same people who have already replaced them with more effective theories, particularly if the theory in question is that the Earth is flat. Even General Mulcahy's Pat Murphys and the Plain People of Ireland would agree with that. They may ask, however, why they should be bothered to understand something that the experts themselves profess not to grasp.

Myles also deals a blow to the aura of respectability surrounding physics and its reputation by equating it with plumbing. In fact the comparison is useful and serves to show the fundamental relevance of Einstein's theories not only to physicists but also to the average citizen. The

⁸⁸ Relativity theory was hardly new anymore at this stage, but it is important to recall that though it was first posited in 1905, it was not actually proven until the 1970s. Eddington used Einstein's theory to explain the bending of light by gravity in his observation of a 1919 eclipse. That gravity was an essential part of the general theory of relativity was confirmed by Eddington's observation.

implications of Einstein's theory of relativity could drastically change the way the average man viewed the world around him. This is brought home to the plain people in a very basic, but modestly roundabout appeal. The message, though carnivalesque and couched in a disparaging tone, is that relativity theory affects everybody, just as everybody has a need for plumbing.

The equation of plumbing with high learning can be read in at least two different ways. On one level it may seem dismissive and thus illustrative of the "what's the point?" attitude. It is as if Myles is in fact saying that we should count ourselves lucky that this controversy is taking place in the universities amongst scientists, instead of its being something so important as to impact real people's daily lives and world views, in the way that plumbers who do not understand plumbing but do it anyway would affect them. In this sense, Myles is also displaying the "science is eccentric" attitude. However, the positive attitude of keeping an open mind is also evident, and likening physics to plumbing shows that yes, there are indeed things outside our understanding that influence our lives in ways we cannot begin to understand. The "what's the point?" attitude expressed in the worry that the "well-paid savants" in the universities cannot understand Einstein's theories which will presumably change the way scientific research is conducted the world over is thus at least partly valid, although it may be a premature judgement, because these things take time. However, this reasoning overlooks the fact that the way relativity theory changed physics is comparable to the way having electricity changed the way people bathed. At stake is not the utility of science, but the circumstances in which it is useful.

For many people it is simple enough to state that they know that plumbing makes their lives easier, they understand it well enough even to take it for granted. However, they cannot say the same of physics while it is equally true, because they have yet to see the practical effects. Therefore, those who are not able to discuss time, space and matter without referring to a working knowledge of Einstein's theories are not "talking through [their] stetsons" as Myles says, but have just fallen on the wrong side of what Thomas S. Kuhn describes as a paradigm shift in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. One paradigm emerges and supplants the theories that were previously believed to be normative in a particular scientific discipline. Relativity theory emerged at the end of a crisis in physics that occurred during the late nineteenth century (Kuhn 72). Similar to the way that various memories converge onto one site or figure of memory for economy of remembrance, the Einstein theory of relativity became known by that name, not because Einstein was the only scientist working on a new theory of space-time, but because he happened to be the one who worked it out.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ While there were several people working on similar problems and theories, only the ones who stand out the most

Problems regarding absolute positions and absolute motions had been acknowledged with Newton's system of motion even in the late seventeenth century. The savants whom Myles criticises may have still believed in outmoded theories of space-time and their lectures may have been accurate according to those theories. They just still had to conform to the new paradigm, catch up with the times before they could learn to discourse on space-time in accordance with Einstein's theory of relativity.

What if we substitute Newton for Einstein in Myles's assertion that a person who attempts to talk about subjects related to gravity, space-time and matter is only talking nonsense as his so-called sense has been shown to be inaccurate? The same statement would be equally true. O'Nolan here, as Myles, wearing this particular "what's the point" attitude for the duration of this day's column, makes one point among many possible points. This particular attitude is in stark contrast with other attitudes to science and belief Myles adopts elsewhere. But when taken together, and where one attitude contradicts the other and that one yet another, I believe that it is here – between the lines, between attitudes, in other words, dialogically – that O'Nolan's general anti-epistemological project reveals itself. The meaning that emerges is closest to the open mind attitude: we simply cannot say for sure whether a theory is true, even if there is good supporting evidence, because there might be something else that is equally true. *The Dalkey Archive's* St Augustine espouses this attitude too: what was believed at a certain point in history should only be made to be accountable for itself in its own chronotope – in its own time-space. As things move between time-spaces, meaning is prone to shifts. The attitudes Myles tests in the column are examples of possible points that could be made in a possible conversation on the subject of the place of science in society.⁹⁰

This column also criticises establishments of higher learning and the state of Irish education. We have already observed how he criticised Irish university professors for not being able to explain relativity theory, much less being willing to do so: "What exactly is Einstein's theory? Why should I waste my time trying to explain? I am not paid to do so. And if [...] you think the people in the universities should try to tell you, be assured that they cannot, because they are as wise about it all

get to name a theory. Kuhn explains that those scientists who can survive a paradigm shift must catch up with the state of the art or risk no longer having a career. "[I]n the early stages of the development of any science different men [confront] the same particular phenomena, describe and interpret them in different ways" (17). Kuhn gives an example of electricians who thought that electricity was a fluid and so tried to bottle electrical fluid: "The immediate fruit of their efforts was the Leyden jar, a device which might never have been discovered by a man exploring nature casually or at random, but which was in fact independently developed by at least two investigators in the early 1740s" (17).

⁹⁰ In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty argues that variety in discourse should be a goal of all quests for knowledge in the hermeneutical view: "[h]ermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts" (318).

as yourself” (CL 3 Aug. 1942). Apart from exempting Myles from actually having to explain relativity, this part of the column is representative of the attitude of suspicion and derision regards science and higher education that was not uncommon in Ireland at the time.⁹¹ This attitude is also evident in General Mulcahy’s objections to the establishment of an Advanced Institute, mentioned above, as well as in a number of ecclesiastical articles and editorials on the subject of teaching sciences in the schools discussed above. People should be suspicious of quack doctors who claim they have a cure for disease x but are not qualified to practice medicine. But, the suspicion and derision attitude goes two ways, in some ways it is a precondition for the positive, open-minded attitude. If scientists are just talking through their hats, how could we call them to account if we do not even understand the language they use and the concepts they describe?

Another level of critique is also evident here, one that suggests people should be wary of accepting without question the wisdom of learned men. Booker’s chapter on *The Third Policeman*, “The Impossibility of Knowledge,” argues convincingly that O’Nolan’s literary oeuvre creates a textual climate that ultimately mandates the futility of epistemology, God, science or otherwise. In this column, O’Nolan obliquely admits that it is not wise to accept any scientist’s theory or point of view at face value just because we assume him to know everything about the subject he professes and teaches. This is taken further in *The Third Policeman* where O’Nolan tests multiple narratives, theories and points of view, thereby enabling the creation of more possible, but never ultimate, meanings.

The critique of Irish education becomes clear in the following paragraph of the column. Hardly the critique of mathematics instruction we might expect from a column raving about relativity theory, Myles criticises Irish language education and the general bad state of affairs in the schools at large. This all serves to point up the pettiness inherent in each negative attitude that totally denies the utility of science. Myles suggests that there is a solution to this problem of no one understanding relativity theory. He connects the fact that chess was taught in Russian primary schools to the game’s popularity there and the contemporary abundance of Russian chess masters. Myles proposes “making a start” by teaching Einstein’s theory in Irish national schools: “Make it compulsory, and have it taught through Irish. Probably we would have a lot of squealing about compulsory relativity and the side-splitting joke about children being illiterate in two languages would be altered to read ‘illiterate in four dimensions’” (3 Aug. 1942).

This oblique yet scathing attack on the method of teaching Irish in national schools ends

⁹¹Nor was it uncommon in Britain. Tom Garvin notes that the Irish mimicked the English in this respect (177).

with Myles reassuring his readers that “some time or the other,” somebody would understand relativity theory enough to “probably be able to discuss it intelligently” and who knows, maybe a committee of national school teachers would even “produce a weighty report on such a departure in education” as they had done on the issue of Irish teaching and the problems facing teachers who taught through Irish (3 Aug. 1942). Sad echoes resonate here of O’Nolan’s scepticism regarding whether anyone undergoing compulsory Irish in the schools would ever be able to speak it with any semblance of intelligence or skill.

In this way, the column ends on a pessimistic “what’s the point” note. Its main criticism turns on two issues: the inability of an apparent majority of mathematicians and physicists to explain or even comprehend relativity theory, and the issue of education for all versus education for those that can understand it when they can understand it. The “side-splitting joke” indirectly criticises the government’s efficacy at making such important and influential decisions, casting grave doubt on both their motives for wanting to set up high-level scientific research institutes such as DIAS, as well as their general reluctance to give science a useful and realistic role in education.

“the laughing stock of the world”

To explore further the attitude of suspicion and derision with regard to science, it is best to look at other *CL* columns and arguably, another Myles. The idea that Ireland deserved an Institute of Advanced Studies and a more serious presence in the scientific world because it had a history of scholarship, particularly in mathematics, has been mentioned above. This was a key motivating factor for getting DIAS off the ground and legitimating its existence.

The *Cruiskeen Lawn* column discussed in this section caused DIAS to sue the *Irish Times* for damages in April 1942. It is also an example of the suspicious and derisive attitude towards science in Ireland, if not the UK as a whole, at this time. Two points are of interest here. First of all, Myles expresses a popular view that is still relatively common today, namely, research work is a luxurious or recreational occupation and should not be considered real work. This is evident in the following *CL* excerpt: “Talking of this notorious Institute (Lord, what would I give for a chair in it, with me thousand good-lookin’ pounds a year for doing ‘work’ that most people regard as an interesting recreation)” (10 Apr. 1942).⁹²

⁹² O’Nolan earned about half that from his job in the Civil Service. He was also highly qualified to work in the School of Celtic Studies but it is doubtful he would have even considered it due to his mix of deference and disdain for the heads of that school, D. A. Binchy, Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best. See Myles’s poem “Binchy and Bergin and Best”

Second, and most importantly, Myles defames the Institute and warns his readers that it could make Ireland look ridiculous to the rest of the world. This was of course the opposite of how de Valera intended DIAS to be perceived. DIAS was supposed to make Irish science respectable (again). It was a prestige institute, one which would serve to remove any remaining possible doubts as to Ireland's modernising intentions. According to an *Irish Times* piece on the foundation of the DIAS, the institute was to serve as evidence "that [Ireland] is leaving behind at last its parochialism, its suspicions and its petty jealousies; that, instead of prattling childishly any longer about imagined slights and ill-treatments, it intends to take its entitled place as a free adult among its neighbour nations" ("Irish Culture," 4). And here was Myles, who presented himself as a bastion of intelligence and learning throughout European and Irish history alike, defaming DIAS with the following (imagined?) slight:

[...] a friend has drawn my attention to Professor O'Rahilly's recent address on 'Paladins and Patrick.'⁹³ I understand also that Professor Schroedinger has been proving lately that you cannot establish a first cause. The first fruit of this Institute therefore has been an effort to show that there are two Saint Patricks and no God. The propagation of heresy and unbelief has nothing to do with polite learning and unless we are careful this Institute of ours will make us the laughing stock of the world. (10 Apr. 1942)

Schrödinger's supposed recent attempts to prove the absence of a first cause can be traced back to his late 1939 lectures on causality and the impossibility of determining initial conditions mentioned above. Mark O'Brien's *The Irish Times: A History* claims that Myles "poked fun" at DIAS after Schrödinger's talk on "'Science and Humanism' in which he said there was no logical basis for the belief of a first cause or divine creator" (130). Myles does not specify his source, but DIAS took offence and issued a writ for libel against the *Irish Times*. This is one of a few memorable instances in which Myles was reprimanded for insulting his fellow Dubliners in the paper. In the end, the *Irish Times* settled out of court and paid about £100 in damages, and the incident ended up being less remarkable than had initially been feared. This would have come as a comfort to the editor R.M. Smyllie, who was always aware of the threat of libel that went with employing O'Nolan, particularly as his columns became more topical and his targets more high profile (M. O'Brien

about their contribution to DIAS and Celtic Studies, reprinted in *The Best of Myles* 265-67.

⁹³ Thomas F. O'Rahilly of DIAS's School of Celtic Studies published in 1942 "The two Patricks: a lecture on the history of Christianity in fifth-century Ireland." O'Rahilly argues that two distinct Christian missionaries, Palladius and Patrick, were conflated into the contemporary persona of St Patrick. *The Dalkey Archive's* Augustine is aware of "a Professor Binchy in your university outfit in Dublin" that had been putting out the story that there were two Saint Patricks since he was a boy (35). Augustine clarifies though: "Two Saint Patricks? We have four of the buggers in our place and they'd make you sick with their shamrocks and shenanigans and bullshit" (35).

130).

Despite having been told never to mention the institute again, references to DIAS and Schrödinger continued to occur in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, but this particular insult was never equalled in content or target. Other references to DIAS by Myles serve to highlight his own personal intelligence and importance, or to show that a particular problem is very complex indeed, just by association with the institute. An example of the former is found on 25 January 1950, when the column is presented as a mock news report on the development of a fictional “cosmic vapour” called Cruscalon,⁹⁴ supervised by none other than “chief medical officer, Dr. Myles na gCopaleen”. Cruscalon happens to be the solution to making the earth able to “free-wheel” in its orbit, thereby removing the need for plentiful fuel required to wage world wars. Cruscalon effectively “throws the earth into neutral” according to the good doctor, who is quoted as saying that he has “been distressed by accounts...about the high speed of modern life”(25 Jan. 1950). This, and the “failure of certain authorities [read: governments] ...to maintain the Milky Way in a manner consonant with their statutory obligations” are the inspiration and cause for Dr na gCopaleen to develop Cruscalon (25 Jan. 1950). Reported complaints about the high speed of modern life also illustrate the growing awareness of the role of science and improved industry in modernising Ireland and the world.⁹⁵ They also reflect the qualms referred to above, held by de Valera and other prominent leaders, about what seemed like the unnecessarily fast-paced nature of change in Ireland.

As a cross reference, Schrödinger is quoted as having said that the people responsible for Cruscalon in Santry (where Myles resides and has his laboratory) lack the proper technology to pursue this research. Dr na gCopaleen, confronted with this so-called Schrödinger claim, retorted ““Schrödinger is not the worst, and he certainly knows how to do the rumba!”” (25 Jan. 1950).⁹⁶ Here Schrödinger is used as a foil for Myles’s doctor persona. Such casual reference to Schrödinger illustrates that he was a well-known figure in Dublin throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, well-known enough to become a regular feature in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The immortalisation of Schrödinger and na Gopaleen together in *Improbable Frequency* also confirms the connection of the two in Irish

⁹⁴ Cruscalon also anticipates De Selby’s use of omnium in *The Dalkey Archive*; essentially it is a tool that will make it easier to wage war and ultimately destroy the world. *CL* of this date (25 Jan. 1950) also includes Dr na gCopaleen’s plans to turn the earth itself into a bomb that can be used to destroy the “aggressor planets” of the sun and moon in order to, among other goals, stimulate tourism.

⁹⁵ Myles and Smyllie disagreed with each other openly in the newspaper about the justness of the dramatic illustration in 1945 of applied atomic theory in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Until the end of his career, Myles was firmly against the use of the atom bomb and saw it as an unnecessary and racist use of technology. See, for example, *Cruiskeen Lawn* 20 Aug. 1945; 21 Aug. 1945 and 1 Sept. 1945. All three have been reprinted in *At War* 171-175.

⁹⁶ This may be an innuendo referring to Schrödinger’s well-documented reputation as a philanderer. Reports vary, but he is said to have fathered between two to four extramarital children while in Dublin, at least one of whom knew that he was their father (Moore 297-99).

cultural memory of the war years. His name functions as an umbrella term for academics, a personification of intellect, much as Einstein's name functions today. When his name is dropped, it refers not just to him but to all learned men, as illustrated in the following examples.

Myles drops Schrödinger's name to point out how complex a particular problem is on 6 March 1950, where the subject of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is Dr Klaus Fuchs, a German physicist working in Britain, who was accused (and convicted) of "illicitly giving the Soviet Union the true mathematical secrets of the atomic bomb." To illustrate Fuchs's calibre, Myles describes him as "a physicist of the primest intellect, a person [...] too burdened with his brain to be an ordinary member of the community. He shuns his human fellows and types out formulae plastered with Greek letters that are, in my solemn opinion, outside the understanding even of Dr. Erwin Schrödinger himself." Elsewhere Myles would present conundrums of his own fashioning to readers and challenge Schrödinger to figure them out.

Myles portrays Fuchs as a person of questionable sanity, referring to Fuchs's supposed admission that he suffered from "'controlled schizophrenia' (if you plaze)" (6 Mar. 1950). The single inverted commas and the bracketed judgement, combined with the implication that Fuchs must be mad to give the Soviets this information, firmly establish a picture of Fuchs as crazy. Likewise, in the *Cruscalon* column, the association of Schrödinger with the rumba, the portrayal of Dr na gCopaleen and his demise in particular, (he is reportedly "taken away by four keepers and will be out of town for forty years" after calling the moon a planet and admitting to feelings of resentment towards that "obsequious nocturnal spy" (25 Jan. 1950)) all exemplify the "scientists are eccentric" attitude. After the war and the use of the atom bomb, scientists were increasingly associated with espionage and mass-murder, and as such, also with compromised sanity. This gave way to the image of the mad scientist.

This "science is eccentric" attitude is perhaps the only one I have discussed here which also features in O'Nolan's novels. It is after all, the most fun and can be exploited in fiction more widely than the other attitudes. Taaffe points out a connection between O'Nolan's 1951 *Envoy* essay on Joyce (in which Joyce is compared to Lucifer) and the contemporary Catholic's view of modern physicists. In his *Envoy* article, "A Bash in the Tunnel," O'Nolan wrote: "Joyce said there was no God, proving this by uttering various blasphemies and obscenities and not being instantly struck dead" (*Stories and Plays*, 201-2). Taaffe explains that "[t]o the contemporary Catholic, like O'Nolan himself, the modern physicist arguably did nothing else" (84).

O'Nolan's biographer, Anthony Cronin, posits O'Nolan's Catholicism as an important

disclaimer to *The Third Policeman*, claiming that his apparently “original approach to philosophical questions involving the mystery of existence” in the novel illusory (104). Cronin sees O’Nolan’s treatment of epistemological problems relating to science and religion as a medieval Thomist’s interesting exercise in combining Catholic orthodoxy with a Manichaean view. Cronin presents O’Nolan as typical of his generation of Irish Catholics, for whom all the big questions about existence are actually clear, boiling down to salvation versus damnation. Questioning this predetermined order of things may be intellectually diverting and entertaining, but it is ultimately irrelevant (105). According to Cronin, “all secular knowledge is largely a joke” to Catholics like O’Nolan: “[a]nd 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 [...] (105).

All scientists are mad enough to place their faith in fictions, only they call them experiments and formulae. But the reincarnation of *The Third Policeman*, *The Dalkey Archive* (and the only public version of the book in O’Nolan’s lifetime), suggests that the same principle is true of any belief, including the Thomist’s. O’Nolan’s adoption of multiple attitudes to both science and religion in *Cruiskeen Lawn* also illustrate this point. By showing more than one side to the debate about whether science or religion was more right than the other, O’Nolan argues that it is best not to place too much or too little faith in any system of thought or belief.

In the nineteenth century, public debate presented science as being in direct conflict with religion, and even now, this view is still held by many conservative religious people. Contemporary physics in the early twentieth century was made to seem more human and less dogmatic by its acknowledgement that the presence of the human observer in any scientific experiment complicated the results. The admission that science could not establish a first cause or be absolutely certain about what it had to provisionally accept as fact for the advancement of science, should have made science less of a threat to religion. But at the same time, science’s self-criticism called into question the confident pronouncements of religion on the nature of life, making both essentially competing fictions. Which one you chose to believe in was a matter of choice. Booker highlights this friction well in his treatment of *The Third Policeman*. He suggests reading the novel together with some of Nietzsche’s essays, such as “On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense” which deals with the role of language in conceptualisations of all knowledge. Both to Nietzsche and O’Nolan, in anticipation of poststructuralism, all language and knowledge are self-referential, all belief is a necessary choice,

and all belief is equally prone to the same failure (Booker 46-7).

That all men are right in their own contexts and that all logic holds up within its own internal boundaries is an argument O’Nolan would make throughout his career in multiple guises. *The Third Policeman* dramatises how selling your soul to science can lead to damnation: Noman’s regard for de Selby’s theories leads him to commit a mortal sin. De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive* is still a slave to science, but deploys it, perhaps ironically, to prove that God does exist, but has made a terrible mistake. Complemented by Joyce’s statements on translation, De Selby’s experiments seem to prove that the Bible and Catholic doctrine are also self-referentially dependent on language and thus as equally prone to mistakes (mistranslations, etc.) because of the human role played in the transcription and transmission of God’s word.

O’Nolan is most eager to point out that no belief is unshakable when the utterer in question, Schrödinger, Einstein, Alfred O’Rahilly, Seán O’Faoláin, De Selby or whoever, voices too much confidence in their own assertions. O’Nolan’s critique was harshest when the utterer professed his particular claim or discipline to be sovereign in some sense, such as art, literature or science, or when a person highly qualified to make statements about one discipline overstepped his boundaries to comment on another area of study. Frequently, the latter related to the misuse of language. This is illustrated in the following example from a column dealing with Einstein’s (“Professor IstI”) criticism of Schrödinger’s approach to unified field theory. In it, Myles chides Einstein for being condescending to his lay (newspaper) audience. Einstein had remarked that laymen were wrong to think that scientific developments were “obtained from the fact of experience by gradual generalisation and abstraction” (qtd. in *FC* 97). Myles positions himself as the representative of all laymen and reads this as an insult: “The Professor would do well to reflect that all men are laymen when dismounted from their individual hobby-horses” (97).

Funnily enough, Myles refuses to dismount his language horse and demands to know what Einstein knows about language use and semantics: “what does he mean by terms like ‘truth’ and ‘the facts of experience’? We do not know and can therefore extract no meaning from his speech” (97). He then makes an important point about truth and context, by pointing out that mathematical truths are established mathematically but cannot be translated into words. Nor are they “reconcilable with either our Greek word *aletheia* or with that grim corpus of hallucination, the ‘facts of experience.’ [...] What have we of experience which is consistently and uniformly apprehended by humans and which can therefore be designated ‘fact’” (98)? Myles then makes one of his missions in life perfectly clear. As “Assistant Secretary of the World,” one of his most

important duties is to warn humans of the “danger and folly they wallow in when they seek to illumine the tenebraical caverns of their own minds with home-made torches. (Affected word ‘tenebraical’? Agreed.)” (98).

The bracketed disclaimer of “tenebraical” partly serves to protect Myles from receiving the same treatment he doles out to Einstein and other scientists. He gives the warning and in doing so warns himself, if anyone is going to point out folly in Myles it will be Myles. His own logic is his own contradiction. The “home-made” nature of the torches may suggest that only divine torches are acceptable. Clissman would likely agree with this, as it fits her interpretation of the scepticism O’Nolan’s novels display toward systems of knowledge as being indicative “of O’Brien’s belief that, after a point, we should eschew human understanding and simply place our trust in God” (Booker 59). Indeed, O’Nolan often argues that speculation about the source or meaning of life is an affront to God, as we have seen in the link Taaffe makes between O’Nolan’s estimation of Joyce as a blasphemer and the view that scientific investigation is dangerously close to heresy.

The column on Einstein’s response to Schrödinger goes on to make five “statements of fact *ex auctoritatis natura*” which all serve to demystify what he perceives as the so-called science of theoretical physics (FC 98). Furthermore, with physics debunked, the fifth point suggests that the only thing people really need is a sound spiritual education to prepare them for the only known truth, death (which can appropriately and ironically itself not be questioned, while at the same time all questions are concerned with death or with avoiding death). The five points summarised are as follows.

First, physics is not a science but “a department of speculation” working with incomplete and erroneous materials which are further complicated by human observation. Because this department “purports” to investigate “the causation of life according to rational criteria, it is sinful” (98).

Second, physicists suffer from an obsession with a so-called order of the universe. Science is only meaningful if it refers to the human race. The “forces of disorder—being energies residing in the human brain—are immensely more powerful than those of order and are such as to reduce planetary and other examples of order to inconsequence” (98). Investigating these human forces of disorder is futile (due to the human observer) and “is also manifest vanity” (99). This point anticipates the thought of hermeneutical philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, who attributes to Western philosophy since Descartes an addiction to knowledge, an obsession with an epistemological quest for “ultimate knowledge of Truth, where Truth is defined as an accurate

representation of the way things ‘really’ are in a fundamental sense” (318-19). O’Nolan dismisses such pursuits as silly on the grounds that the only truths that really matter cannot be verified anyway. This argument recurs throughout O’Nolan’s journalism and is also evident in novels such as *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*. His work also suggests that not only is it pointless to seek ultimate truths, whatever about how enjoyable and diverting it can be, but it can also be dangerous, as he argues in his next point.⁹⁷

Third, major scientific discoveries, such as the atom bomb, only expand ignorance through their myopic focus on a sole aim and failure to account for a subsequent solution, such as a defence against the atom bomb (*FC* 99). Focusing on a single aim stops the possible conversation on the existence of truth and prevents exposure to richness and variety of meaning.

Fourth, it is foolish to study one isolated aspect of the world and call it a science without “a simultaneous regard to the whole, and particularly to the gigantic abstractions known as thought, feeling, imagination, impulse. True and useful science must therefore be a synthesis of all the sciences, a thing that is generally called omniscience” (99).

Finally, omniscience is not on any of the National School curricula. Myles asks if young Irish people are expected to have the money for their education squandered on reviving Gaelic and thus, without any training in omniscience, “go forth into the world completely unequipped for...death?” (99). This final point has direct dialogical echoes of popular criticism about including more science courses in schools, such as General Mulcahy’s concerns about the pointlessness of having high-level science available in the DIAS when it was not an essential part of the Irish child’s education. It also corresponds directly with Myles’s suggestion to make relativity theory compulsory in the national schools, while reflecting fears that Irish education was not even preparing young people for their inevitable emigration.

The combined effect of the five points developed in this particular column do much to promote a pessimistic view of the benefits of science. This is amplified by the sense of frustrated desperation in the final point about children being unprepared for death, in lieu of something like a career or a future, things that education is supposed to prepare them for. However, I am not convinced by critics like Cronin or Clissman who have argued that O’Nolan’s criticism of science and philosophy demonstrate that he was “a deeply religious man” at heart, one who trusted “that the questions which are unanswerable will one day be answered completely” in eternity (Clissman 323). This view misleadingly suggests that O’Nolan’s criticism of the Church and religion’s

⁹⁷ This will be developed in the following chapter.

approach to science was purely for jest, but both Clissman and Cronin maintain that his critique of philosophy and science is in earnest. They seem to invoke the fact that he still went to mass from time to time as an excuse to claim that for O’Nolan, the Church or religion were in some way beyond serious criticism. He studied physics in school too: does that mean science is outside his critical reach? Killing his darlings or criticising that which he appreciated or loved was never outside O’Nolan’s critical or parodic province, as his treatment of the Irish language question clearly shows.

In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, O’Nolan did not confine himself to one point of view. He created an eclectic textual climate where anything could be criticised, championed or debunked. As Booker importantly points out, the textual climate created in novels like *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive* equally calls into question “any escape from the infinite regression of the epistemology of futility through an appeal to God” (59-60). Religion, he adds, “is traditionally the kind of discourse in which one seeks precisely the kind of ultimate Truth that *The Third Policeman* seems designed to mock” (60). The sceptical attitude O’Nolan’s work shows towards authority of any kind, whether in his journalism or in his fiction, does not exclude divine authority.

His literary project is concerned not with the personal beliefs of one man, but all human beliefs and their attendant idiosyncracies. Multiple points of view are expressed everywhere while points of view that are presented as uniquely authoritative and beyond criticism are attacked as presumptuous. In the following chapter we will see that the questions that *The Third Policeman* poses concern both science and religion. Neither one is singled out for extra critical attention, as if one might be less fraught with question marks than the other. Both are riddled with certain phenomenological inconsistencies which raise more questions than they answer, but this seemed to please O’Nolan. Nietzsche held that people needed to rely on myth and fictions in order to make sense of conflicting realities because if they were aware of the self-referentiality of all knowledge, they would not be able to bear it. He contended that truth was pragmatic and wrote that even the most false beliefs were indispensable to humanity: “without a constant falsification of the world...man could not live” (*Beyond* 202 pt.1. sec.4). Echoing Nietzsche, Roy Hunt writes that when “confronted by the unsettling truth of the unattainability of truth, people seek comfort and security in systems where truth is indubitable. Naturally enough O’Brien examines the systems in which people have traditionally placed their most trust: science and religion. Both, finally, are shown to be unsatisfactory refuges” (68). But, while O’Nolan’s entire project is extremely sceptical of Western epistemological systems such as science, philosophy and religion, at the same time he

argues that we should not make too big a fuss about the unsatisfactory nature of the belief systems or narratives in which we seek refuge. One fiction may be as good as the next. The trick is to realise that everything is subject to question, but not every question has an answer.

Relative Opposition to the Absolute

In his depiction of the conflict between science and religion in 1940s and 1950s Ireland, O’Nolan advances multiple points of view to underscore the belief that there can be no single and sovereign answer to all the questions that occupy us as contemplative human beings. Most of the material that has been dealt with in this chapter’s examination of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is thematically closely related to *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*, and indeed O’Nolan’s oeuvre as a whole. For that reason, I want to gesture towards a general conclusion about his overall treatment of the big epistemological and ontological questions of his time. The perspective that his work provides on these questions is not really that the final truths have already been answered and are outside our understanding (while he allows for the possibility that may very well be) but that in humanity’s quest for knowledge and understanding, if anything needs to be thrown overboard it is that additional and all-important quest: mastery of knowledge – or addiction to knowledge. But even if that were possible, O’Nolan does not seem to think it is truly desirable. It may be futile to try to establish Truth, but it certainly adds to the theoretical and intellectual richness of life.

By pitting various theories about existence against each other in his work, O’Nolan shows that the meaning which emerges from their interaction, conflict and dialogue, is that we can benefit more from questioning different theories and systems of knowledge than we can from blindly accepting any theory as ultimately sovereign.⁹⁸ *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s eclecticism is an excellent illustration of how one supposedly definitive and deterministic theory, attitude or belief could supplant another within a matter of days or weeks. Contemporaneous popular interpretations propagated by certain physicists and popularisers of the new physics such as Eddington, James Jeans and others suggested that quantum mechanics had given free will to humanity and made determinism of any kind completely redundant. But there was also another view. Bohr and Heisenberg followed the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics that “man cannot discover all characteristics of a particle [. . .] not because of any human error or ignorance but because the nature of the physical world” is indeterministic (Friedman & Donley 127). In contrast,

⁹⁸ This will be further developed in the following chapter.

Einstein, Planck, de Broglie and Schrödinger espoused a limited determinism and rejected complete indeterminism, arguing that causeless events were impossible (127).⁹⁹ Similarly, just because O’Nolan criticises epistemological systems because they cannot provide certainty does not mean that he ascribes no value to them whatsoever.

In fact, his work seems to accept the non-Copenhagen interpretation of indeterminacy and discontinuity. He portrays humanity as horribly but incontrovertibly hypocritical in its dual acknowledgement that truth cannot be satisfactorily established, either philosophically, scientifically or religiously. But at the same time, humanity is excused for its aspirations and even its pretensions to the mastery of knowledge. In the following example, O’Nolan suggests that such cannot be avoided. Myles poignantly portrayed humanity’s struggle as essentially an instance of dramatic irony: we know that death and disease are unavoidable, but still we try to delay death and cure diseases, still we seek certain answers to uncertain questions.

We speak commonly of disease, dissolution and death as though these routines were set apart from the illusory business of living [. . .] as though they were symptomatic of upheavals not part of the natural order [. . .]. This casual attitude, arising partly from a dialectical need, partly from the sense of dichotomy, of conflict, which deny it as we may, is endemic to the species, need not be too rashly deprecated. [...] [I]n the pyrrhic encounter with *ennui*, we amuse ourselves by reading the apprehensible ‘world’ only in terms of duality. (CL 2 Nov. 1944)

Whether testing various epistemological systems in a fictional context, or the validity of different attitudes and voices from the public sphere in a supposedly ephemeral newspaper column, in O’Nolan’s work, humanity is always doomed to re-enact and suffer a pyrrhic encounter with *ennui*. It is also inclined to relieve the *ennui* and the uncertainty about the point or causation of human existence with dualistic, straight answers. But perhaps humanity would profit from accepting the wisdom of Sergeant Pluck: “The first beginnings of wisdom is to ask questions but never to answer any” (*The Third Policeman* 59).¹⁰⁰ Booker points out that O’Nolan’s constant “interrogation of the boundaries between truth and fiction” is not only central to his project, but also suggests, in line with Nietzsche and later hermeneutical philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Richard Kearney,

⁹⁹ Friedman and Donley note that this is the biggest popular misconception about physics and has resulted in “unthinking transference of physical and metaphysical problems into ethics” (126). Furthermore, the Copenhagen interpretation was more popularised, despite Einstein’s protests. The authors note that “outside physics, the concept of indeterminacy has led to extreme positivist claims that metaphysics itself is dead” (127). Just because the uncertainty principle proves that “what happens is limited to the observation,” it does not mean that man cannot possess knowledge, even of the ultimate nature of things (127).

¹⁰⁰ All subsequent parenthetical references to *The Third Policeman* will employ the abbreviation *3P*.

that “a radical skepticism toward epistemology can lead, not to impoverishment, but to richness. The defamiliarizing strangeness of works like *The Third Policeman* enriches our conceptions of the world by suggesting alternative conceptions of reality that escape the limiting confines of traditional systems of knowledge”(63).¹⁰¹

Despite its humorous tendencies, a defamiliarising strangeness also runs through a great many of O’Nolan’s columns. His adoption of various attitudes to science and the limits of knowledge in *Cruiskeen Lawn* foreground and seem to favour a multiplicity of viewpoints over the limiting, if somewhat comforting, confines of certainty and mastery. *Cruiskeen Lawn* demonstrates the pitfalls of attempting to master knowledge through mockery and pedantically looking for holes in the presentation of theories and claims. The column’s varied treatment of scientific themes also demands that we recognise all epistemological systems of knowledge are equally fallible as they were created by humans; in the end we simply do not know, we can only be sceptical and choose. By juxtaposing a number of attitudes and theories in the column and by frequently interrogating them as soon as they have been advanced, whether he dismisses them as fallacy or presents them as hardened truths, O’Nolan simultaneously makes the world ten times stranger than it already was and suggests that that might not even be the half of it.

Taken as a whole, the multiple and often contradictory interpretations and attitudes to science and other subjects expressed in *Cruiskeen Lawn* are in this light a more honest and synthesised assessment of humanity’s relation to the world and experience than any epistemological or metaphysical system. In 1928, Wyndham Lewis claimed that artistic experiment, mutually necessitated and inspired by twentieth-century physics, involved “not only technical and novel combinations, but also the essentially new and particular mind that must underlie, and should even precede, the new and particular form, to make it viable” (126). Despite his tenacious conservatism in some matters, O’Nolan’s work belies his possession of a new mind in others, as is evidenced by his predilection for multiple interpretations, particularly as the multi-faceted and Janus-faced Myles of limitless experience. Like the White Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* who tells Alice that “sometimes [she has] believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,” Myles was expert at believing six times as many impossible – or possible – things within a single column, and thousands more throughout the life of *Cruiskeen Lawn* (Carroll 251).

¹⁰¹ The capacity of scepticism to enrich experience is something that I will develop in the following chapter’s discussion of *The Third Policeman*, a book that demands that we ask what we might be missing by placing too much faith in epistemological systems of knowledge that are plagued by inconsistencies and erroneous material, largely because of our own indelible presence in the processes of observation and of delineation of these systems.

Chapter 3: From Lower Down or Higher Up: Spectral, Sceptical Dialogism in The Third Policeman

The Third Policeman receives an extended mention in Wills's history of Ireland during the Second World War, *That Neutral Island*. The reason for this is the way that the landscape and setting of *The Third Policeman* seem to embody the sense of cultural stagnation commonly, and often hyperbolically, associated with Ireland during the war years. Wills describes neutral Ireland of this period as operating on a bizarre, internal logic, which the country did not share with any other European nation in the 1940s, and which it was determined to maintain at all costs, however paradoxical it proved in practice. This description of Ireland's bizarre, internal logic is highly accurate when considered in relation to this novel, which itself answers only to its own even more bizarre, internal logic.

The world depicted by the novel is recognisably rural Ireland, but it is an uncanny country apparently detached from linear time and contemporary history. In this respect, the book forms a stark contrast to other contemporary writing in Ireland, which at this time still consisted largely of dreary or romantic realism firmly set in the recent Irish past or present concerning (usually rural) life in the new state. However, Wills sees similarities between O'Nolan's work and other important mid-century writers:

For all its wackiness, *The Third Policeman's* surreal exploration of the decline of post-revolutionary fervour into greed and self-interest offered a critique of Irish society not so very different from that of the realist short-story writers, O'Faolain, O'Connor and Lavin. One of the reasons the idea of stagnation and paralysis in Irish wartime culture could take hold so easily was that it had been a staple of Irish literature for several decades – particularly of the short story. (265)

O'Nolan's version of cultural stagnation and confinement is admittedly more involved and nonsensical than say, O'Connor's, but many younger, liberal authors felt that the "cultural gloom seemed to be aggravated by the war" and this was reflected in their material, including O'Nolan's (267). Censorship certainly imposed undue thematic limitations, with pamphlets, literary work, periodicals and popular fiction from Ireland and beyond being banned for obscenity.

Later in his career, O'Nolan wanted to have his new work banned, but in the late 1930s and early 1940s he was still eager to publish and seems to have tried to develop the objectionable parts of his literary work as unobjectionably as possible, perhaps by ensuring it was convoluted enough to fly under the Censorship Board's radar. Such diversionary tactics may not have been intentional;

his letters show that he was willing if not happy to make changes at the request of worried publishers.¹⁰² He was convinced that *The Third Policeman* was straightforward and only “wacky” in its humour. To Patience Ross he wrote: “[t]his is meant to be a funny murder or mystery story and cannot be said to be a lot of highbrow guff like the last book” (24 Jan. 1940). With this novel, O’Nolan cannot be accused of “seeking higher sales ‘by pandering to the lower instincts of human nature,’” the very thing the Censorship Board claimed younger writers were doing, and incidentally, exactly what he attempted with the scatological *The Hard Life* (Wills 267).

Taaffe intriguingly suggests that the almost cliché description of boredom and stagnation in the Free State years “might itself be read as a deadpan response to once remarkable affairs, as revolution was dulled into respectability” (81). She reads *The Third Policeman* as a nonsense novel, a reading that reinforces the novel’s implicit social criticism. Taaffe follows Wim Tigges’s distinction between nonsense and the absurd, which states that in nonsense, “language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (Tigges 128). Taaffe claims that the novel’s topsy-turvy treatment of the rational world does more than simply reveal common absurdities in Irish social life, such as the exaggerated “deference to local hierarchies” we will see below (81). In addition to exposing such absurdities, nonsense also effectively exposes the logic of the world upside down even more (81).

A reading of *The Third Policeman* as a nonsense novel that responds to the time and cultural atmosphere in which it was created – one which was considered to lack sense – contributes to a better understanding of the novel. This reading also underscores that *The Third Policeman* is much more than just an amusing-Irish-literary-anomaly, as it has frequently been received by critics and readers.¹⁰³ Instead, and particularly in terms of how the novel’s uncommon reality is created and dissected by language, this book’s relationship to the time and place of its production should be considered in any critical reading. Many cultural historians and interestingly enough, perhaps fewer literary critics, have continued to see an uncanny reflection of real Ireland in the novel.¹⁰⁴ Taaffe’s description of the cultural situation in which the novel was written helps to explain why this connection is relevant:

¹⁰² Brooker suggests that this was due to O’Nolan never really having been at ease “in the role of the Artist” (*Flann O’Brien* 45). The letters about the novel show him to be “anxiously attending to his commercial prospects and relying on the judgement of his publisher, in a way that would seem most out of character in Joyce or Beckett” (45).

¹⁰³ This is in some ways a simplification of various critical points of view. Popular reception of the novel does tend to view it as an inexplicably bizarre work of fiction that cannot possibly intend to reflect reality at all. Critical assessments of the novel as metafiction are valuable (Hopper; Shea; etc) but can be complemented by serious consideration of *The Third Policeman*’s relationship to its cultural moment.

¹⁰⁴ See Wills 264-5.

At the turn of the century, a large amount of print was being devoted to the improbability of Ireland, whether as an independent nation-state or as the mystical invention of the Celtic Twilight. By the time *The Third Policeman* was written, the improbable had long since become a reality, both in political and literary terms. Its strange country may not be quite identifiable as Ireland, but it is not quite unfamiliar enough to be anything else. (81)

In my view the improbable Ireland to which O’Nolan’s generation were the heirs is elliptically criticised in *The Third Policeman* through the unravelling of the novel’s reality and “arcane laws” as both absurd and wholly logical – within themselves, as Wills has noted (265). Furthermore, I find that Taaffe’s observation that the Ireland represented in *The Third Policeman*, while not overwhelmingly identifiable as Ireland, but still not sufficiently unlike Ireland to be any other place, entirely accurate and well-put.

Perhaps unlike the comedy and settings of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Poor Mouth*, which depend heavily on the reader’s familiarity with Ireland to be enjoyed if not understood, *The Third Policeman* has something of the universal to it.¹⁰⁵ It could be anywhere, but knowing that it is Ireland makes it all the more unnerving and meaningful. By presenting an Ireland “which has already become estranged to itself,” the book foreshadows the technique of *The Poor Mouth*, in which the main character is the “wholly artificial product” of formulaic Gaelic autobiography, slavishly following the genre’s precepts for life Irish style (Taaffe 79). The self-conscious textuality of *The Third Policeman* reflects a nation that was briefly becoming aware of its own textuality and growing self-estrangement in the early 1930s through an abundance of narratives (literary and political) about Irishness. During the Emergency, Ireland had to defer a full-on confrontation of the drive to represent and statically define Irishness, only to wake up to the worse nightmare of the truly stagnated and self-consciously Irish world of *The Poor Mouth*. Taaffe points out the remarkable absence of “revivalist baggage” in *The Third Policeman*, arguing that while the “self-consciousness of *At Swim-Two-Birds* can largely be attributed to a revivalist literary culture,” which had over-thought and over-dictated the grounds on which to develop a modern Irish literature to the extent that “writing an Irish novel now meant writing an ‘Irish’ novel[.] *The Third Policeman* does

¹⁰⁵ *The Third Policeman* enjoyed a massive increase in sales after the book itself appeared for no more than three seconds in the popular US television series *Lost*. This supports the claim of *3P*’s universal appeal, if not quality. The BBC reported that “[m]ore than 15,000 copies were sold in the three weeks following the *Lost* episode airing in the US – equalling sales of the previous six years” (“*Lost* Revives Irish Novel Interest”). The newer Harper Collins editions of the book blurb it as “the story of a tender, brief, unrequited love affair between a man and his bicycle and a chilling fable of unending guilt,” itself a fantastic and intriguing description, but one which is hardly a just description of the novel.

not engage with the question to the same degree, but it carefully inserts those quotation marks” (79). In this way, the book continues O’Nolan’s reclamation of a fantastic mode of satirically-inflected narrative once a feature of early Gaelic literature, in which it “was considered a form of verbal magic with which poet-seers cursed and disabled enemies and trespassers of the law” (Lanters 3). The somewhat detached but strikingly accurate resemblances to contemporary Ireland make the novel truly uncanny. If real Ireland is supposed to be *heimlich*, *The Third Policeman*’s Ireland has quite literally been made *unheimlich*. The *unheimlich*, or uncanny as it is commonly known in English, is experienced as unsettling precisely because it seems familiar but is not. The ordinary world and its once familiar trappings have been made to appear alienating, in a surreal way that suggests it might always have been alienating and uncanny (Taaffe 80).¹⁰⁶

Wills posits both *The Third Policeman* and its initial rejection as products of the era, the latter contention being relatively common in O’Nolan criticism. Hugh Kenner writes that 1939 was “a bad year for a comic novel to get noticed,” in reference to *At Swim-Two-Bird*’s reception (*A Colder Eye* 255). The same holds for the publication of *The Third Policeman*, which was in fact “a more radical and involved metafictional fantasy” than *At Swim* had been (Hopper 47). However, while Wills acknowledges the novel’s connection to real Ireland, she states that it would wrong to interpret *The Third Policeman* as “a portrait of the stagnation caused by the war” and thus as a sort of satirical allegory of neutral Ireland (265). True, the novel is hardly an example of classical allegory, but it does exhibit several characteristics of allegorical satire. Its satire of modes of scientific reasoning is comparable in some respects to Swift’s 1726 satire of scientific and philosophical dogmatism in *Gulliver’s Travels*. *The Third Policeman* deploys allegorical imagery and conventions in its personification of legal and scientific discourse through respectively the policemen and Noman and de Selby. The novel eventually makes perfect if complicated sense on the primary level of signification while it also has further relevance on a second, elliptical and correlative level related to the reality of contemporary Ireland. Taaffe, with some hesitation, calls *The Third Policeman* “more of a fable, a parable of a soul in purgatory” (64). I disagree with the idea of the soul in purgatory, because the novel is far darker in outlook and hell is a far more likely and appropriate location. Early in the novel, the narrator does seem to have a chance at redemption, but the novel comes full circle and Noman begins his journey again, doomed to repeat it for eternity. Nonetheless, noting the absence of “obvious satire in its eerily estranged vision of rural Ireland,” Taaffe emphasises that its “bleak sense of confusion was strangely appropriate for the

¹⁰⁶ Taaffe points out that the “eeriness” of the police barracks “depends on a sense that we have not strayed very far from home” (80).

winter of 1939. [...] If *The Third Policeman* is a parable, it was a curiously timely one” (64).

Keith Booker’s reading of *The Third Policeman* as Menippean satire posits the novel as “above all else a detailed exploration (and deflation) of traditional Western epistemological systems like science, philosophy and religion” (46). Lanter’s reading is similar to Booker’s, but she explores issues of influence and the cultural climate of post-independence Ireland more thoroughly than Booker, for example by attending to the similarities between O’Nolan and Wittgenstein as regards their views on the limitations of reason and logic in relation to linguistic limitations (206-234). For Lanter, *The Third Policeman* is a book “about what cannot be written:” a “self-defeating exercise” undertaken despite its imminent failure (234). She suggests that if Brown is right to claim that *At Swim-Two-Birds* “was born from a sense ‘that the only possible life in present-day Ireland is the linguistic,’ making it ‘perhaps the most damning indictment of post-independence Ireland in the period’ then [3P], being a book about the unnameable, must literally be a book of the dead” (234).¹⁰⁷ This is particularly interesting when considered in light of how censorship further circumscribed linguistic and intellectual freedom in Emergency Ireland, in turn increasing the sense of social alienation and isolation from the wider world.

Brooker pronounces the novel itself to be “the greatest mystery of O’Nolan’s career,” hardly the orthodox mystery he described to Patience Ross (*Flann O’Brien* 45; Letter 24 Jan. 1940). “[S]omething of a trick,” the novel is superficially more conventional than *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but this is “radically undercut” by the supernatural ending (Brooker, *Flann O’Brien* 51). Brooker knowingly oversimplifies the difference between the two, stating that in *The Third Policeman*, “complexity of form [has been] replaced by complexity of content. But that distinction is never reliable, and the oddness of [3P] is indeed manifested in narrative and style, as well as in the ideas to which it gives voice” (46). Thomas Shea, on the other hand, reads the book as an attempt to reconstrue and open up the concept of normalcy under new, chiefly mechanised, conditions of language and logic. For Shea, it is an extravagant novel that transgressively “toy[s] with ‘as if’s” and explores deviations from social and linguistic norms (129). Neither Shea nor Brooker relates the novel to contemporary Ireland, their focus remains on its circularity, metafictionality and representation of selfhood.

The critical reactions to *The Third Policeman* as at least partly corresponding to contemporary Ireland’s political and historical alienation, albeit in a way that defies straightforward description, support my reading of the novel as a dark, investigative carnivalisation or celebration

¹⁰⁷ The Terence Brown reference is to “The Counter Revival: Provincialism and Censorship 1930-1965,” 93. Brown claims that O’Brien “attempted to write a language of the dead” in *The Third Policeman* (93).

of the world turned upside down.¹⁰⁸ Such was the sense of the world shared by many people upon the outbreak of the Second World War. This was also reinforced and strengthened by the popularisation and dissemination of new scientific ideas and technology, as I argued in the previous chapter. Simple truths were replaced by mind-boggling complexities and the notion of establishing certainty seemed, if not obliterated, more fraught than before. Even before the Great War, modernist writers were preoccupied by themes such as the universe in flux, life as a collection of forces, historical time as overflowing or halted, alternative modes of reality existing next to one another, and comparisons of human subjectivity to technology.¹⁰⁹ The First World War only exacerbated the sense of disruption and chaos. Tim Armstrong writes that it “upset the dynamic relationship between past, present and future which constitutes modernity: [the war locked] its protagonists in the present; rendering the past a mythic ‘before’; and displacing the hopes invested in the future” (16).

This is not the place to undertake an in-depth investigation of how Ireland’s experience of the First World War was different from the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States’ deeper entanglement. However, it must be pointed out that it put Home Rule on hold and dashed Irish hopes for achieving independence until after the end of the conflict. Civil war followed, with far-reaching consequences. With the Free State only seventeen years old by the time war was declared again in 1939, it is easy to imagine how in Ireland, as elsewhere, the advent of a new worldwide conflict made order, peace and sense seem like relics of a bygone era, and thoroughly displaced and deferred hopes for a stable, independent future.¹¹⁰ Many modernists sought to make sense of modernity’s complexity by attempting to master and understand it, some by cataloguing it, some by tearing it apart and trying to restore to it a lost order belonging to a supposedly stable past. Some rejected new scientific developments while others enthusiastically celebrated them. Tension regarding how to view and approach the trappings of modernity abounds in literary modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, but the experience of two world wars increasingly saw the balance swing more towards fearful rejection of the new and a desire to return to a fetishised, lost

¹⁰⁸ In this way, my reading differs substantially from readings which maintain that *The Third Policeman* is a love story about a man and his bicycle.

¹⁰⁹ For example, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924), D.H. Lawrence’s *The Lost Girl* (1920), Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931), the poetry of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, Mallarmé, etc. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) are further examples from Ireland which dealt with similar themes. Tom Rochford’s Turn machine in “Wandering Rocks” is a particularly suitable example of technological interpretations of subjectivity in that as soon as one turn is over another turn begins, both mechanically and figuratively.

¹¹⁰ This is not to suggest that anxiety about the future was unique to Ireland, but rather to emphasise that the anxieties of a state that had only recently achieved independence in comparison to other European countries were somewhat different.

past. In O’Nolan’s more postmodernist vision, the world never had much order to begin with and it was impossible and silly to attempt to restore a lost place and time that had never existed in the first place. His work responds to a world that Gerald Heard (1889-1971), a popular science writer, once described as having “dissolved into elegant paradox” following the early twentieth-century scientific revolution (Armstrong 121). *The Third Policeman* explores and celebrates “in a monstrous comic debauch” the conflicted complexity not so much of modern life as of modern thought.¹¹¹ The novel focuses on the unsettling impossibility of the individual making sense of anything.

In it, O’Nolan experiments with the impact of quantum mechanics and relativity theory, among others, on ideas of temporality, spatiality and matter. He foregrounds the narrator’s mental struggle to grasp the unreality of the world depicted by the novel. This reality-testing is integrated into the novel’s fantastic and uncanny hesitation. In the process, epistemological systems are satirised and O’Nolan demonstrates that all forms of human knowledge are prone to paradoxes, contradictions, structural lacunae and blind spots.

My view of O’Nolan’s work as an extended diagnosis and prognosis without a prescribed cure of what ails post-independence Ireland also fits Bakhtin’s pronouncements on the testing function of Menippean satire. In *The Third Policeman*, competing (minority) grand narratives are confronted with one another and the dramatic tension that ensues begs the pressing philosophical questions arising from the novel. Booker acknowledges that O’Nolan’s works question “in important ways fundamental and universal issues such as the relationship between truth and fiction or between reality and our linguistic representations of it. *The Third Policeman* is centrally built around the opposition between life and death, perhaps the ultimate of these ‘ultimate questions’” (146).

For Bakhtin, these ultimate questions can be adequately addressed by the fifth characteristic of menippea, embodying “an extreme philosophical universalism and a capacity to contemplate the world on a broad scale and in terms of ‘ultimate questions’” (Booker 146, Bakhtin 115). The novel’s action also takes place on different existential planes: earth, hell and purgatory. This sixth characteristic, entailing that “action of the menippea is transferred from earth to Olympus or to the netherworld” is what enables the seventh, namely, the asking of ‘ultimate questions,’ a process facilitated by “[d]ialogues at the threshold” that divides the different existential planes (Booker

¹¹¹ The phrase is from a letter written to Tim O’Keeffe on 21 September 1962 concerning *The Dalkey Archive*. As *DA* is more or less *The Third Policeman* + hagiography and global destruction, I find the phrase suitably applicable to *3P*.

146).¹¹² The most ultimate of ultimate questions posed by science, philosophy, religion is also a central question for supernatural or occult interpretations of life and death: what happens to humans after death? *The Third Policeman* explores (but does not answer) this question from a combined and eclectic vantage point of science, philosophy and several unknown or alternative possible systems of explanation.

The previous chapter looked at how Myles tested various contemporary Irish scientific discourses and reactions to the world as elegant or horrifying paradox through juxtaposing and adopting competing voices and attitudes in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The interaction of these different voices points up the existence of several disparate forces at work in determining the actual role of science in Irish society. The newspaper column and its close proximity to other articles and opinions, often concerned with similar themes, was an excellent location for O’Nolan to perform a critique of the Irish intellectual climate. Myles’s pluriform personae showed that a single view is not enough to achieve intellectual certainty, and suggested that even six or seven views cannot establish certainty either. O’Nolan’s journalism illustrates that man is ultimately forced to choose what he believes in, there is no single right or wrong answer; the column’s implicit and occasionally explicit message is to hold the balance for yourself and eschew the temptation of dualistic thinking.

I am approaching *The Third Policeman* along similar lines, because his project in this 1940/1967 novel is comparable to his journalism’s reduced conclusion. The different voices that participate in the novel’s dialogue are constantly challenging each other and vying for supremacy. In the novel as in his journalism, no single voice is able to achieve ultimate authority. Each voice and perspective is shown only to be meaningful in relation to the other voices. This dialogic meaning achieved through the eclectic interaction of these voices and interpenetration of their attendant perspectives is the only form of meaning that goes unchallenged in the novel. We must practice sceptical dialogism, defer certainty and continually seek out dialogue.

I approach the characters in *The Third Policeman* as haunted subjects in dialogue with each other. My analysis of the novel turns on the complementary notions of sceptical dialogism and loquacious ghosts and bridging the gap between radical others by making them relative others. Science and haunting are linked by the uncanny in that both contribute to the impinging awareness

¹¹² For more on O’Nolan’s novels as Menippean texts, see Booker; Bakhtin (114-19), but also Lanter’s *Unauthorized Versions: Irish Menippean Satire, 1919-1952*. Lanter places O’Nolan’s work in a larger Irish tradition and context of (Menippean) satire. *The Third Policeman* shows almost all characteristics of Menippean satire, most predominantly: juxtaposition of high and low; a mixture of styles, genres and registers; the representation of “abnormal moral and psychic states” (Bakhtin 116); “all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events [...] including manners of speech” (117); (dream) journeys and fantastical elements.

in the first half of the twentieth century that what humans thought they perceived and knew was not necessarily the whole story, an experience that it is itself spectral and otherworldly. Not knowing your relationship to reality is uncanny because it forces you to consider known and unknown explanations. O’Nolan dramatises the urgency of exploring this new uncertainty in *The Third Policeman*, in which the narrator is a deceased would-be-scholar obsessed by the work of a mad scientist. After the narrator has been murdered, a fact he fails to notice, he finds himself in the afterlife. The novel foregrounds the process by which his system of observation and analysis fails to explain the bizarre events unfolding around him in hell as everything he encounters takes on a new and disturbing meaning. While at first he marvels at each new ineffable thing, he comes to understand that nothing in his hell adds up in his solipsistic reasoning, rendering the world around him “no longer wonderful, but terrible” (3P 76).

Sceptical dialogism enacted by the Odd Trinity, de Selby Noman^{JOE}

In *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, Emmanuel Levinas describes the dual nature of scepticism: it is “le réfutable, mais aussi le revenant” (261). Colin Davis points out that even after scepticism has been dismissed, it keeps on returning; like a ghost; it survives its own death” (“The Sceptical Ghost” 1). Davis writes that “the ghost can serve as a privileged figure to approach the two central questions of scepticism: what can I know of other minds, and what can I know of the external world?” (1). Perhaps a third question could be added, a sub-question that in being put, becomes the main question, after the possibilities of the first two have been exhausted or solved, a third question that will be at the centre of a sceptical trinity: what can I know of my own mind?¹¹³ This sceptical trinity is, I will argue, the focal point of metaphysical and ontological speculation in Brian O’Nolan/Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*. The novel’s nameless narrator (referred to below as Noman) and his soul, Joe, bring another dimension to the level of investigation,¹¹⁴ namely, their interaction and dialogue occurs between (at least) two subjects in one body. In the novel, this serves to interrogate and investigate the world around them, the minds of others and Noman’s own

¹¹³ This question also overthrows any of the meaning or answers derived from the first two. If the answers to the third question are so uncertain, the first two are contingent on the third. “What can I know of my own mind?” throws the other two questions into existential disarray and pre-empts their being answered satisfactorily.

¹¹⁴ I follow critic Keith Hopper in calling the nameless narrator Noman to save space. It also recalls the name Odysseus gives to Cyclops in Hades. I am, however, aware that calling him thus may be investing too much identity in *The Third Policeman*’s narrator. Brooker aims to both “echo and diverge from [Hopper] in dubbing the figure Anon, another recognition that getting rid of names is harder than it appears” (*Flann O’Brien* 49).

Joe is with Noman for the majority of the novel and it is essential that Joe and Noman are referred to as a unit consisting of at least two separate but interlocking subjectivities.

mind. The narrator's inquisitive nature causes him to question his surroundings and the motives of those he interacts with; his murder victim, his accomplice and the three policemen inhabiting and apparently controlling the strange, hellish parish in which the novel folds up on itself like origami rather than unfolding.

Noman starts out as a positivist, but as the novel progresses, he learns to adopt a sceptical stance in order to actively interrogate the others he encounters in the novel. Upon entering the realm of the dead in the novel, though without knowing why or exactly what about this new world is different, Noman decides "in some crooked way" that there is no alternative other than to "believe what [his] eyes were looking at rather than to place [his] trust in a memory" (3P 27). Thus he abandons the mode of proceeding, which although flawed, served him in the other world, his life. The scepticism he adopts is directed at his habitual way of perceiving, understanding and remembering what he sees and experiences. He transforms his approach to experience in this way by refuting his previous stance, despite his desire to fall back on a comfortable, familiar approach and the fact that he must suppress the desire to discount the incredible things he experiences after his death, as yet unbeknownst to him. The tension and hesitation this creates issues from his uncanny experience of "the 'reality' of [his] situation [which] defies what he believes to be 'real'" and the fact that "what his eyes now witness contradicts what his memory tells him is impossible" (Hunt 66-7). With the help of his soul, Joe, he attempts to explore and understand the bizarre reality of his hell. The internal dialogism of Noman and Joe, as we will see, provides the reader with a balanced view of Noman's experience of the world and how he has arrived at such a point of view and at his ultimate, eternal destination – hell.

Knowledge in *The Third Policeman* is shown only to be meaningful when it is achieved dialogically, in interaction or conversation with an other. In the parish, thoughts and observations must be corroborated and verified by others if they are to have lasting significance or be true within the novel's structure of reality. Meaning is produced as Noman and Joe encounter and converse with the policemen MacCruiskeen and Pluck. As their world views collide, Noman's growing sense of confoundment at each encounter is worked out through Joe's interjections and advice, spoken to Noman in his head and therefore never signified to the other characters. Noman's notion of sense is turned topsy-turvy in the parish, and dialogically, the prevailing sense in the parish emerges as nonsense. It is subject only to its own internal logic, detached from the world outside the parish, that of the living, which Noman has departed.

The novel's epigraph states that life is an hallucination. Combined with the fact that Noman

is not able to tell the difference between life and death, O’Nolan seems to suggest that because humans do not even know if they are alive or what qualifies as life, then it is extremely presumptuous of them to imagine they know what the afterlife will be like. This makes the Catholic belief that existence is divided into life, death and a quadripartite or tripartite afterlife (heaven-(limbo)-purgatory-hell), seem even more audacious. O’Nolan thus suggests that in both life and death, certainty is impossible. How then, are we to know the minds of others? How are we to know things around us? How are these two pursuits possible if I do not even know myself, and what is more, I don’t even know if I am actually alive? Is it all just an index of futility?

As we have seen in the preceding chapter in the discussion of Myles’s attitudes to intellectual occupations philosophical or physical, O’Nolan’s stance is that these pursuits are inevitably meaningless fictions and diversions – but while they may be meaningless, they are necessary fictions and diversions that make the experience of this waiting room life more tolerable and pleasant. To employ an analogy, Catholic life and death can be likened to a doctor’s surgery with two rooms. The waiting room is where life is spent and played out, and being allowed entry to the consulting room equals death. Science, philosophy and the pursuit of knowledge are like the busy beads, blocks and magazines found in doctors’ waiting rooms: they are diverting, briefly amusing, but must stay where they are when it is your turn. Our main reason for playing with them is that we have nothing better to do or require a distraction from the anxiety of what awaits us on the opposite side of the door. This is to say nothing of the fact that the waiting-room diversions – and thus the pursuit of knowledge – are covered in the germs of other patients’ grubby hands. These germs of influence are not only contagious, but well-nigh impossible to destroy. It is a question of becoming resilient, a question of learning to live with contaminating spectres.

In the various columns discussed in the last chapter, Myles shows that seeking to achieve mastery of knowledge is always already doomed to failure, but is a forgivable and necessary human foible. His pronouncements on the matter are for the most part situated in the realm of the contemporary Irish public sphere, characterised in the late 1930s and early 1940s by continued debate and problems concerning how to fit anything of cultural and economic importance in a distinctly Irish mould. While he does transcend the Irish stratosphere into more lofty intellectual heights, for example on 2 November 1944 in the column about humanity’s “pyrrhic encounter with *ennui*,” his critique of the usefulness or correctness of these endeavours remains relatively abstract. But the columns dealing with specifically Irish pyrrhic encounters with *ennui* or attempts at mastery, such as the role of science in contemporary Irish society or the educational debates about the Irish

language, illustrate the particular urgency with which O’Nolan regarded the Irish situation. He distinguishes between essentially harmless attempts to master that which cannot be understood or mastered and actually harmful attempts to master or set limits on matters which could be satisfactorily arranged would they only be discussed intelligently, pragmatically and patiently, such as the value and use of science, or the position of the Irish language in the Irish economy and schools. It is one thing to have a casual attitude to the meaning of life but another to have a casual attitude to educating future generations. In the Thomist view ascribed to O’Nolan by Anthony Cronin, the former will be taken care of by God and we have no reason to worry about it, but the latter is still a grave display of irresponsibility, even if man is really just waiting for eternal life.

But where O’Nolan tended to separate the more pedestrian issues from the metaphysical, and the banal issues from the lofty in his newspaper column, they overlap in his novels; this eclecticism is also largely responsible for his comedy. Chapter 2 showed that *Cruiskeen Lawn* functioned as an ephemeral and fluctuating stage on which Myles performed various social and cultural discourses that existed in Ireland at the time. The ongoing dialogue enacted there between competing discourses on science illustrates that before privileging any single view on the value or role of science in society, or a scientific theory for that matter, it is advisable to consider other views and to make pronouncements only hermeneutically and dialogically – that is, by weighing the other views and forming an opinion from an interstitial position rooted in a grey area. O’Nolan’s contradictory and complementary contributions to this dialogue show that monologic worldviews and narratives lead nowhere (at least nowhere conclusive), and dialogism is the only way to escape the solipsistic vortex of monologic claims. *The Third Policeman* further underscores the necessity of dialogism by dramatising it.

The stylistic and formal limitations of the newspaper column are exploited to their fullest if the topic is limited to a single unified idea. Likewise, the number of words that can be spent on it is also limited. While the newspaper is already formally dialogic and O’Nolan exploited this directly, the novel is better suited to this type of epistemological caprice. This is supported by Bakhtin’s view of the novel as the site par excellence where various discourses belonging to a culture interpenetrate and circulate. Myles’s self-contradictions in *Cruiskeen Lawn* were part of the joke and the fluctuating Mylesian persona, which was itself consistently (mock-)erudite and convincing. Blatantly contradictory points of view tended to be separated from each other temporally, by days, weeks, months and even years. Flann O’Brien’s novels, in contrast to Myles’s columns, are distinguished by the consistency of his characters’ inconsistency of argument and point of view.

These unreliable narrators are constantly erecting signposts for the reader to mark such inconsistencies.¹¹⁵ Together under one roof in *The Third Policeman*, the dialogues play out competing points of view similar to the cumulative effect of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

A Spectral Allegory?

In addition to considering this a dark novel about the world turned upside down, I interpret *The Third Policeman* as novelistic and metaphorical exploratory surgery into some of the complexities at stake, not only in determining the State's desired role for science in Irish culture in the 1940s, but also in shaping the modernist subject's position to the pursuit of knowledge and to epistemology. Both *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Third Policeman* present science and its perceived value to society as a worthwhile and entertaining pursuit – but one which must be complemented by an ethical and moral dimension in order for it not to be privileged too highly or solely as the only point of human existence. Science is shown to be a valuable component of human existence only if it maintains contact with the moral-ethical dimension by being open to other theories or discourses. There is an important difference between the novel's critique of science and attempts at mastery and the correlative, cumulative critique of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Despite certain contradictions in the novel, *The Third Policeman* is able to offset the more philistine aspects of *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s critique with an in-depth demonstration of how scientific rationalism can be complemented by mindful ethics and scepticism, and vice versa.

Without truly being an allegory, *The Third Policeman* enacts the complexities and problems that arise when different systems of knowledge interact, often conflictually, but sometimes complementarily. But, as I have said above, the novel exhibits characteristics of allegorical satire and it is worth while to consider it in its social and cultural context and thus to entertain Taaffe's

¹¹⁵ Noman signposts his own fallibility in his description of how he started his de Selby-motivated life of crime, namely, by stealing (his first theft) one of de Selby's books from his boarding school.

The book was a first edition of *Golden Hours* with the two last pages missing. By the time I was nineteen and had reached the end of my education I knew that the book was valuable and that in keeping it I was stealing it. Nevertheless I packed it in my bag without a qualm and would probably do the same if I had my time again.

(9)

Here he indirectly admits that the last two pages may have contained information which might have caused him to act differently, had he possessed all the facts. He thus acknowledges a gap in his understanding of *Golden Hours*, and shows some unscientific tendencies in his fragmented reading of de Selby. At the same time, his readiness to repeat the theft, despite knowing the consequences, shows that it is not science or the scientist de Selby that prompted his crime, but his own misguided choice and desire to master knowledge, even incompletely.

tentative claim that *The Third Policeman* is at least in some ways a “curiously timely” parable (64). For this reason, I approach it as a site of cultural remembrance concerning Ireland in the late 1930s and early 1940s, even if it is highly disjointed from the period in which it was produced (even more so because it was not published until after its author’s death). I investigate the extent to which the novel reflects some of the real complexities of Irish life at the beginning of the 1940s, such as the paradoxical demands of local government and authorities, and the alienation from the wider world that resulted partially as the result of strict censorship. My analysis of the novel focuses on its loquacious ghosts by analysing aspects of dialogue in relation to haunting as a (post)modernist literary aesthetic. I take all of the characters appearing after the first chapter in the novel as spectres because of the novel’s setting in the afterlife, most convincingly and commonly designated by critics as hell. Because the narrator and the reader do not realise that the novel’s events have been unfolding after his death until late in the novel, the narrator can be read as a haunted subject who both confronts and is confronted by spectres. Moreover, Noman’s experience of these different modes of haunting, encountering spectres like Mathers and appearing as a spectre to his accomplice, Divney, means that he is both haunter and “hauntee” – at once the haunted subject and the ghost that haunts.

The loquaciousness of these ghosts is striking when compared to more conventional ghost stories of the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as those of Sheridan LeFanu or Henry James. Traditional ghost stories are populated by window-rapping, table-tapping ghosts who rarely speak at all, much less engage in a dialogue with the living.¹¹⁶ The ghostly characters or presences in (Irish) gothic fiction of this period tended to manifest themselves as vampiric colonisers or colonial subjects, respectively sucking the life out of or parasitically living off the colonial other.¹¹⁷ Spectres also appeared as conniving folkloric tricksters such as fairies, banshees or imps. In contrast, the ghosts of *The Third Policeman* inhabit a setting which looks exactly like the real world. They engage in dialogue with each other and the new arrivals or visitors to the parish as if alive. With a few

¹¹⁶ Silent ghosts tend to represent and reintroduce to the present moment something emblematic of their past (the period of their lived existence that they are now both severed from and connected to). They are indicative of a particular sense of a particular history, one which is challenged by their disjointed, anachronistic presence in the haunted present. Their presence speaks so that they do not have to. What they have to say is said purely through their symbolic presence.

Vocal or loquacious ghosts represent a skewed and fragmented sense of history. What they represent is not immediately clear and cannot be inferred from symbols. Appearances can be deceiving. This is the visor effect, the name that Derrida derives from King Hamlet’s visor to describe the strange phenomenon that the very thing that enables us to identify a ghost as such also conceals its identity (*SM* 6-7). Although it could be anything or anyone, and it could lie about its identity – the ghost must speak and the haunted subject must listen to establish the ghost’s identity and desideratum.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Luke Gibbons’s *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture*. Galway: Arlen House, 2004.

exceptions, there are no outward traits about this particular parish (hell) to distinguish it from the Irish countryside. The novel's hellish setting, populated by ghosts, is as rationally modern as the world it is a departure from.

Most popular ghost stories present the ghost as revenant with a message to relay to a living subject. Once this is done, the ghost can go away for good, and the proper order that was threatened by the ghost in the first place is restored. As we will see below, in this way and others, despite the unconventionality of the message the novel's dead have to give to the living, the novel fits the requirements of a ghost story, albeit a very unorthodox one which plays with and inverts several of its conventions. Viewed in this way, *The Third Policeman* is a postmodern ghost story or epistemological thriller in which order cannot be restored in the traditional sense because it was never there in the first place. Order is ousted for a precarious balance, it shifts and compensates as it responds to pressure and changing weight. It is not so much unhinged as it has no need for hinges; it rests like a red and white candy-striped disc on a fixed point. The disc stays on it, but is constantly shifting, making it appear as though it might spiral out of control or stop altogether. It spins best and fastest when the "hermeneutic imperative of a plurality of interpretations" and dialogue are maintained, when it slows down and the individual stripes become visible, order and understanding are threatened and the threat can only be diminished through a return to the hermeneutic, dialogic imperative (Kearney, *SGM* 82).

Noman as Haunted Subject

Whatever their form, ghosts are signifiers of a radical alterity. Where there are ghosts, there is controversy, ambiguity and uncertainty. In the words of Bianca Del Villano, "the ghost opens a space of interrogation. In this space, the spectre reveals the complex and controversial nature of cultural and historical manifestations, reflecting or reacting to the dynamics of power..." (14). However, while at first ghosts appear as radically other, radical alterity is not insurmountable. It can be made relative by engaging with or responding to a ghost (or an other) – the radical other is made relational through an attempt to relate, to understand how the other is different and like the self or the same. The definition of "other" that I employ here follows Richard Kearney's use of the term in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (2003).¹¹⁸ Others are only other in relation to the same; the other is both a part of what is and what is beyond a known order of being, because being defines

¹¹⁸ All subsequent parenthetical references to *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* will use the abbreviated form *SGM*. Kearney's definition of other derives from the interrogation of otherness by the Eleatic stranger in Plato's *The Sophist*.

itself in relation to what is otherwise than being (15). Self and other cannot be completely separated from one another because this would preclude not only speaking about the other, describing it, but would also preclude our ability to speak of ourselves and to identify or discern the other as such.

One of the aims of Kearney's *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* is to reintroduce the other onto the scene of philosophical understanding in light of deconstructionist, psychoanalytical and hermeneutical explorations of the relation between self and other. These three readings of the self-other relation all emphasise the "unavoidable conflict of interpretations" (82). Kearney argues for a diacritical hermeneutics that will "make us more hospitable to strangers, gods and monsters without succumbing to the mystique of madness," without demonising the other while becoming more mindful of it (18). Kearney's conception of ghosts is similar in many ways to Derrida's but differs in at least one important way, namely, Kearney does not argue for unconditional hospitality to ghosts or others as Derrida does. Instead, he claims we must learn to differentiate between others who deserve hospitality and others who seek to harm.¹¹⁹ Of strangers, gods and monsters, Kearney states that most of them, "along with various ghosts, phantoms and doubles who bear a family resemblance – are, deep down, tokens of fracture within the human psyche" (4). Understood in this way, they are representative of how humans are "split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other. And they remind us that we have a choice: (a) to try and understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness, or (b) to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders" (4). According to Kearney, we tend more towards (b) and scapegoat and demonise the other in order to turn blind eyes and deaf ears to our own alterity and the other within. In *The Third Policeman*, Noman attempts to make sense of his surroundings and the others inhabiting the strange parish. He does so by coming to recognise the other within himself and the others he encounters as other selves. Finally, though it is fleeting, he achieves (a), but not without first refusing to recognise them as others and trying to obviate any discernible difference between himself and them.

Ghosts are the others of those they haunt, the haunted subject. However, at first glance, the ghostly characters of *The Third Policeman* are not immediately discernible as ghosts in any orthodox or obvious sense. Their appearance and presence do not initially seem to differ from the appearance and presence of the living characters in the first chapter. Apart from the dead Mathers's bandages and Noman's uneasy acknowledgement that he has just killed him, the novel does not highlight any physical markers or other textual insinuations that the other inhabitants of the parish are not

¹¹⁹ If we were to practice unconditional hospitality, despite the vast diversity in culturally specific interpretations of hospitality, we would thus be obliged to invite even vampires into our homes.

ordinary, living people. The novel's characters are made up of a host of others: one-legged men, sensitive and industrious policemen, a soul, and the ultimate other, dead men. The extent of their alterity is only revealed much later. But despite not knowing that he is dead (indeed this lack of knowledge is part of his ghostliness), Noman is the encountering and thus haunted subject for most of the novel.¹²⁰ The reader experiences the uncanny through Noman because it is he who narrates the story and conveys the sense of prolonged hesitation throughout the novel. Is this really happening to him? Is he dreaming? Is he in a different world? The unnerving and darkly existential, in fact quite Beckettian questions the reader is forced to ask are also Noman's questions. Reader and narrator share doubt and wonder.

A clearly defined line between the living and the dead is only present in the first and last chapters of *The Third Policeman*. However, such a distinction is scarcely significant in terms of this novel's temporality or the degrees of pastness it depicts. The novel's ghosts are not figures of an earlier, far different and antiquated order which reigned supreme in the past. *The Third Policeman's* ghosts, like several other ghosts in Irish fiction of the early to mid-twentieth-century, manifest themselves in what Fred Botting describes as the third order of spectrality.¹²¹ This third order is typical of the drastic change in world view brought about by scientific discovery and development in the early twentieth-century. According to Botting, the third order of spectrality "developed alongside modernity's faith in scientific empiricism and reason: its ghosts point to the absence of any secure reality, identifying spectrality with psychological, delusional, hallucinatory effects of disordered consciousness" (6). *The Third Policeman's* ghosts fall into this category, especially as the novel is concerned with the limits of scientific empiricism and reason. Technological and scientific innovation caused literary modernism's ghosts to appear less and less as floating, hallucinatory apparitions, and more and more as technological reproductions, spin-offs or by-products of the new age's technology. In the new world view, technology appears uncanny and impossible, despite the presence of proof that can be provided to explain its apparent mysteries.

This novel, like O'Nolan's entire literary project, underscores the absence of any secure reality. In fact, redolent of Erwin Schrödinger's claims about the impossibility of establishing a first

¹²⁰ Divney in the final chapter is also a haunted subject in the most literal sense. Noman appears to him and scares him to death, at which point he joins Noman on the road to/in eternity.

¹²¹ Further examples from Irish Modernism of instances of the third order of spectrality include the apparition of Leopold Bloom's dead son Rudy in the "Circe" episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (Churchyard Clay) (1948), a novel about a woman who has recently died and been reunited in the graveyard with her deceased sister and other dead. Recent above-ground history is relayed to the longer-dead and conversations and old gripes continue to persist among the dead, illustrating the continuation of consciousness and petty interests into the afterlife.

cause, *The Third Policeman* seems to suggest that the only secure reality that could ever exist would be confined to the assertion that there can be no secure reality. Within the limits of the prevailing logic in the parish, Policeman Pluck's, "everything is knowable and nothing makes sense – if a sentence can be logically executed then so can a prisoner" (Taaffe 66). Many of the novel's uncanny effects are directly related to its narrator's doubts appertaining to whether what he sees or experiences is in fact real in an observable, empirical sense or if they are simply delusions, psychological aberrations, hallucinations or something else entirely new and different. Asking whether Noman's fantastic and uncanny experiences are *merely* the effects of a disordered consciousness brought on by the complex experience of modernity, also asks if they might be something more supernatural. This in turn introduces the possibility of something beyond the limits of experience and known reality, it reveals tension between "credulity and irony towards supernatural sources of authority," a tension which Colin Davis attributes to modern ghost stories (*Haunted Subjects* 72). The conflict between these interpretative strategies facilitates the imagination of concordant realities, which without a certain fantastic or spectral quality, would otherwise be precluded from Noman's experience and world view.¹²² By acknowledging this friction between credulity and irony, Noman learns to accept inexplicability as a valid possibility.

In his "The Four Orders of Spectrality," Botting writes that "[t]he Enlightenment disposed of ghosts and supernatural beings" (1). Actually, it was supposed to dispose of them, but was not thorough enough. Declaring them disposed of in fact invites them back, and this bold declaration is one of the key motivators for Botting to even attempt a categorisation of four orders of spectrality. Like Levinas's description of scepticism as both the refutation and the revenant, as soon as the Enlightenment declares there is no need to be sceptical about whether ghosts exist because it has reasoned them away, the question arises of whether we should be so sure that science has really done away with spectres. With some irony, Botting adds that "reason and empiricism introduced a scientific order, condemning spirits and spectres to a bygone barbaric age of superstitious credulity" (1). The appearance of ghosts after they have supposedly been banished by scientific reason is somehow more disturbing. Kearney contends that the Enlightenment attempt to dismiss monsters and ghosts as products of the (disordered) unconscious arguably made them more terrifying: "[m]onsters did not go away. They merely changed their habitation and their name and returned with a vengeance. The Shadow struck back" (117). Ghosts and shades invaded the unconscious. If they appeared, they always unsettled the haunted subject, who was no longer supposed to believe that

¹²² Belonging as it does to a fantastic mode of literature, the ghost story also "serves [...] as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and most important, testing it (Bakhtin 114).

spirits walked the earth, much less be afraid of them. Prior to the Enlightenment, supernatural beings resided in “preset moulds in ancient religion and cosmic hierarch[ies],” which meant that you knew what to expect of them and what they represented (118). Once freed from these moulds, “the monsters of modernity take on a heightened sense of unpredictability. *In an age of secular Reason, unreason appears all the more disturbing* [emphasis added]” (118). This also explains to some extent the conflating link between scientific mysteries and occult or supernatural mysteries.

By parodying and questioning faith in any source of authority (particularly intellectual), *The Third Policeman* re-mystifies what had been wholly demystified for its narrator, a scientific rationalist *par excellence*. His founding presumption is positivist; he believes what he can see, test and falsify. He changes though, and the spectral awakens him to scepticism and the attendant awareness that by having assumed he could make sense of the world monologically, he may have been misleading himself and thus prevented himself access to a richer world of possibilities, unknowns and imponderables.

A brief word on the uncanny is required before continuing. An approximate definition of the uncanny derived from Freud’s “The Uncanny” (1919) is that it can arise when (a) “repressed infantile complexes [...] [are] revived by some impression” which seems familiar, or (b) “when primitive beliefs which have [supposedly] been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (248-9). It should not come as a surprise that the uncanny is difficult to define. Freud’s description of uncanny experiences and effects, which he saw as qualities of feeling, gives us a better sense of what the uncanny is though. Freud tended to view the uncanny as individual psychological pathology, but I think it is more useful here to consider the uncanny and haunting as a social and cultural phenomena. Sociologist Avery Gordon’s reading of Freud’s “The Uncanny” focuses on the experience of the uncanny, which she describes as “usually frightening” experiences arising from a person’s “doubts [about] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” (Gordon 50; Freud 226). In her description of a number of lessons derived from “The Uncanny,” Gordon presents a social reading of the concept of the uncanny, which I believe can be helpful in articulating the social uncanny in this novel.

Freud claims that “[a]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on” (244). He shows that the so-called primitive beliefs that spirits of the dead walked the earth and that certain people or things had magical powers, continue to exist despite his

claim that they have been surmounted (240). Feeling as if your house has ghosts in it following an uncanny experience, or feeling homesick is not actually what it seems – it is not just intellectual uncertainty regarding “a new or foreign reality you have not mastered yet” (Freud 221; Gordon 51). Instead, it is the return of the repressed which has “transmuted into an unsettling specter” and according to Gordon, this important distinction entails being haunted “by something we have been involved in, even if they appear foreign, alien, far away, doubly other” (51). This element of the social uncanny in haunting is responsible for most of the spectrality in *The Third Policeman*, and does much to explain why Noman finds this new realm so familiar to his own world, yet so alien.

Gordon points out that Freud struggled to maintain his distinction between uncanny experiences issuing from reactivated infantile complexes and those that arise when something we thought had been explained away or proven false turns out to be true turns on the issue of reality-testing (53). Reality-testing differs in psychic life and real life, because in the former, the question of material reality is absent. But Freud was at pains to describe the uncanny issuing from the persistence of primitive belief, and while he tried to subsume this second type of uncanny into the first type of repressed infantile complexes, he remained troubled by his inability to reduce all uncanniness to “the acting out an individual’s psychic state,” perhaps explaining why he found the second type occurred more in literature than in real life (52). Freud actually considered literature a more suitable province for exploring the uncanny than real life, because “it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life” (249).¹²³ However, he was not entirely at ease with treating an imagined occurrence as incontrovertibly real and so tried to explain it away like a natural scientist.

Gordon provides an alternative reading of the uncanny and offers the fruitful suggestion that Freud could have substituted ‘social’ for ‘primitive’ or ‘archaic:’

The social is ultimately what the uncanny is about: being haunted in the *world of common reality*. To be haunted is not a contest between animism and a discrediting reality test, nor a contest between the unconscious and the conscious faculties. It is an enhanced encounter in a disenchanted world between familiarity and strangeness. The uncanny is the return, in psychoanalytic terms, of what the concept of the unconscious represses: the reality of being haunted by worldly contacts. (54-5)

I consider this a far more captivating interpretation of what it means to have uncanny experiences or to be haunted, one which I do not think Freud could have expressed in 1919 when he first described

¹²³ Hélène Cixous has written extensively on the possible applications of Freud’s theory of the uncanny in literature. See her “Fiction and its Phantoms” 525-48.

the uncanny, because the concept required a longer gestation and has done well to be expanded by other, later critics and thinkers. Furthermore, the lasting trauma of the First World War also caused Freud to rethink his two-category uncanny as a manifestation of individual pathology and accept that not everything could be reduced to the psyche.

Noman's haunting and hauntedness is social before it is individual. Only through contact with others is he able to come to terms with the unreal reality of the parish and his death, with the help of another spectral being, his soul Joe. Joe alerts him to the sceptical perspective and to the awareness that, in dealing with a (spectral) other, "what is vital is to remain open to an encounter with the unstable, unassimilated spectre because it is through such an encounter that something previously unheard of might occur" (Davis, *Haunted Subjects* 84).

Taaffe notes that "[i]n the winter of 1939, as neutral Ireland deliberately turned away from 'the threatened disintegration of the universe', O'Nolan created something oddly similar to Ireland's 'self-contained otherworld' in which to stage a disintegration of the known world" (66).¹²⁴ At the centre of *The Third Policeman's* odd trinity of subjectivity, consisting of de Selby, Noman and Joe, Noman is the main haunted subject who encounters and negotiates the spectrality in the novel. By considering a number of Noman's dialogues with other characters and spectral beings, I hope to show how certain ghosts in this novel function as signifiers of alterity and mediators of change, very much in response to the 'threatened disintegration of the universe'. This reading of the novel posits it as an allegorically-inflected warning of what Ireland may be becoming through willing isolation from the rest of the world, cut off by wartime censorship and neutrality. The estranged realm and characters depicted in the novel can be likened to neutral Ireland.

The potential for change that the novel's ghosts mark and seek to mediate reflect some of the real life changes and options that 1940s Ireland must entertain before it can comfortably enter into modernity proper. An opening of eyes is what must be achieved, the novel suggests. Just as Noman achieves brief understanding dialogically, the Irish nation can only achieve modernity in dialogue and in conjunction with its others. Because he forgets what he has learnt and reverts to his earlier solipsist ways before repeating the process, a dark warning seems to underlie Noman's circular metamorphosis; start a dialogue now and do not hide in isolation because it might be too late too soon. *The Third Policeman* is an illustration of what Derrida calls learning to live "with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without

¹²⁴ The phrase is from a letter to Patience Ross, in which O'Nolan wrote that he had started the story of *The Third Policeman* in August 1938 but owing to "the threatened disintegration of the universe [he could not] see any use in this writing at the moment" (10 Oct. 1939).

commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise and [more justly]. But *with them*” (*SM* xviii). The interaction and dialogue of the fantastic encounters in the novel highlight an excess of untapped possibilities. Instead of trying to restore a threatened order and exorcise its ghosts, *The Third Policeman* allows them to sit down together and figure out – dialogically and hermeneutically – how to live together, better, more justly, and as peacefully as possible in the haunted house of Irish modernity.

The Spirit Works: de Selby in Noman

It is for de Selby that the narrator commits both his “first serious sin” (stealing de Selby’s *Golden Hours* from school) and his “greatest sin” (the murder of Mathers) (*3P* 9). The deep connection that Noman feels with the savant de Selby is illustrated in his realisation “that if my name was to be remembered, it would be remembered with de Selby’s” (10). De Selby is the source of many of Noman’s impulses and in this way can be likened to his id. He motivates his crimes and gives meaning to his life in this way and others, such as defining his identity as a scholar. Although a later version of de Selby would appear in *The Dalkey Archive* as a key character, in *The Third Policeman* he is not a character in the traditional sense, but he is present throughout, particularly in the novel’s footnotes. He is present as a spirit, his spirit as configured by Noman’s personal experience of his work and thought, and it is with the spirit of de Selby that Noman converses. Here, spirit is understood in the sense that Derrida derives from Paul Valéry’s “La Crise de l’esprit:

[T]he European Hamlet looks at thousands of spectres. [...] His ghosts are all the objects of our controversies; his remorse is all the titles of our glory....If he seizes a skull, it is an illustrious skull—”Whose was it?”—This one was *Lionardo*....And this other one was *Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit*....Hamlet does not know what to do with all these skulls. But if he abandons them! [...] Will he cease to be himself? (qtd. in *SM* 5)¹²⁵

Thus *de Selby genuit Noman*, he gives life to Noman by giving purpose to his life in the sense that Noman appropriates de Selby and what he symbolises for that means. Metaphorically, Noman’s skull contains within it the skulls of those who came before him and who have proved important, more so than Noman’s parents for example, in shaping his identity. Like Hamlet, if Noman abandons de Selby’s skull, he will no longer be the same. This is what I call the notion of skulls within skulls: knowledge of the past and the personalities and people who lived in the past continues to exist,

¹²⁵ See Valéry 993. In the essay “La Crise de l’esprit,” Valéry depicts the genealogical line of “ghosts chained to ghosts” in relation to *Hamlet* (*SM* 5).

albeit in a newly interpreted and derivative state, in the skulls of the present. Knowledge of the world and traces thereof are communicated and passed on through inheritance – books, oral histories, and teaching. The contents of one skull are inherited by another skull in a later generation, and so on and so forth, like the Laughing Cow into infinite (but fragmented) regress. De Selby's influence and spirit elicited Noman's individuality. Without him, Noman's life would have been subject to different contingencies.

Footnotes in the novel discuss the work of de Selby and his critics' appraisal thereof, giving the reader insight into the skull Noman so admires. Early in the novel, de Selby is discussed in the main narrative, but his presence is increasingly relegated to footnotes. The footnotes provide metacommentary on the main narrative. The de Selby passages in the main narrative, but especially those in the footnotes, provide new insight into Noman's character and reveal his process of reasoning and subsequent interpretation. Let us first consider an example of de Selby's presence in the main narrative, in Chapter 4, by looking at Joe's intervention into Noman's communication with the spirit of de Selby and how he relates to him.

As an unreliable narrator, Noman is particularly prone to applying double standards without realising that he is in fact refuting his own beliefs or logic. His ability to discern failed logic or delusions in others but not in himself is nicely demonstrated in Chapter 4 after Noman has described de Selby's claim to have travelled from Bath to Folkestone without having left his room. Noman states contentedly that "[it] is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena" (3P 54). However, in the following paragraph, he unwittingly mirrors de Selby by succumbing to the same deluded belief in his own fantastic explanation of his journey to the police-barracks

Of my own journey to the police-barracks I need only say that it was no hallucination. The heat of the sun played incontrovertibly on every inch of me, the hardness of the road was uncompromising and the country changed slowly but surely as I made my way through it. [...] It was still early morning, perhaps. If I had not lost my American gold watch it would be possible for me to tell the time.

*You have no American gold watch. (54)*¹²⁶

Noman might be hallucinating, or he might be dead. But O'Nolan suggests that there might not be a difference. For all we know, death, or life for that matter, might be an hallucination. The bracketed

¹²⁶ My underlined emphasis. Note the indubitable adjectives and style, leaving no room whatsoever for doubt in Noman's perception of the situation.

qualification of de Selby's objections to scientific demonstration of the sequence of day and night refers to his theory that day and night are hallucinations resulting from black air accretions instead of the distinct result of the earth's rotation. The theory is presented as the novel's epigraph:

Human existence being an hallucination containing in itself the secondary hallucinations of day and night (the latter an insanitary condition of the atmosphere due to accretions of black air) it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death. - de Selby¹²⁷

The complementary categorisation of day and night and life and death as hallucinations can be extended to claim that if night is no more than the imagined result of the material black air, then death may just be the result of the failure of imagination to sustain itself indefinitely.¹²⁸ Whereas de Selby's delusional account of his trip to Folkestone is predicated on his questioning of obvious reality, whatever that may be, Noman fails to question what strikes him as the obvious reality of his journey to the barracks. He even fails to realise that he has started to believe his own lie about the gold watch – a story he invented so as not to have to explain to the policemen that he is really looking for a stolen black box. Even though Joe points out this aspect of his fantasy, Noman seems not to hear it, he does not pause to reflect, but instead continues along the increasingly extraordinary road. De Selby and Noman both make mistakes, but through different approaches to observing an 'obvious reality'. Fallibility is shown to be an equally possible outcome of questioning or not questioning what one sees or experiences. Both approaches can be flawed and both give good reason to adopt a more sceptical, less self-assured investigative stance.

Chapter 8 of *The Third Policeman* provides an example of how de Selby footnotes parallel and give a metacommentary on the main narrative. Chapter 7 pays particular attention to issues of veracity and how, and at what point, one knows whether a thing is true or exists, when it has a full and incontrovertible presence. The narrator has been condemned to hang for murdering Mathers, only this second murder was not committed by him. The policemen explain that without a name, Noman does not exist in the eyes of the law, thus, according to Sergeant Pluck, "Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true. [...] For that reason alone we can take you and hang the

¹²⁷ Onno Kusters has pointed out to me that it is quite extraordinary to have a character provide an epigraph to the novel in which he appears. I think this in fact serves to invest de Selby with more authority. It makes him appear familiar and gives the impression that his authority extends beyond the fictional confines of the novel. This particular de Selby idea is also clearly modelled, like other de Selbian ideas, on theories of Des Esseintes in Huysman's *À rebours* (1884). Des Esseintes thought travel a waste of time and held that "without stirring out of Paris it is possible to obtain the health-giving impression of sea-bathing'—by immersing oneself in a bath of salt water, smelling a twist of rope, 'consulting a life-like photograph of the casino and zealously reading the *Guide Joanne* describing the beauties of the seaside resort'" (qtd. in Lanthers 219).

¹²⁸ Samuel Beckett would approve: *Imagination morte, imaginez.*

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 [...]” (106). According to this logic, his death would only be a proper death if he had an identity which was legally recognised, for which he requires a name. A name that he claims as his own and one which is reciprocally given to him and recognised by others as belonging to him proper, which is to say that a tree that falls in the forest and is not heard does not actually fall. In *The Third Policeman*, “[l]egal fictions are allowed a literal reality,” so without a legal personality “[Noman] can easily be written out of existence” (Taaffe 87). This same concept extends to objects which cannot be described in known words, such as the inventions of MacCruiskeen.

When a man called Gilhaney arrives at the police-barracks to talk about the timber required for the scaffold, he knocks one of Policeman MacCruiskeen’s mindboggling, diminutive chests from the table. Panic breaks out as the three men try to find this invisible chest.¹²⁹ Joe points out the poetic justice of the situation: “*You are going to be hung for murdering a man you did not murder and now you will be shot for not finding a tiny thing that probably does not exist at all and which in any event you did not lose*” to which Noman meekly replies “I deserve it all...for not being here at all” (117). Gilhaney, after searching for “ten minutes or ten years, perhaps,” tries to dupe MacCruiskeen by extending what he believes is an empty hand but in fact contains the miniscule chest. MacCruiskeen reveals that Gilhaney had just failed to realise he had actually picked it up. This and other events in Chapter 7, which highlight how life is controlled by contingencies often outside our control, cause Noman to question his own significance and existence. MacCruiskeen’s invisible chests and his tiny spears that cause you to bleed before you can even see the point of the spear are such imponderable objects, but are still too real (the spear illustrates this best, as it draws blood) to deny. The chest produces an uncanny experience for Noman because it defies what he considers the limits of possibility, the chests are there but they cannot be seen by the naked eye. What does this say about Noman’s existence? Without a name, he has no definition or legal existence, but surely his presence cannot be denied if he bleeds, or can it?¹³⁰

The footnote in Chapter 8, covering more than two pages, lends more perspective to

¹²⁹ In another of the novel’s many instances of infinite regress, MacCruiskeen makes chests in which an exact replica of the same chest, but slightly smaller, fits. Each chest contains yet a smaller chest, and so on into infinite regress. O’Nolan may have been thinking of swirling, invisible molecules, there all the time but invisible to the naked eye.

¹³⁰ Similarly, when Noman reports the theft of his (non-existent) American gold watch, Sergeant Pluck informs him that when they find it they will have to start looking for the owner. Noman states that as he is the owner, he does not have to be found. Pluck explains that without a name he “cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not exist [...]. 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” (3P 64).

Noman's thoughts while he lies in bed awaiting his execution. He considers how small he feels in the night when his eyesight becomes restricted. The darkness surrounding him and limiting his sight, causing his train of thought to focus inward, prompts the footnote, which follows the word "night" in "I reflected on how new the night was [...]" (120). The footnote is a critique of de Selby's "disquisitions of night" and his commentators' reactions to them (120). To summarise, in addition to regarding darkness as "an accretion of 'black air'" de Selby saw sleep as "a succession of fainting-fits brought on by semi-asphyxiation due to [black air]" (120). The narrator-author of the footnote does not hold de Selby's theory of darkness and night in high esteem; he states that the "considerable reserve" with which his critics have treated de Selby's theories of night is "hardly to be wondered at" (120). The footnote gives a literature review of the various commentators, notably privileging the work of a certain Basset, whose work on de Selby includes "formidable tables of dates and... corroborative extracts from contemporary newspapers," and thus, if not proving the work's authority, displays admirable scientific and statistical rigour (120).

Other works receiving muted praise are Henderson's *Hatchjaw and Basset*, which the narrator considers "not unuseful" for "those who wish to hold the balance for themselves" and most interestingly, the work of "Kraus, usually unscientific and unreliable," but on this topic, his *De Selby's Leben* is worth reading (120). The footnote goes on to discuss Kraus's dubious biography and position in de Selby studies, and in this, the narrator shows sympathy for Kraus and also reflects on his own (as implied narrator, outside the footnote) precarious mode of existence. Kraus had reportedly been involved in a letter scandal with another de Selby scholar, Hatchjaw, after which he was said to have disappeared. Recent research, the narrator states, has failed to reveal more about Kraus's identity and "ultimate fate," but Basset, of whom the narrator also approves, suggested that "Kraus did not exist at all, the name being one of the pseudonyms adopted by the egregious du Garbandier, another de Selby scholar whose work often mocks de Selby, to further his 'campaign of calumny'" (122).¹³¹ The narrator discounts this last accusation on the basis that the tone of Kraus's book "seems too friendly [...] to encourage such a speculation" (122).

Whether Kraus existed at all, was likeable and whether he is a credible source are all questions which can be asked about Noman too. In fact, for the footnote author, whom I take to be Noman himself, Kraus's credibility seems dependent on the first two factors – did he exist and was he likeable – but Noman's credibility is being determined along the same, hardly scientific lines. If Kraus is judged on the basis of these factors, what of Noman, whose existence is being contested on

¹³¹ Of course, this passage also serves as a metacommentary on O'Nolan's own career and status as real author; he is a writer with pseudonyms and was involved in, if not entirely and solely responsible, for a number of letter scandals.

all sides in this narrative, and whose likeability – at least for readers – is put to the test by the fact that he brutally murdered a man in cold blood to satisfy some aspect of his own vanity? The footnote here thus provides more than superficial metacommentary. It emphasises subjectivity and choice as determining factors in how readers judge text, author and narrator.

The review of how de Selby has been interpreted by various critics often in disagreement with each other shows that other readings are possible and that his is just one reading, despite his intention to write the definitive critical assessment of de Selby. Even an expert reading is still just one possible reading. This is most clear in the commendation of Henderson's book for the reader who would like to make up his own mind. Noman's willingness to relinquish critical authority reifies the scientific world as a thing, as a text to be interpreted and analysed in different ways. Removing the authorial, critical control demystifies the scientific world as an abstract thing that requires a certain expertise in order to be definitively and correctly interpreted. The risk of incorrect interpretation is thereby removed so that anyone can "hold the balance for themselves:" knowledge is a free-for-all; it can be contested, refuted, denied, believed, reaffirmed, deemed irrelevant and so on (120). In much the same way as Noman's codex interprets Deselbiana and seeks to perform a definitive reading of it, the reader's reading of *The Third Policeman's* footnotes and the main narrative may find him, to no avail, trying to interpret the novel definitively, which possibility is excluded by the novel's cyclical insistence on repeating its events, each time with the force of the new. While a definitive reading may seem desirable and even unavoidable in some ways, ultimately, it cannot be achieved. The footnote's interaction with the main narrative in this example suggest that as soon as one reading is characterised as definitive, complete and unassailably correct, another will arise and challenge its authority, even and especially if it is wholly fraudulent. Even things that do not exist can supplant things that do.

The world through which Noman travels is strange, wonderful and wholly unlike the realm of experience known to him in life. He and Joe observe the new theories and possibilities this world presents and together they form an interpretation. Generally, this is not a final interpretation, with Noman ultimately deciding he must suspend judgement (and disbelief) and accept his experiences as they come. In its refusal to commit to final answers, *The Third Policeman* is markedly postmodern, while remaining modernist in its deference for big ideas and desire to pick them apart. Noman's turn to patient observation and wondering, sceptical inquisitiveness suggests that since knowledge can never be totally verified, it is best to adopt a critical view and withhold definitive judgments. The novel privileges this approach as preferable and advisable, indeed, it hardly leaves any other

satisfying alternative. This allows Noman – and the reader – to move on with an open mind, but it also presupposes that all knowledge, though outside our own grasp, is in some way all interconnected and co-referential.

In *The Third Policeman*, various pseudoscientific and scientific texts exist next to each other and still seem to function independently of one another. These texts must be interpreted: the atomic or “mollycule” theory, the coloured winds, omnium and the mechanical eternity are all connected in some way outside our control and outside our knowledge. Like the novel’s mechanical eternity, we cannot see the wires that make the machine work, but that does not mean they do not exist. Exercising a variant of Sergeant Pluck’s advice about it being wise “to ask questions but never to answer any,” the last word in the footnote concerning de Selby’s theories of darkness belongs to de Selby scholar Le Clerque: “This matter [...] is outside the true province of the conscientious commentator inasmuch as being unable to say aught that is charitable or useful, he must preserve silence” (59; 122). The narrator also identifies this as the “wisest course” on the question of de Selby’s notions of darkness, perhaps demonstrating that he too is becoming wiser in the parish, certainly as the scene which this footnote interrupts is a pivotal one for him in that he comes to know more about the nature of his soul Joe and their shared relation to a world outside their understanding.

Spectral Encounters, Dialogue and the (Im)possibility of New Knowledge

Noman’s first encounter with his soul takes place directly after his initial encounter with spectrality in the novel, the meeting with the ghost of Mathers. He and Noman are seated in a room of Mathers’s old house, Mathers remaining silent despite Noman’s inquiries. He utters only a chilling cough, the first sound Noman hears after dying and waking up in hell. While Noman attempts to make sense of what he sees, Joe intervenes to help him. Too shocked by the appearance of Mathers after having murdered him years before, Noman tries to convince himself that it may be Mathers’s twin brother, at which point Joe notes details that Noman has overlooked, remarking “*Scarcely. If you look carefully at the left-hand side of his neck you will notice that there is sticking-plaster or a bandage there. His throat and chin are also bandaged*” (26). Noman realises that this is all true and in an instance of disjointed temporality or a delayed form of phantom pain, he feels his shoulders become stiff from his efforts with the spade/murder weapon years before. He contemplates the origin of the voice which confirmed Mathers’s identity:

But who had uttered these words? They had not frightened me. They were clearly audible to me yet I knew they did not ring out across the air like the chilling cough of the old man in the chair. They came from deep inside me, from my soul. Never before had I believed or suspected that I had a soul but just then I knew I had. I knew also that my soul was friendly, was my senior in years and was solely concerned for my own welfare. For convenience I called him Joe. (26) ¹³²

Joe explains things to Noman, advises on how to proceed and most importantly, also acts a moral barometer and a sort of spirit guide. As in the example above, he points out details that his host has overlooked. He also corrects him and scolds him to reveal character flaws that Noman has not confronted.¹³³ For all his importance, Noman scarcely acknowledges the extent to which he grows to depend on Joe to help him carry on the interview with Mathers's ghost and the rest of his encounters with others in the novel. As the above quotation illustrates, Noman instinctively (or with narrative hindsight) feels that Joe has his best interest at heart, despite there being good reason to doubt his sense of certainty. Joe's presence is also in the reader's best interest, because his dialogue with Noman unconventionally provides unique insight into how Noman reasons and forms opinions. Their interaction (as a duo) with other characters, such as Mathers and the policemen, dialogically increases the possible meanings and possible conversations contained within the novel. An underlying third party is actually present in this duo, thus expanding it into an odd trinity of combined subjectivity. Above I have discussed how de Selby informs Noman's impulses and mode of scientific thought. His underlying presence is almost unconsciously encrypted in Noman's

¹³² The insight that Noman displays in this example that Joe is in fact his soul and a part of him cannot occur solely in this passage, the first description of Joe, unless it is hunch-based. Noman is incredulous and doubts everything he sees or experiences until he can satisfactorily explain it to himself. Joe's sole concern for Noman's welfare is thus a belated insight achieved through his journey through the parish. This insight is prospective and retrospective – it draws on a future that has yet to unfold at this point in the narrative while it also draws on the past that the same narrative will provide, when it gets that far, enabling Noman to tell this story and to say at this particular junction with such assuredness that Joe is friendly, older than him, and has his best interest at heart.

¹³³ As Noman imagines names that might be his with detached amusement and indeed a lack of concern, Joe interrupts to illustrate the possible lives attaching to the possible names that could be Noman's. His mocking illustration serves to reveal to Noman that not taking his lack of a name or a verifiable identity quite seriously:

“I light-heartedly gave a list of names which, for all I knew, I *might* hear:

...

Signor Beniamino Bari.

The Honourable Alex O'Brannigan, Bart.

Kurt Freund. ...

Signor Beniamino Bari, Joe said, the eminent tenor. Three baton-charges outside La Scala at great tenor's première. ... As he warmed to his God-like task, note after golden note spilled forth to the remotest corner of the vast theatre, thrilling all and sundry to the inner core. ...

Thank you very much, I murmured, smiling in wild amusement.

A bit overdone, perhaps, but it is only a hint of the pretensions and vanity that you inwardly permit yourself. (3P 43-4)

motivation and sense of self, which increases the dialogic meaning in the novel by functioning as a third level of discourse (and thus a text) through the footnotes and the less perceptible traces in Noman's personality. This further accentuates the dialogic meaning of Noman's narrative.

In a novel where each character's individual idiosyncratic use of language problematises both their own narrative reliability and the structure of the fictional reality, Joe is the only one the reader also instinctively trusts. His helpful interventions also make him the most reliable character in this novel. This is ironic in the context of the novel as a satirical analysis of the failings of rational thinking, as Joe is a rational immaterial being opposed to Noman, an irrational but more material being. In fact it is doubly ironic, as the jaded empiricist Noman never even imagined he had a soul. That an immaterial being is the only voice of reason in *The Third Policeman*, is a great critique of the extremes of scientific rationalism or Enlightenment thought, that would strip human existence of immaterial influence and leave everything to reason.

Whereas later in the novel, Noman will struggle to submit to the logic of the parish policemen and its extraordinary difference to his own, his belief in Joe and what Joe is, is strangely matter of fact.¹³⁴ While the policemen and their logic are other, Joe's otherness is more extreme. He is a voice inside Noman, and maybe a voice with a body, as we will see later, but the possibility that Joe is nothing more than an aberrant voice in his head without a separate subjectivity never presents itself in the novel, nor does it seem plausible. This is not an instance of hearing voices as the result of mental instability or illness; Joe is real and has his own, unique subjectivity.

Joe endears himself to the reader and achieves spectral authority by reprimanding Noman both for lying and, as we have seen, for being pretentious and vain. He encourages him to use his imagination, to think beyond pre-programmed reactions and copper-fastened presumptions and modes of perception. He also warns Noman to proceed cautiously in certain of his encounters; he has feelings that can be hurt and provides comfort as well as metaphysical and teleological explanations to his very unlikeable host. If *The Third Policeman* is the Irish *Inferno*, then Joe is Virgil. The main function of his speech is to guide him and complement Noman's empirical observations with moral and ethical meaning. He also helps keep Noman on the right path and prepares him for yet another death, a death when Joe will leave Noman permanently. His presence and introduction at this crucial first encounter with spectrality serve as a reminder that reason is not

¹³⁴ It may be more appropriate to state that it has become matter of fact, because Noman's narrative is disjointed and he narrates the story as if it is unfolding, but the knowledge that this is a cyclically repetitive narrative, gained only through the denouement, casts doubt on Noman's narrative reliability. He may have left out, for example, a more reluctant account of hearing Joe's voice for the first time, which he may have initially confused with madness.

enough to sustain life; humans must also have a moral fabric for life or death to have any meaning. Joe's presence has ethical precedence and authority. Because of the valuable contribution Joe makes to establishing meaning in Noman's interpretations of his encounters, his authority must be heeded. Noman cannot act against Joe because he is a part of him.

I will now examine how Joe intervenes and adds to Noman's encounters with spectrality in the novel. This will show how his contribution to Noman's personal development in hell – only to be unravelled at the end – is ethical and moral, qualities which Noman possesses few of. I will then discuss the nature of Joe's spectral authority and the seemingly unflappable nature of spectral authority in general.

Joe is instrumental in the first encounter with Mathers, who only replies in negatives. His repudiation of every question put to him extends even to the social faux-pas of denying "that it was a dark morning" (28). On one level, Mathers's negatives confuse Noman, as they prevent them from engaging in a direct conversation (he is after all talking to his murderer). But the negatives do not prevent Noman from getting the answers he seeks, so Mathers's speech is still informative. In speech act theory, Mathers's utterances are perlocutionary. They initiate a chain of events by requiring interpretation. What he says is distinct from the resulting consequences (Butler 17). What Mathers says can only be meaningful to Noman once he has adapted his attitude and his own line of questioning to accommodate the other, Mathers here. Their dialogue will remain in unfruitful stasis if they both pursue a monologic mode of discourse and thus refuse to establish a common ground for their communication. The strangeness of Mathers's speech forces Noman to think differently and to engage with the newness of his spectral situation. He must go beyond his observations and sense of what is normal. He must allow for gaps in his rationalist, materialist world view. Joe enables this, as in the following example.

Still frustrated by Mathers's refusal to engage in conversation with him, Noman gets a clue from his soul. Joe points out that Mathers only speaks in negatives to get Noman back on track after being terrified by Mathers's appearance and uncanny manner of speaking.

He had said nothing beyond the one word No. His lips hardly moved; I felt sure he had no teeth behind them. [...]

Do you notice anything?

No, I replied [...]

But do you notice nothing about the way he answers your questions?

No.

Do you not see that every reply is in the negative? No matter what you ask him he says No.

That is true enough, I said, but I do not see where that leads me.

Use your imagination. (28-9)

At this injunction, Noman changes his questions accordingly. He asks for example, ““Will you refuse to answer a straight question?”” (29). Mathers reveals that he has found that “yes” tends to lead to vice, while “no” pre-empts the negative behaviour that “yes” inevitably precludes. This is why he has decided to only reply in negatives. Joe comes to value Mathers’s approach, and in his expression of his agreement, it becomes clear that his subjectivity is completely distinct from Noman’s.

This is very wholesome stuff, every word a sermon in itself. Listen very carefully. Ask him to continue.

‘Continue,’ I said.

I confess I felt a click inside me very near my stomach as if Joe had put a finger to his lip and pricked up a pair of limp spaniel ears to make sure that no syllable of the wisdom escaped him. Old Mathers continued talking quietly. (31)

Noman is unnerved by Joe’s interventions in his discourse with Mathers, but he is also grateful. His death has awakened him to the existence of an other within, a soul with a subjectivity separate from his, a soul which while it is indeed a part of him, is also something else. He begins to realise that there is an other within him, and that he too is part of something outside himself. This is illustrated in greater detail in Chapter 8 as Noman awaits his execution and imagines whether Joe has a scaly or in some way repulsive body:

Was I [...] 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? Who or what was the core and what monster in what world was the final uncontained colossus? God? Nothing? Was I receiving these wild thoughts from Lower Down or were they brewing newly in me to be transmitted Higher Up?

From Lower Down, Joe barked. [...]

The scaly idea – where did I get that from? I cried.

Higher Up, he shouted.

Puzzled and frightened I tried to understand the complexities not only of my intermediate dependence and my catenal unintegrity but also my dangerous adjunctiveness and my embarrassing unisolation. (123)

This hierarchy of beings within beings recalls what I described above as the concept of skulls within

skulls, which corresponds closely to Derrida's politics of inheritance, in which inheritance is always multiple and selective. Where Hamlet's problem turns partially on whether to give up these illustrious skulls which have generated his world view and subjectivity, Noman is unluckier. At least Hamlet has some inkling of who the skulls belonged to and that they are there at all; Noman on the other hand, has just been informed after death that there are generative skulls. Aside from de Selby's skull, which Noman handpicked for himself, Noman is chained to a being greater than both Joe and Noman combined. There may be still more beings that encompass all of these – beings outside even Joe's vast knowledge of existence. Impulses to act may be given from higher up or lower down, in the end the experiencing subject simply can never know whether his thoughts are original or even belong to him. As we have seen, in Botting's third order of spectrality, the spectral is identified with the "psychological, delusional, hallucinatory effects of disordered consciousness" (6). The instability of reality, proven by science, combined with a discontinuous, disordered consciousness affecting perception of the outer and inner world, is surely the pinnacle of uncanny experience. Not only is Noman unable to know reality, he is not able to know himself.

Thus the realisation that individual consciousness contains multiple subjectivities is rendered spectral. This realisation confronts Noman with factors hitherto unconsidered by him, the alterity of his own compartmentalised self almost becomes too much for him to bear, as illustrated by his reaction to the following advice given by Joe:

Listen. Before I go I will tell you this. I am your soul and all your souls. When I am gone you are dead. Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him. Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the beam has not yet played beyond you. Your earthly successors await dumbly and trust to your guidance and mine and further. [...] When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what you are – I take all your significance and importance and all the accumulations of human instinct and appetite and wisdom and dignity. You will be left with nothing behind you and nothing to give the waiting ones. Woe to you when they find you out! Good-bye!

Although I thought this speech was rather far-fetched and ridiculous, he was gone and I was dead. (3P 123-4)

In this passage, Noman is confronted with the sceptical dialogism of selfhood – even it must be re-negotiated and re-defined in dialogue, even if this dialogue is an internal monologue. Internal monologue is shown in this novel to always be dialogue. His reaction to Joe's sublime explanation

of himself as an archive of past and future humanity is dismissive because it terrifies him to think that there is nothing individual about his personality that will survive him. Moreover, there are aspects of his self with which he has no direct contact and can never have. He is unsure which way the hierarchy works and does not understand how or where he fits into it. Not only are there other beings, higher up and lower down, but their significance is more enduring than Noman's and will succeed, if not wholly erase, him.

Just as Nietzsche warned that understanding the self-referentiality of everything in life would instantly drive a man insane, Noman's consciousness seems to implode when he tries to grasp the totality of these complementary selves and beings.¹³⁵ However, Noman is in luck and Joe does not appear to have gone anywhere. For a moment, Noman thinks he hears the nails being driven into his coffin with him in it, but upon opening his eyes, he is happy to see Sergeant Pluck, looking "large and lifelike and surprisingly full of breakfast" (124). As the narrative distances itself from the philosophising of the previous section and returns to comforting trivialities such as the size of Pluck's gut and the worldly pleasures of food, Joe remarks "*Thank goodness to be back to sanity*" (124). The sound of his voice, "friendly and reassuring, like pockets in an old suit" comforts Noman, who was verging on Nietzschean insanity thanks to Joe's presentation of the sum of his reality (124).

The dialogues between Joe and Noman and the subtextual metacommentary provided by the de Selby criticism in the novel's footnotes create a dialogic perspective of Noman's subjectivity. With Joe's help, the spectral encounters with Mathers and the policemen result in a broadening of Noman's subjectivity by revealing it as intersubjective and interdependent. Although Noman's readiness to adjust his perspective to engage his interlocutors is selfishly motivated (his desire for the black box), he is open to a dialogue with the sometimes radically other personalities and logic of the policemen. He needs them to get anything accomplished. Similarly, on his visit to the mechanical eternity, he comes to acknowledge the possibility, indeed the reality, that there are natural laws governing this parish that he has never before encountered, much less understood. By opening up to the voice of the other within, Joe, he learns that existence is far more complex than he had ever hoped. He follows the ghost, he listens and does not refuse to engage in dialogue with the extremely unknown, and in doing so, Noman opens himself up to unknown possibilities and realises, if only briefly, that life is not predetermined and that it can or could be otherwise. But Noman is not
alive.

The Law Beats Noman, Noman Beats the Law

When MacCruiskeen first shows him the diminutive chests, Noman thinks there is nothing more wonderful in the world. As each chest the ingenious policeman shows him gets smaller and smaller until at last they are “half a size smaller than ordinary invisibility,” he begins to find the experience terrible and must reassure himself with a “loud human noise” to feel sure that he is still in control (76).¹³⁶ Hesitation between the wonderful and the terrible in the fantastic mode of literature means that it cannot be decided whether a thing or an event is terrible or wonderful. This precludes judgment as to whether the thing or event is natural or supernatural. I am arguing that because Noman cannot decide, it is more comfortable and practical for him to ultimately defer judgement.

The conundrum implicit in the hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations of inexplicable events is illustrated well by Tzvetan Todorov: “Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings [...]” (25). According to Todorov, our reluctance to decide whether the devil is real or imaginary means that we rarely encounter the devil. Each option has far-reaching consequences that many of us are not willing to consider. For Todorov, the primary characteristic of the fantastic is hesitation. When a reader or a character decides if the strange event can be explained according to the natural laws of the known world, the fantastic ceases to exist and the event (and the literary work containing it) becomes decidedly uncanny. If it is decided that the laws governing the known world, at least some of them, are unknown to us – potentially an equally terrifying conclusion – then we speak of the marvellous (41). Neither the reader nor Noman can make this decision. Hesitation remains because the forces causing the inexplicable events seem to be both natural and supernatural. The havoc that the supernatural wreaks on known and unknown natural laws confuses the reader and the haunted subject’s sense of reality so that neither can be ruled out.

As the novel’s events continue to grow stranger, Noman is forced to adapt intermittently to each new situation, shifting between supernatural and natural explanations. Confronted with MacCruiskeen’s chests and shouting to restore his sense of humanity, he returns to a level of discourse which at the very least resembles every day conversation and normalcy. He sympathises

¹³⁶ Richard Kearney identifies a wonderful-terrible dialectic in the history of western philosophy that underlies the “conundrum of the Other” (*SGM* 13). He notes a deep ambivalence towards alterity in “terms of wonderment (*thaumazein*) and terror (*deinon*)” in Plato, and in Socrates’ definition of himself against Typhon (a Greek monster or “fearful dragon” (*deinos drakon*) with a ‘hundred heads’) (13). Typhon’s many heads spoke in many voices, some terrifying, some beautiful. The wonderful voices were understood by man and gods alike. Kearney points out that the comparison is significant as the Typhon is both wonderful and terrible, quasi-terrestrial and quasi-divine. It is “akin to the gods (who readily comprehend its speech) and uncanny, strange and fearful to men” (13). For Kearney, this speaks of how the “origins of philosophising” are linked to “a certain *pathos* of wonder and awe:” “if Reason is predicated upon the expulsion of its monstrous Other, it is never wholly rid of it” (14).

with MacCruiskeen: ““Such work must be very hard on the eyes,’ I said, determined to pretend that everybody was an ordinary person like myself” (77). In order to remain calm he must remind or deceive himself that MacCruiskeen and Pluck with their inexorable logic and adherence to quirky laws – but laws all the same – are not fundamentally different from him. Despite their tendency to speak almost as if in tongues, the policemen can still be approached and engaged in conversation. Their otherness is not insuperable because he can and does relate to them. He does so by adopting a sceptical but curious stance which is willing, if not eager, to dialogue with the policemen who control his fate in the parish. In realising that he cannot rely on familiar terms or ways of approaching them, he leaves behind the ideal (the high road) of equal minds conversing on the same level. In doing so, Noman effectively takes the middle road of diacritical hermeneutics, described by philosopher Richard Kearney as having the power to “obviate both the congenial communion of fused horizons [a view in which all others become the same as me] and the apocalyptic rupture of non-communion [a view in which the alterity of the other is such that I will never come close to understanding them]” (*SGM* 18). This “middle way (*metaxu*) is in fact more radical and challenging” than either the former, romantic way, or the latter, radical way, because it alone is capable of exploring “possibilities of intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves” (18). Faced with spectres that by nature defy definition and which slip out of any category they can be fitted into, a metaxic route is the most productive. Spectres are not like humans, but nor are they unlike them.

O’Nolan’s literary project is infused with this metaxic ethos, which is one of the reasons that Kearney’s philosophy fits it well. As a writer, like a spectre, O’Nolan himself resists categorisation: is he a modernist or a post-modernist? Is he a journalist, a novelist or a civil servant; a shrewd businessman or an experimentalist? How do we as critics even decide what name to call him in all his plurality? The metaxic route of diacritical or even dialogic hermeneutics plus deconstruction, as we will see below, enables me to examine O’Nolan’s work as existing between and because of competing discourses. Throughout his work, unlikely characters are paired and set in contexts which at first may strike the reader as incomparable, unbelievable and even wholly inappropriate. In addition to fostering comedy, this amplifies the possibilities of intercommunion between them. As O’Nolan shows in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Dalkey Archive* and in *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s Keats and Chapman instalments, strange bedfellows hit upon even stranger ideas and concepts that would likely have remained untapped had, for example, Sweeny never met Jem Casey or De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive* not met John the Baptist.

Dialogue can be facilitated by de-alienating the other, like warring siblings who forget their argument when both find humour in a certain situation or third party. Noman de-alienates the policemen by telling himself that MacCruiskeen and Pluck are just as ordinary as he; he refuses to succumb to his growing unease and fear, and so remains in dialogue.¹³⁷ Here he exercises a double consciousness; as spectral others, the policemen are not the same as Noman – they are outside him and beyond what he can know. But by trying to relate to them as being no different to himself, he effectively “holds open the possibility of an unconditional encounter with otherness, of an undetermined, unanticipated *event* without which there would be no escape from the endless repetition of the same and no promise of emancipation and justice” (Davis, *Haunted Subjects* 76). This deconstructionist perspective of the spectre as other and the other as spectre enables Noman to adopt a middle road approach that he can use to navigate the parish and finally come to some understanding of his situation, even if once the cycle begins again, he loses understanding to a sort of pre-originary amnesia no sooner than he has gained it.¹³⁸

In my view, Derrida’s deconstructionist approach to the spectral other facilitates Noman’s adoption of the metaxic route advocated by Kearney and diacritical hermeneutics. Joe’s intervention in Noman’s approach to the spectral others of the parish helps him to be open to an “encounter with the unstable, unassimilated spectre” which Colin Davis notes is vital to Derrida’s condition of encountering “something previously unheard of” (84). Dealing with that which has never been seen or heard of before requires more openness to the future than reliance on the so-called hard facts of experience and the past. In this, it requires the haunted subject either to be in or to look to both the future and the past, to defer judgment from the present to the future. That Noman comes up against something previously unheard of in *The Third Policeman*, is a thing that none of us can deny. His spectral counterparts, however, do not share his new-found ability to recognise the other as another self. The laws of the parish are not those of the real world. O’Brien’s presentation of the failures that occur when ethics is absented from encounters with the world views of others resembles Kearney’s injunction of an ethical approach to the other. However, Kearney’s argument about de-alienating others in order to seek a common ground and thus reconstitute opposing subjectivities is better

¹³⁷ One of the best ways to de-alienate the other, according to Kearney, is to recognise “(a) oneself as another and (b) the other as (in part) another self (80).

¹³⁸ But, ironically, the cyclical nature of this particular novel and the other world that it depicts has predetermined that Noman will repeat this encounter endlessly, for him there is no promise of emancipation from this cycle, not in the literal sense, not beyond authorial control. However, this does not take away from the importance of seeking out the encounter – Noman’s chance at emancipation and justice is there in the novel, it is just fleeting. He comes to understand his situation exceedingly briefly, and that is all he can hope for, because as his creator, Flann O’Brien decided that this was hell and that Noman’s punishment for his misdeeds in life is to repeat this cycle endlessly.

applied to the real world and not the world of *The Third Policeman*. He contends that “if ethics rightly requires me to respect the singularity of the other person, it equally requires me to recognize the other as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities, that is, as someone capable of recognizing me in turn as a self capable of recognition and esteem” (*SGM* 80).

This seems both reasonable and desirable, but the ethics and laws governing this fantastic novel are different. Unlike Kenner or Clissman who view *The Third Policeman* as being completely unrelated to a real external frame of reference situated in modern Ireland, I argue that the novel indirectly denounces real Ireland’s failure to engage with sufficient interest and enthusiasm in a dialogue on the competing views of its future or even its contemporary reality. Read in this way, the novel makes a sub-textual argument which conforms to the aim of Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics: for the reader and for Noman to understand the novel’s spectral world, it is necessary to reconstrue “otherness less in opposition to selfhood than as a partner engaged in the constitution of its intrinsic meaning” (80). The policemen do not afford Noman the same singularity that he, with some difficulty, grants them. The novel illustrates the result of a failure to look for partnership, respect otherness, and once a commitment to dialogue has been made, to do so unconditionally. The result is the relatively innocuous but frustrating prospect of perpetual misunderstanding and the extreme of arbitrary violence, illustrated in the decision to hang Noman for a murder he did not commit only because he has no name and therefore does not exist in the eyes of the law.

“It is the way we work in this part of the country”¹³⁹

These are Sergeant Pluck’s last words on the matter of hanging Noman for the second murder of Mathers. Mathers’s corpse was found disembowelled in a ditch, the murderous calling card of Martin Finnuane, the leader of the hoppy men and the first person Noman met after leaving the dead man’s house. Inspector Corky delivers the news of his death to Pluck and Noman after they have returned from retrieving a bicycle Pluck had stolen to protect Gilhaney from further exposure to the atoms of his iron bicycle. Inspector Corky, Pluck’s superior, demands to know what steps Pluck is taking to apprehend the murderer. Pluck informs him that the murderer is already in his custody and indicates Noman as that party.

Here we have an example of one of the dominant discourses of authority circulating in the novel – one which extends to real-life Ireland – the law. Inspector Corky reintroduces this discourse

¹³⁹ 3P 102.

to the novel, more or less reminding Pluck of his duties as a police officer. Pluck must submit to Corky, so he placates him with the promise of incarcerating Noman in order to prevent being reprimanded for neglecting his more serious policing duties to combat the effects of the Atomic Theory. Everyone in the novel must submit to a higher power and discourse which defines their role in the novel and existence. Pluck and the policemen submit to the discourse of the law, and Noman must submit to their logic and deference of the law. Joe answers to an unnamed higher power (or powers) that we are to assume is divine in nature.

Pluck is aware that his decision to execute Noman is unethical but he must respect the police hierarchy, appease his superior officer and cover his tracks. But this does not stop Pluck from taking refuge in the knowledge that “[i]t is the way we work in this part of the country” (3P 102). Joe prompts Noman to ask if this is all just a joke. The sergeant’s response reveals that he realises condemning Noman is unfair: “‘If you take it that way I will be indefinitely beholden to you,’ said the Sergeant earnestly, ‘and I will remember you with real emotion. It would be a noble gesture and an unutterable piece of supreme excellence on the part of the deceased’” (101). Pluck’s ethical code is flexible and he does not worry about being punished for this wrongdoing. His actions are more than just obeying orders from above: he is only adhering to his own rules of true wisdom, one of the regulations of which is “to turn everything to your own advantage” (101). In “making [Noman] a murderer this today evening,” he is in full accordance with the regulations (101). But at the same time, Pluck has to concede that Noman was just in the wrong place at the wrong time when he had the misfortune to meet Inspector Corky in a bad humour; his misfortune is Pluck’s good fortune.

Conveniently, Pluck is also in a position of power, one which is reinforced by his particular code of true wisdom. Joe reminds Noman that the Sergeant has actually already told him that “*the law could not lay a finger on us on account of your congenital anonymity*” (102). Pluck’s true wisdom turns that to his advantage too, enabling him to claim that because Noman has no name he cannot be subject to the law, but, for that reason alone he is an increased threat to the law and can therefore be hanged without compromising the same law that denies his existence. Even if or when he is hanged, he will still not be dead in the eyes of the law and there will be no paperwork to complete because it never happened (105). Pluck’s true wisdom does seem infinite and very, very convenient. The discourse of the law is thus shown here to refuse to cooperate or engage with other discourses, for example, (Noman’s) personal testimony.¹⁴⁰ Pluck has his own problems with

¹⁴⁰ This is particularly poignant when considered in relation to the trial of Bonaparte in *The Poor Mouth*, where he is tried in a language he does not speak and condemned to prison. The unfair trial is a recurrent theme in O’Nolan’s work. See also the trial of Dermot Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

bureaucratic discourse, and blames the County Council for the bad condition of the roads which aggravates the results of the Atomic Theory as the many potholes increase the exchange of molecules between people and bicycles. Taaffe describes the policemen as “state functionaries gone haywire,” trapped in the “clockwork diction of a Free State civil servant, though that clockwork has gone wildly astray” (80). Considering O’Nolan’s other life as a civil servant and his attendant familiarity with the language used to exercise the power of the State, it is hardly far-fetched to assume that his portrayal of these policemen as unable or even unwilling to look further than their own lexicon is a critique of the discourse of the law and the State’s occasionally myopic and insular view of how best to govern Ireland.

The haywire course of events causes the reader to sympathise with Noman against their better sensibilities: Noman is a murderer and Mathers is the man he killed, just not this time. The grey line between right and wrong becomes more expansive and the possibility of anything being just white or just black becomes increasingly unlikely. Taaffe considers Noman’s response to the “lavish destruction wreaked by the Atomic Theory...nicely judged” when he asks Pluck: ““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?”” (81; *3P* 85). According to Taaffe, this “pained civility in the face of a delicate matter only exposes more clearly the common absurdity in the deference to local hierarchies” (81).¹⁴¹ The bodies suggested as potentially having solutions to the problem of the Atomic Theory would have been the first ports of call for a social problem in the early years of the State and would only multiply as the Department of Local Government, O’Nolan’s employer, was given more shape. How could the Dispensary Doctor or the National Teachers even begin to correct the diabolical power of the exchange of atoms between bicycles and humans? Furthermore, what type of organisation would be capable of addressing this problem? An Institute of Advanced Studies? The Myles na gCopaleen Research Bureau? The policemen are doing their best, and their best so far has been to become bicycle thieves just to stave off the effects of the Theory for a few days more. A choice between a doctor and a teacher may suggest that the policemen would do well to learn more about Atomic Theory from the perspective of a scientist or a philosopher. Neither may be suited to the task, but they have been entrusted with stranger tasks outside their province before, regardless of their qualifications or proven record.

It is tempting to read this as indicative of a far-reaching problem facing the Irish authorities, one addressed on several occasions by O’Nolan’s various literary personae, that of unqualified and

¹⁴¹ The Sergeant’s response to Noman’s question about whether this is all just a joke is a further example of the “pained civility” Taaffe describes.

untrained staffing of the civil service and police services.¹⁴² The need for dialogue and developing a broader view of things is made to seem more imperative in Noman's encounter with the third policeman, Fox, who has the black box Noman wants and the power that comes with it. The box does not contain cash earned by Mathers in an artificial manure ring as Noman and Divney surmised, but omnium, the material responsible for all life, a material which can do absolutely anything: produce enough strawberry jam to drown in, clean the muck off your shoes, create or destroy the world.

Noman escapes from the barracks with the help of a new accomplice, Sergeant Pluck's bicycle. He intends to return home to find Divney and recommence their search for the black box. On his way he stops at Mathers's house when suddenly his "mind [becomes] clouded and confused" and he can no longer remember clearly the events of the "the last few days" (3P 180). He only recalls that he killed Mathers and that he is on the run from "two monstrous policemen" (181). It is important to note that at this stage Joe has gone, which is to say that Noman is dead (again). Without his dialogic partner, he has to make sense of things the way he did before Joe was with him, so there are massive gaps in his understanding. After some difficulty in trying to ascertain the source of a particular light shining from inside the house, Noman feels the presence of a shadow and experiences terror again, his body shrinking and quailing "painfully before the presence confronting [it]," at which point the elusive Fox makes his presence known (186). Noman has not yet seen the policeman's face, it being dark, but the uniformed body that leads him into a small police station inside the walls of Mathers's house betrays his profession. When he does see Fox's face, he is horrified to realise that Fox has Mathers's head on his body and also speaks in his voice.¹⁴³ Noman exclaims, "I thought you were dead!" to which Fox replies, "[t]hat is a nice thing to say [...] but it is no matter because I thought the same thing about yourself. I do not understand your unexpected corporality after the morning on the scaffold" (189). Noman says he escaped, but Fox doubts it and asks if Noman is sure. Noman almost collapses from the shock of this idea; he cannot know for sure if he did make good his escape. His memory is in conflict with experience, to full uncanny effect. The horror he experiences reminds us that when we cannot identify and localise a spectre, the work of mourning risks becoming doomed entirely (Derrida, *SM* 9). If Noman thought he had come to terms with murdering Mathers after his initial confrontation with Mathers's ghost, here he is proven

¹⁴² O'Nolan frequently complained about uneducated sons of country publicans and farmers coming to Dublin to join the civil service. Among others, this features in *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green: The Insect Play* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*

¹⁴³ This can be read as Mathers haunting via Fox. Noman is most afraid of confronting Mathers. Although it remains unclear whether Fox knows this and puts on Mathers's face and voice to confuse Noman, but there is no doubt that Noman knows this is Fox and not Mathers, he is aware of a trick of his mind.

wrong. Poor Noman, doomed to repeat the realisation of his awful crime, doomed to reason it away over and over again, doomed to confront his most powerful ghost for eternity, “the spirit comes by coming back” and disordering Noman’s consciousness once more (Derrida 10).

Fox reveals that he has had the black box sent to Noman’s home. Instead of cash, it contains four ounces of omnium, a *khora*-esque substance that can create and destroy anything.¹⁴⁴ The chain of events in the novel is almost full circle now, and without Joe, Noman reverts to solipsistic arrogance:

If I could believe him he had been sitting in this room presiding at four ounces of this unutterable substance, calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery to delude the other policemen, interfering drastically with time to make them think they had been leading their magical lives for years, bewildering, horrifying and enchanting the whole countryside. (3P 195)

Omnium provides omnipotence – with it comes unlimited power. This much is clear from its name and usages. Fox’s deployment of it and the uses Noman imagines he or Divney might give it, illuminate the ways in which discourses of authority are critically pitted against each other in this novel.

Fox, representative of legal authority, uses it as a household cleanser and a potent diversion when he creates the mechanical eternity to distract and occupy the other policemen. Noman, representative of science and philosophy, imagines feverishly what he will do with it: “I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will” (195). Noman imagines that Divney, representative of everyday discourse (albeit of variety belonging to a mean, begrudging and calculating class of Plain Person of Ireland), will throw the omnium into the manure heap when he realises the box does not contain cash. In relation to the Ireland of that period, these three uses provide an insightful, stereotypical critique of those who would define and carry out a vision of modern Irish society. Legal authority, the police and the civil service, are always suspect in O’Brien’s work and are normally portrayed as being thick, rural buffoons, incapable of devising a better use for omnium than cleaning the muck off their shoes.¹⁴⁵ The novel also casts suspicion on science and philosophy. Science in particular

¹⁴⁴ Omnium in *The Third Policeman* becomes DMP in *The Dalkey Archive*. In principle the substance is the same in both novels. Its application in the later novel is more sinister and restricted to destructive purposes; at least insofar as no creative or productive applications are given, as they are in *The Third Policeman*.

¹⁴⁵ Noman is more than a little unfair to Fox. Fox did create the mechanical eternity which Noman admits terrified and baffled him, seemed magical and which he “did not understand [...] and thought that even the smallest thing that happened there was miraculous” (193). It’s after he discovers the omnium is as good as in his pocket that he begins to

exhibits diabolical potential and seems primarily interested in progress than it is in humanity. The combined threat that both science and philosophy pose to theological and ontological narratives of human existence is further reason for suspicion. Ignoramuses of the Divney class are not to be trusted because they show no interest in anything for which they can find no direct use for in their petty realm of experience.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that the interpretation of Fox's use of the omnium given above is very similar to Schrödinger and Myles's Probability Adjustment Tank (PAT) in the musical comedy *Improbable Frequency*. The idea of enchanting the whole countryside corresponds to the effects PAT has on Dublin, namely, altering the laws of probability to keep Ireland neutral against all odds. The "altered probabilities / Are nightly threaded through [O'Dromedary's radio] show! / Making his every turn of phrase / A sinister reality!" (Riordan 67).

Bewildering and enchanting the countryside would also be a fitting description of the effects of censorship on neutral Ireland. The invention of "intricate and unheard of machinery," is redolent of the intricate censorship policy and elaborate invention of official euphemisms to describe and report on the Second World War. Supposedly neutral terminology was employed everywhere – to the weather, to reports of Irish soldiers fighting for the Allies who died in battle – with the aim of "nullifying any strong feelings about the war" and fostering a sense of detachment (Wills 277). Under wartime Irish censorship, "[f]acts were denied context, resulting in what one commentator called a 'life lived in half-tones', and, one might add, half-speech. [...] [The] very term 'Emergency' was a refusal to name the war explicitly" (277). Fox's creation of the mechanical eternity, with its levers and readings that seem vitally important but are revealed to be meaningless diversions, affects the policemen in a similar way. In turn, their language and world view, which can be seen as the result of Fox's manipulation of their reality, has a similar effect on Noman. He is subjected to it but not aware of its actual parameters and context due to Fox's alteration of known reality.

In *The Third Policeman*, "all epistemological quests are booby-trapped," and the exposition of this shows how "all systematic programs for the pursuit of knowledge inevitably lead to such invidious quests for mastery" (Hopper 49; 52). But the way in which O'Nolan allows these programmes and discourses to intermingle and reveal something of their relation leaves a door open

regard Fox as a fool and describes eternity as an "oafish underground invention [which] 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 extravagant way imaginable" (196). The irony of course, is that Noman's hell is solely concerned with bringing about his own death in the most extravagant way imaginable, and that over and over again.

for replacing competition between discourses with cooperation. Each discourse and epistemological project in the novel excels and fails at different things, none is entirely capable of explaining reality, and each is at times prone to making false claims of immutability and indubitability. I maintain that in his work, Brian O’Nolan welcomes the existence of more versions of more than one past, present and future in all narratives and discourses. He is always aware of other versions in general, and more often than not, he foregrounds their existence. He neither refuses nor denies the possibility of anything and reveals that temporal categories are always already spilling over into each other, into different narratives and vice versa. But at the same time, he displays an undeniable wariness of any discourse that would ever claim to be immutable or indubitable.

O’Nolan presents the opposing discourses and their representatives as so radically other from one another that it seems to obviate even the slightest possibility of creating a dialogue. A hauntological and dialogic reading of *The Third Policeman* suggests that if the competing discourses of authority and ordinary life discussed above were not so mutually exclusive and suspicious of each other, then dialogue would be possible, and the correct conditions could be established to find some fruitful use of the miraculous omnium which satisfies the needs of both parties. However, in O’Brien’s dark novel, human greed and ignorance prevail and preclude a meeting of mutually beneficial true minds.

However, in his exposition of this problematic, complemented by unlikely encounters and conversations between a sagacious soul and a solipsistic aspiring-scientist, between the ghost of a dead man and the dead man who murdered him, and between a dead murderer and a policeman turned accidental-god, the novel shows that the productivity ensuing from these unlikely dialogues is always better than the parties’ persistent ignoring of each other, in that it leads to new knowledge and understanding that would otherwise have remained trapped in monologic stasis. O’Nolan’s career-long critique and satirisation of discourses, people and institutions that would present themselves as beyond all questioning is in this way an indirect endorsement of dialogue, comparison and effectively, diacritical hermeneutics, underscoring the importance of conversations between opposing points of views and of healthy scepticism and self-critical belief.

The most nagging question that arises from this novel and from the blows of criticism it deals to discourses of authority, science, philosophy and the law is perhaps best illustrated by Jorge Luis Borges. Borges, an admirer of O’Nolan’s work, when he considers the unsettling effects of literature and the conceptual power of infinity in “Partial Magic in the *Quixote*.”

Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the

Thousand and One Nights? Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers and spectators, can be fictitious. (231)

What is chillingly disturbing in *The Third Policeman* is that nothing seems capable of describing or explaining even banal reality on the one hand or the most complex workings of quantum physics on the other hand. And if Noman can be dead from the end of Chapter 1 and not realise it until the final pages of the last chapter, only to forget it again instantly, what does that say about us? Maybe Fox's mechanical eternity is actually our reality and we simply do not realise it. The novel's fearful conclusion implies that the real world might as well be an invention of a god not unlike Fox, who has made the world and fitted it out with both necessary and arbitrary distractions and fictions such as philosophy, science, law, sleep and bicycles, just for his amusement. In the end we will never know, yet, what shape life has, what the proper tools for exploring it are, or whether Joe's description of Noman's journey as a cyclical return in advance in fact applies to real life: "[it is] again the beginning of the unfinished, the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh forgetting of the unremembered. Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable" (207).

Chapter 4: Assembling Pluralism and Dismantling Authority in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Dalkey Archive*

*The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet.*¹⁴⁶

-- Student narrator on the novel

*-There is no evidence against me beyond what I wrote myself.*¹⁴⁷

-- St Augustine to De Selby

At Swim-Two-Birds (1939) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) promote pluralism and dialogue between multiple voices and perspectives and challenge diverse types of authority. In this respect, O’Nolan’s first and last novels are similar to *The Third Policeman*, which as we have seen, explores the dangers lurking in monologic perspectives and master narratives while demonstrating the fruitfulness of remaining productively sceptical and seeking out unceasing (critical) dialogue, even within the self. While *The Third Policeman* certainly engages in intertextual borrowing like *At Swim* and *The Dalkey Archive*, the last two go further in their presentation of a diversity of narratives and readings, many of which have been borrowed from other well-known texts. *At Swim* is critically acclaimed as O’Nolan’s literary masterpiece, while *The Dalkey Archive* is usually considered his weakest novel, a mere rehashing of old material and little more than a pedant’s revenge on a more successful literary forbear. But, like *At Swim* and *The Third Policeman*, it too is concerned with literary and textual authority. *The Dalkey Archive* resembles *At Swim* in its scrutiny of the pitfalls of authorship and its exploration of how literary authority can be established or diminished. Both novels are highly intertextual and rely on a process of literary assembly to create a new perspective on how earlier narratives are invoked to portray and negotiate modern experience. Each novel examines the ethical responsibilities pertaining not only to authorship, but also to reading and interpretative strategies.

Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja has convincingly argued that *At Swim* is an “ethical examination of the literary project” (55). Her study of structures of play in what she calls “Play-Texts,” texts that engage formally and philosophically with questions of reception and creation, defines literary ethics as the way in which an author understands the rules guiding the creative processes of writing and reading (4-10). I share Bohman-Kalaja’s view that O’Nolan’s texts are concerned not with direct or, as we will see, despotic communication, but with creating a dialogue with his readers and between different discourses. In a country in which literary censorship was strictly and sometimes recklessly

¹⁴⁶ *At Swim-Two-Birds* 25.

¹⁴⁷ *The Dalkey Archive* 33.

applied, it is not surprising that O’Nolan’s first and last novels are so deeply concerned with writing and reading.

The central aim of this chapter is to look at how O’Nolan undertakes an examination of the ethical responsibilities of both authors and readers to look for dialogue and question the authority of the texts that they interpret and use to define themselves in relation to the world. In Chapter 3 I looked at a number of these issues on the microlevel of personal subjectivity in *The Third Policeman*’s Noman. The current chapter aims to consider some different but related themes in a broader cultural and social framework, such as nationalist identities, Catholic theology and the social role of the Irish artist. Furthermore, this chapter also examines issues related to spectrality, authority and dominant discourses and narratives circulating in Ireland between the late-1930s and mid-1960s. Where Chapter 3 focused on spectral, sceptical dialogism at an individual level, my discussion below of *At Swim* will consider O’Nolan’s implied dialogic imperative for individuals in relation to the national level. In *The Dalkey Archive*, O’Nolan examines how the individual’s relationship to the wider world is determined (to different extents) by intellectual, legal and ecclesiastical authority and his implicit call for unceasing dialogue is thus extended beyond the local and national levels to include the global.

Both *At Swim* and *The Dalkey Archive* provide valuable insight into his varied perspectives on authorship and textual authority. In *At Swim*, O’Nolan examines the ethical, aesthetic and social responsibilities of the author (to narrative in relation to real and fictional authors. *At Swim* will be approached as a text about writers and writing as a process of literary assembly. *The Dalkey Archive* is also about authorship, but also focuses on readers’ expectations of authors as well as their beliefs about the texts that they read. The complexity of these books, each with their own twists to, departures from and abandonments of plot, necessitates a brief summary of each novel.

At Swim begins with the frame story of an unnamed student narrator who writes in his spare time; the novel consists of his biographical reminiscences, excerpts from the manuscript of the novel he is writing in addition to excerpts from other books he is reading. His novel is about another writer, Dermot Trellis, who is, according to the student narrator, writing a “book on sin and the wages attaching thereto” (ASTB 35). But, because he knows no one will read such a book, he is making sure to include “plenty of smut” in it to cater to his readers’ wishes (ASTB 35). Trellis resides in the Red Swan Hotel, where he also forces his characters to live so he can have absolute control over them, except when he sleeps and his motley cast of hired characters – Finn Mac Cool, a gang of leprechauns, a pair of cowboys borrowed from a writer of westerns, as well as several

figures borrowed from Irish folklore – are free to do as they please. As the student’s narrative progresses, Trellis’s characters rebel and drug him so he sleeps all the time allowing them to lead lives of their own and even write their own stories, one of which will help to exact their revenge on their creator.

The Dalkey Archive is about a civil servant, Mick O’Shaughnessy, and his supervision of elderly “men of indeterminate calibre, of sanity that was more than suspect” (DA 134). The men are the fictional scientist (theologian and physicist) De Selby and the writer James Joyce, who did not die in 1941 but returned to Ireland and is currently employed as a bartender and harbours hopes of becoming a Jesuit priest. *The Dalkey Archive* deals with the relationship between readers and authors, and examines issues of authorial responsibility in the author figures of James Joyce, who denies authorship of the works attributed to him, and Saint Augustine, who denounces part of his own work. De Selby has discovered a material called DMP that deoxygenates the atmosphere and can thus destroy all life on Earth.¹⁴⁸ A small amount of DMP also “cancels the apparently serial nature of time and confronts us with true time and simultaneously with all the things and creatures which time has ever contained or will contain, provided we evoke them” (DA 21). De Selby uses the DMP to conjure up saints and Church Fathers to interview them on scriptural misunderstandings. Mick conspires with his friend Hackett, and a local policeman and bicycle enthusiast Sergeant Fottrell to steal the DMP and save the world. Mick has also taken it upon himself to help Joyce, either by introducing him to De Selby so they can collaborate on some incomprehensible literary work, or by introducing him to the Jesuits of Lower Leeson Street to pursue a late vocation. His schemes are a partial success, but do not go according to plan. Mick steals the DMP and locks it in a Bank of Ireland safe but De Selby independently decides to abandon his diabolical plan, destroys his laboratory and emigrates. Joyce is left with the Jesuits, not to become a priest, but to mend the brothers’ undergarments.

A critique of authority and the reasons for privileging certain narratives and authors over others is a recurrent theme in O’Nolan’s writing. Combined, the two novels propose that the creative processes of both writing and reading can function as means of exercising power and control. *The Dalkey Archive* suggests that reading may be just as empowering as writing, if not more so. While there may be only one text, there can be many interpretations, which in turn results in more texts. This principle is also illustrated in *At Swim*, where the seventh-century story of the Frenzy of Sweeney (*Buile Suibhne*) is re-appropriated and retold by different authors throughout the

¹⁴⁸ DMP recalls the Dublin Metropolitan Police but we are told in the novel that the name is arbitrary and has no relation to the defunct police force: “it is in no sense a formula or even a mnemonic” (20).

novel. The ability to tell a story well is shown to be an exertion of power because a good storyteller controls his audience's attention. Choosing which stories to listen to, to read or to tell can also be a means to define personal and cultural identity, among other things.

Denell Downum states that in *At Swim*, O'Nolan embraces "an aesthetic based on literary borrowing and fragmentation" (305). Most of O'Nolan's novels are deeply concerned with emphasising the mechanics of writing as literary assembly, including *The Dalkey Archive*. Downum's recent essay provides an innovative reading of *At Swim*'s use of intertext and citation. She draws on Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) to show how O'Nolan's literary project echoes several of Benjamin's concerns about the materials of artistic production and reproduction in a mechanised age, and Derrida's theories of hauntology and spectrology to support her argument that citation is a form of spectrality. I want to discuss briefly Downum's reading of *At Swim*, and build on her engagement with Benjamin's "Work of Art" in order to lay the groundwork for some of the main theoretical issues that will recur throughout this chapter.

While Benjamin's influential essay is predominantly concerned with mechanical techniques of reproduction such as photography, Downum argues that the way stories are appropriated for retelling in *At Swim* has an effect similar to the techniques Benjamin discusses. *Buile Suibhne* (The Frenzy of Sweeny) is the story that is most retold throughout *At Swim* and repeatedly drawn from one context to another. Downum argues that "Finn's English-language retelling of Buile Suibhne appears to have a similar effect" (308) to what Benjamin describes as that of "detach[ing] the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" eventually leading to the "liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (571-2). "The authority of the traditional storyteller is compromised" as Finn's listeners begin to question his ability to captivate them and proceed to author their own "bastardized lines" (Downum 308). "For Benjamin, any loss in the authenticity or traditional aura of the original is more than repaid by the ability of a reproduction to 'meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation', creating a new perspective that 'reactivates the object reproduced'" (308; Benjamin 572). With a new functionality adapted to the contemporary needs of the listener, the pre-transformation traditional value is shattered but, once transformed, the tradition itself takes on added value in a revitalised context: it lives on in a new guise supplemented with new cultural input and value.

The many retellings of appropriated stories in *At Swim* are continually adjusted to harmonise better with the audience's desires and demands. *The Dalkey Archive* examines how readers'

creatively interpret texts to make them fit better with their own worldview and preconceived ideas. Both “lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition,” as Benjamin dramatically puts it, while they also lead to the rejuvenation of that tradition by making it conform to current standards and expectations (572).

The literary reproduction of narratives in *At Swim* serves four purposes that are relevant to the framework of this chapter. First, his reproduction of an earlier text in a new context serves to decontextualise the original (or earlier version). The second effect is to open new possibilities or new lives for the reproduced or borrowed text. Third, Benjamin’s tradition-shattering effect is complete once the reproduction actually starts to take on a new life, as in the case of creating corrupted poetry inspired by the more original version told by Finn. The final effect of this process is to re-establish the tradition in a new context, when the reproduced object is reactivated in a renewed, updated tradition.

The entire process corresponds closely to O’Nolan’s multivalent criticism of the use of traditional Irish literary narratives. No sooner has he debunked the authority of the tradition than he re-establishes its authority by showing how it lives on in altered form, and inspired offshoots of that tradition, thus transforming the tradition itself. He criticises the use of the old stories for nostalgic purposes alone and the superficial identification with them as a marker of what Downum calls an “ersatz ideal of cultural authenticity,” (309) illustrated by Shanahan’s praise for Irish literature insofar as it “put our country where she stands today” (*ASTB* 75) but can be ever so tiresome if you get too much of it. But at the same time, O’Nolan also criticises those who claim that earlier Irish literature has no value whatsoever because it lacks contemporary relevance. As usual, everyone is wrong in O’Nolan’s far-reaching critique. For as Downum notes, Finn’s listeners fail to “grasp the democratizing potential of a narrative unmoored from nationalistic ritual and fetishist claims of originality” even though they “exploit those possibilities unwittingly with their own stories and poems inspired by Sweeny’s tale” (309).

The democratising potential of the narrative freed from nationalistic ritual is a particularly salient point, and one which deserves further exploration. Combined with the unwitting appropriation of the narrative that Shanahan and friends think they have outgrown, it is useful to explore the concept in relation to Benjamin’s discussion of the response of the masses to architecture in “The Work of Art.” He emphasises the role of habit in “the distracted mass[es]’” absorption of the work of art in reference to architecture and goes on to outline the “laws of its reception” (575).

Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to a contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception [which occurs] by noticing the object in incidental fashion. *This mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by...contemplation [...] alone. They are mastered gradually and by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.* (575, emphasis added)

Much of what Benjamin says about the appropriation of buildings in the sense that they become meaningful to the people who see, exploit and inhabit them can also be said of the old Irish narratives and legends, like *Buile Suibhne*, in the revivalist discourse that O’Nolan criticises in this novel, his column in the *Irish Times* and in *The Poor Mouth*. Rigney stresses the importance of repetition in realising a shared and meaningful cultural memory (20). This is of course exactly what the revivalist movement was doing at the turn of the century (and what O’Nolan would do later in the century), repeating and reproducing narratives – each time with a difference – which affirmed a shared cultural heritage. Each new repetition and transformation of the Sweeny story adds to the existing cultural memory and inscribes the object of remembrance with more value.

Through habit, repeated commemorative acts and behaviours, a recurrent theme of heroic suffering (the aspect of *Buile Suibhne* most emphasised in *ASTB*) that runs throughout nationalist-approved narratives in Ireland became institutionalised as part of official history. These narratives had already been circulating for centuries in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland; they were common currency, being reproduced and revived as translations, plays, songs, paintings and so on, and were transformed in the process. These were being used by the State and manifold cultural organisations to inspire the Irish with a sense of a rich past once characterised by suffering, by virtue of which they were entitled to a modern and sovereign state.¹⁴⁹ Over years of exposure to

¹⁴⁹ The rhetoric of heroic suffering in Irish national narratives is of course only one among many. It is not my intention to suggest that it dominated Irish cultural remembrance or national narratives. It is singled out here because of its predominance and relevance in *At Swim*. However, it is worth noting the important commemorative role that narratives of suffering in Ireland have played. David Fitzpatrick has illustrated that the rhetoric of heroic suffering (shared or not) in Ireland, due to its link with death through conflicts related to the establishment of the independent state, has been highly contentious. In different ways, it has been employed by numerous political and cultural organisations to reconcile opposition among the Irish as well as to create or exacerbate opposition (184-204). See especially 189; 191; 195-98. For a detailed account, also of the extent to which narratives of the past were contested, see

these narratives in various, usually narrative forms, the people who received these stories formed a habitual relationship with them and began to use them as models for other stories (of the Irish experience). However, people were not uncritical in their acceptance of narratives of the Irish past used by the post-independence State; they did not just accept them blindly but chose them selectively. The narratives that stayed in circulation and began to lead a life of their own succeeded because they were useful to people, who found in them, for example, inspiration, pride, justification, a thirst for revenge or comfort. People began to inhabit the narrative by appropriating it through habit.

A good example of this can be found in *The Dalkey Archive*. The character of Joyce calls attention to the comfortable inhabitation of accepted and preordained narratives when he elaborates the changes he foresees in Catholic doctrine should he manage to infiltrate the powers that be to rewrite Church history and the Bible to account for the mistranslation of *pneuma* and the subsequent groundless invention of the Holy Ghost. Mick weakly voices his surprise at Joyce's account of the invention of the Holy Ghost by saying that "I always understood that God was of three Divine Persons," to which Joyce remarks, "Well you didn't get up early enough in the morning, my lad" (DA 171). Joyce goes on to detail the third hypostasis as it occurred at the Council of Nicaea, an occasion which resulted in the eponymous Nicene Creed. But scholars distinguish between two creeds of this name, one that defends the orthodox faith against Arianism and another consisting of the original creed and appendages to it, known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Joyce claims that at the Council, the Holy Spirit was hardly mentioned. In fact, what is commonly known as the Nicene Creed is the second version, complete with appendages. Mick confirms Joyce's assumption that he, despite his limited biblical knowledge as a side effect of having been reared a Catholic, certainly knows the Nicene Creed: "Sure everybody knows that," he replies, expressing the casual confidence of one comfortable in what he knows he knows (171). The canonical value of the Nicene Creed wipes its dual origins from popular memory. In lived experience, in the day-to-day life of the text, it is a statement of faith recited from time to time from beginning to end – hardly a text whose origins are speculated about by the majority of its users. Furthermore, its canonical position in the Irish (Catholic) nationalist tradition as a text that "everybody knows," is here shown to be taken for granted. The non-Irish origins of the Nicene Creed and countless other Church texts have not prevented their integration into the nationalist tradition, illustrating that religious texts could in many ways transcend the 'nationally appropriate'

requirements many other non-Irish texts. Where *At Swim* experiments with and rewrites existing narratives that play an important role in Irish nationalism and historiography, *The Dalkey Archive* rams a wrecking ball through comfortably inhabited, canonical narratives and exposes the foundations that made them appear stable and unquestionable for so long.

Another aspect of literary assembly and borrowing that I will develop relates to intertextuality and citation. Citation, argues Downum, becomes haunting when the cited speaks back. She refers to spectrality to support the claim that Sweeny functions as a ghost in *At Swim*:

Derrida's notion of spectrality illustrates that [...] he is a shadow, a shade, a revenant of the Middle Irish past. Evoked in a period of revolution, both political, in the case of post-independence Ireland, and aesthetic, as the various modernist manifestos proclaim, the figure of Sweeny resists the pure appropriation of citation, of being spoken for by others, and instead speaks back. (313)¹⁵⁰

Building on citation, borrowed texts and allusions is a gesture which extends and opens dialogue between the cited and the citer. The exposition of attitudes in *The Dalkey Archive* to Augustine, Descartes, Einstein and Joyce takes the acquired face value of the cited and transforms it by carrying it away, not from its place of origin, but from the last place it was seen.

To inherit anything from the past always entails borrowing (Derrida, *SM* 24). By engaging in a dialogue with the dead heroes and kings of early Irish literature or with dead saints and (un)dead authors, O'Nolan inevitably borrows from them and continues a transformational dialogue with them in his own text. The new dialogue consists partly of their own words, which anchors the borrowed text in tradition while also making it new in his work. The radical and transformative break with context is not only revolutionary, but spectral. Downum illustrates this with the example of the incorporated, speaking figure of Sweeny in *At Swim*. In *The Dalkey Archive*, Augustine is "encorpified" when he takes on a body for the convenience of his interlocutors. He is not so much invited to speak as he is cornered and forced to speak back. Similarly, Joyce is tracked down and located against his will and commanded to speak.

Repeatability, for Derrida "structures the mark of writing itself," each utterance must be repeatable, but its "[i]terability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat 'itself'; it leaves no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean to say" ("Signature Event Context" 7). Every time something is cited, the original is cited along with every citation of it, and with that, all the contaminations and out-of-context usages it has acquired are reiterated. Thus each repetition is a first time; each use of

¹⁵⁰ Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive* is, like Sweeny, only a shadow or shade of his former self.

intertext alludes not just to other texts, but changes them and preserves them.

O’Nolan’s invitations to the others of the histories and fictions he invokes requires them to speak. This dialogic imperative opens his writing “to otherness, to [an] embrace [of] the other as an ethical other, and to prevent the erasure of its significant difference” (Woods 113). I am not suggesting that this is an intentional gesture towards accepting otherness unconditionally, not at all. O’Nolan was far too conservative to be open to all Others in the sense advocated by Lévinas in *Autrement qu’être ou Au-delà de l’essence* (1974).¹⁵¹ Nor do I propose that he felt an unequivocal obligation to accept ethical otherness along the lines that Derrida seems obliged to do and advocates in his notion of unconditional hospitality to others. However, perhaps because of his comic and pedantic aims, his writing exhibits an openness to *recognise* the ethical other, a self like any other self, even if only to make a joke at their expense. The key here is that as an extremely dexterous writer, O’Nolan could defend any one cause as well as he could argue its opposite, poke fun at serious subjects and make the serious hilarious. His work always sought, for reasons comic or pedantic, to remind his readers of what they never knew they did not know or had forgotten. His work always attempted to show the many stories behind any one story. Regardless of how much he borrows from other writers, he always puts his distinctive stamp on the narratives he smuggles in or refers to. He leaves his authorial trace behind in the gaps and interstices of the narratives he appropriates, showing that the author is not dead at all, but like Schrödinger’s cat and Derrida’s “Thing:” “neither dead nor alive, it is dead and alive at the same time” (*SM* 153).

Authorial Power Play in *At Swim-Two-Birds*

At Swim encourages an alternative, pluralistic identity politics and highlights the existence of a variety of narratives circulating in both pre- and post-independence Ireland. Its inclusion of disparate narratives, and importantly, different versions of the same narrative, show how O’Nolan “looked the past full in the face, especially the past as represented by literary history, and tried to find in it a possibility for future art” (Cohen 7). While it “pok[es] fun” at the overreliance on narrow nationalist readings of the Irish (literary) past, it “rais[es] questions about the inherent problem of authority and authorship” (53). My discussion of *At Swim* differs from previous critical assessments

¹⁵¹ O’Nolan was in many ways deeply conservative; for example, fiscally and sexually. For his supposed fear of women, see Cronin 60-62 and Hopper 61. Racist attitudes were common enough in Ireland during his lifetime (and continue to be). Racial, ethnic, sexual and religious slurs occur throughout *Cruiskeen Lawn* and feature regularly in several Flann O’Brien characters’ speech. For a particularly remarkable example from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, see 15 Mar. 1943.

first and foremost in the comparison to *The Dalkey Archive*. Building on the work of Downum and Bohman-Kalaja, my focus will be on examples of narratives used to usurp or surrender authorial control, and the double gesture of shattering tradition and infusing it with new meaning.

Bohman-Kalaja proposes a new topological model of *At Swim* which in my view should replace Clissman's, the only other structural model of this novel. Clissman's model divided the novel into three books with four distinct narratives and narrative levels (76-150). The identification of distinct narrative levels is important, but Bohman-Kalaja is right to argue that they do not match up directly with four narratives, because the stories told interpenetrate one another as one narrator's character moves between narratives and begins to narrate their own stories (52). There are instead, "twelve structurally vital narratives recounted by twelve significant author-figures across four narrative levels" (52). The levels of narration, in this model, are distinguished by different modes of play and games that "reflect distinct modes of dialogue" that in turn "relay distinct ethical anxieties about the role of authorship" (52).

As various authorial voices vie for the storyteller's seat, the modes of play – chance, competition, cooperation and imitation – reciprocally influence one another and enable or hinder dialogue to varying degrees (52-4). The extent to which these modes co-exist or supplant one another maintains the Cailloisian *ilinx* or vertigo, games which aim at disorienting, dizzying, and undermining stability of perception and everyday reality (Tomlinson).¹⁵² The concept of vertigo meshes well with the typical reading of *At Swim* as structured by chaos. Bohman-Kalaja bases her exploration of modes of play on French scholar Roger Caillois's quadripartite classification of play and games: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimcry* (imitation) and *ilinx* (vertigo) (20). The complex and fascinating unpacking of the consequences of each mode of play that she undertakes in her discussion of *At Swim* exceeds the scope of this chapter, but I will address a few of the consequences of these modes insofar as they relate to the ethical responsibility of authors to establish dialogue with the narratives they use.

The author figures of *At Swim* appropriate existing narratives and models of authorship from the narratives and authors with which they are most familiar, the narrative most drawn upon being *Buile Suibhne*. The mythical Sweeny is a poet whose modern counterpart is the "poet of the pick," Jem Casey. What constitutes a good story is one of the central questions under examination in *At Swim*. In the Red Swan Hotel, the characters Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey are discussing their

¹⁵² Bohman-Kalaja's analysis of play modes in *At Swim* includes a mix of *alea/agon*, competitive cooperation, as well as a mode of *agon* that degenerates into corruption in the trial scene when "characters' characters become narrators" (54). See also Caillois's *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958) or *Man, Play and Games* (1969).

ideas on this subject, during a lull in a story-telling competition while the ancient hero Finn Mac Cool sleeps. Finn is not only an extremely important character in Irish folklore, but a key storyteller in the novel. The modern subjects Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey disparagingly nickname him “Mr Storybook” and while he naps, they discuss his merits as a storyteller.

They agree that Finn is basically a good storyteller, as he has “seen more of the world than [they]” and his yarns always have a beginning and an end, which they consider important. But they agree that Finn’s stories should not be taken too seriously: “you’d want what you’d call a grain of *saló* with more than one of them if I know anything,” claims Shanahan (63). “By God [Finn] can do the talking,” the men agree, but “whether a yarn is tall or small [they] like to hear it well told” (63). Finn’s stories are well constructed and strengthened by his centuries of experience and accumulated material, but his manner of telling is not satisfactory. Rather than enjoying his tales, they feel subjected to them. As Finn starts to relate the story of Sweeny’s madness to his companions, the men groan: “We’re off again [...]. Draw in your chairs, boys, [...] we’re right for the night” (64). The following eight pages are dedicated to Sweeny’s madness and flight throughout Ireland.

The mainly prose text is interwoven with O’Nolan’s English translations of verses from *Buile Suibhne*. Reminded of the work of the fictional Jem Casey, Shanahan interrupts Finn’s story to share this reminiscence with the others. Finn is not amused and issues a warning about what happened to people who interrupted Finn “in the yesterday:” they were stripped and placed in a tree only to have their head rammed in a black hole so that their “body was upside down and upright in Erin for the gazing thereon of men and beast” (72). Finn does not have the same authority he had formerly, and Shanahan is undeterred by Finn’s warning: “Now give us a chance, Mister Storybook, yourself and your blackhole” (72). Shanahan does not respect Finn’s authority as leader of the band of warriors known as the Fianna and being known as a great storyteller.

It is significant that while Finn is angered by this interruption, Shanahan actively involves his audience in the process of telling the story by asking them questions and making sure they follow him. The model of authorship exemplified by Finn maintains that the storyteller has the ultimate authority and there will be no backtalk from the gallery while he holds the floor. Shanahan’s storytelling is more modern and interactive. His story has a conversational tone grounded in dialogue with his listeners. It forms a stark contrast to the third-person prose and recited staves of Finn’s account of Sweeny’s madness. He presents Casey as “a poet of the people,” “a poor ignorant labouring man” who composed “pomes” in his head while he worked (73). His most celebrated characteristic according to Shanahan is that he was “the same as you or me,” a hard

worker with “a pick in his hand like the rest of us” (73). Because he is an ordinary man of the working classes, Shanahan and the others identify with Casey as an equal. But his poetry is superior to that of other poets, despite Shanahan’s firm belief that if you take “the bloody black hats off” a group of men they are all the same (74). This illustrates how important the men think the personality of the author is in their assessment of a given work. Shanahan claims that he has read and heard poems recited by others, indeed, “the whole lot of them,” and has still concluded that Casey is the best and only one for him. The hearty agreement of his companions illustrates their desire to be able to identify with the author as well as the subject matter of writing. Shanahan extols the value of Casey’s poetry as compared to Finn’s:

Now take that stuff your man was giving us a while ago [...] about the green hills and the bloody swords and the bird giving out the pay from the top of the tree. Now that’s good stuff, it’s bloody nice. [...]

You can’t beat it, of course, [...] the real old stuff of the native land, you know, stuff that brought scholars to our shore when your men on the other side were on the flat of their bellies before the calf of gold with a sheep-skin around their man. It’s the stuff that put our country where she stands today, Mr Furriskey, and I’d have my tongue cut 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. (75)

On the one hand they have great respect and pride for traditional Irish literature, but they cannot relate to it and tire of listening to it. Its main value is sentimental. It made their country great, but they would prefer to keep it as a monument, standing proudly in view but without dominating the landscape, leaving plenty of room for passers-by and the day-to-day business of the man on the street. In short, they prefer the doggerel of Jem Casey, something like “Workman’s Friend,” a “pome about a thing that’s known to all of us. It’s about a drink of porter” (76).

When things go wrong and will not come right,

Though you do the best you can,

When life looks black as the hour of night –

A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN.¹⁵³

When your money’s tight and is hard to get

And your horse has also ran,

When all you have is a heap of debt –

¹⁵³ “Workman’s Friend” was originally composed by Brian O’Nolan for a competition at UCD for the worst poem. The phrase “A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN” is the student narrator’s friend Kelly’s platitude, announced in a pub after the first sip of their pints.

A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN. (77)

Shanahan's recitation is received enthusiastically by the men (barring the silent Finn). They declare: "By God there's a lilt in that" and "There are things in that pome that make for what you call *permanence*" (77). They thought Finn's recital was "bloody nice," but "Workman's Friend" is a thing of incomparable beauty and social relevance that in Lamont's words "will live" and be recited, repeated and cheered in their own time. This shows that the men recognise permanence as an important criterion for what makes literature qualitatively good. The potential of "Workman's Friend" is so promising that they expect it to "be heard wherever the Irish race is wont to gather, it'll live as long as there's a hard root of an Irishman left by the Almighty on this planet" (78). Unlike the poetry and tales told by Finn, Casey's poetry can be read over and over again without boring them. This diminishes the authority traditionally associated with Finn and ancient Irish poetry. It is not stimulating enough to the modern man. They ironically believe it is wrong to read and reread the stuff of the inherited tradition and "read damn the bloody thing else," but Casey's subjects are deemed eternally appealing (76). If Finn's stories have lived this long, perhaps Casey's will too, that is the unlikely but disturbing truth. Finn, who had fallen asleep again, is violently wakened and asked to give his "scholarly pertinacious fastidious opinion," but with "a patient weariness" he simply continues slowly reciting Sweeny staves "to the fire" and the men's shoes, "the voice of the old man from the dim bed" (78-9).

Sweeny is the speaker in the staves Finn recites, rich with natural imagery and conveying his love for the land and the creatures inhabiting it.

I like not the trumpeting
heard at morn;
sweeter hearing is the squeal
of badgers in Benna Broc.

I do not like it
the loud bulging;
finer is the stagbelling stag
of antler-points twice twenty.

There are makings for plough-teams
from glen to glen;
each resting-stag at rest
on the summit of the peaks. (80)

Inspired by the nature imagery, Shanahan interrupts Finn once more to recite a verse of his own

which mixes the imagery from Sweeny's song with the metre and mores of "Workman's Friend:" "When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the colour of bran, when a badger bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN!" (80). His friends applaud his ingenuity, their enthusiastic back-clapping forming a sad contrast with Finn, whose "droning from the bed" recommences, betokening that high epic verse may no longer be able to compete with popular lyric celebrations of the banal.

However, Finn steadfastly continues his recitation, even if he is weary, amid the increasingly pompous cries of his listeners who are newly emboldened by their literary efforts. But it could also be argued that their behaviour is more akin to the type of patient deference afforded an amateur singer who always sings the same old song at weekly traditional music sessions, their listeners politely looking into their pints and clapping perfunctorily when the song is ended. This deference can disguise mild annoyance, while as a gesture, it respects the auratic and authoritative value of the tradition and reaffirms the audience's belief that everyone has a right to recite or sing what they want, first of all to express themselves and secondly to participate in a national tradition and perform their identity. Even if the audience considers their poem or song to be out-moded, this patient deference leaves intact the artistic expression's aura of authenticity and authority while also simultaneously expressing the audience's decision to distance itself from that mode of expression.

In my view, this reading casts new light on a line from the blank verse recited by Finn early in the novel at his introduction.

I am the breast of a young queen, said Finn,

I am a thatching against rains.

I am a dark castle against bat-flutters.

I am a Connachtman's ear.

I am a harpstring.

I am a gnat (15-6, emphasis mine).

Cathal Ó Hainle claims that this poem echoes an earlier poem that has "traditionally been ascribed to the mythical Amergin," and which has been called poetry of "pantheistic nature ecstasy, a poem of wizardry and a paean of metaphoric self-praise" (28). The version recited here parodies Douglas Hyde's translation and (contested) attribution of the poem to Amergin or Finn, both mythical figures. Ó Hainle suggests that because this stanza is more ridiculous than the previous or subsequent stanzas, they are intended to warn the reader that this is a parody, culminating in the "pathetic [...] 'I am a gnat'" (30-1). As a form of metaphoric self-praise, calling yourself a gnat is pathetic or ironic. Being a gnat would signify that Finn is puny or insignificant, so it is unlikely that

he would use this word to describe himself, but the student narrator conceivably would. Nor should we overlook the fact that the gnat (and his close relative the midge) is perceived as one of the most irritating natural phenomena in Ireland. With this in mind, I think that O’Nolan has Finn identify with the gnat to symbolise his indelible presence in the collective Irish imagination through repeated representation in revivalist literature circulating in contemporary Ireland. At the time, with the sense that the literature of the past or even modern literature with a past motif, was being invoked to the point of annoyance, the comparison to a gnat would seem derogatory – it certainly tarnishes his authority.

Finn’s authority degenerates substantially from his introduction on the first page in “*The third opening*” as a “legendary hero of old Ireland. Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development. Each of his thighs was as thick as a horse’s belly, narrowing to a calf as thick as the belly of a foal” (*ASTB* 9). His epic proportions immediately belie his epic status if it was not already known. When he first appears in the Red Swan manuscript, he needs no introduction. His iconic status in Irish culture is well-known by readers in the novel (the student narrator’s friends) and the other characters in Trellis’s book. The implied reader of the Red Swan manuscript’s knowledge of Finn’s iconic status is also taken for granted. When Finn begins to speak and dominate the narrative space, any doubt remaining would be obviated. To confound the reader’s expectations of the mythical Finn, O’Nolan diminishes his authority from then on, as if being forced to play a bit part in a smutty novel was not degrading enough. This is in keeping with O’Nolan’s tendency to establish *and* destroy the authority of certain seminal narratives in one fell swoop, before showing how the authority of the original has been transformed. The grotesque presentation of the legendary hero that frames the above-quoted poem confounds widely accepted perceptions of Finn. Then, in the dialogues with Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey, Finn’s authority continues to wane by degrees. At first, they too accept Finn’s authorial authority without question, he is to be respected. But as I have shown above, because Finn’s recitation of the story of Sweeny cannot hold the men’s attention, they gradually tire of him and usurp his authorial standing not so much by silencing him, but by sending up their own authorial cries and debating the quality and value of his narrative. When Finn’s recitation comes to an end, more or less unnoticed by his distracted listeners, his status is so diminished that he is nothing but a weary figure slowly droning from the bed. Bohman-Kalaja considers Finn’s “inability to engage his listeners” the ultimate cause of “his textual death” (87).

Later, once Sweeny himself is introduced, he too is written out of existence as Jem Casey

wins his listeners' love and attention because they understand his poems better than the inscrutable verses Sweeny raves after he has fallen bleeding from a tree. One of the characters even suggests putting Sweeny out of his misery, but he is saved by Casey who feels connected to his fellow poet (*ASTB* 127-8). According to Bohman-Kalaja, because the characters can copy the structure of Casey's poetry with ease, "the poet is no longer necessary to the poetry – the formula has displaced him" (87). Clearly this resounds with anxieties about authorship – O'Nolan asks what is so special about it if everyone can do it, particularly when the texts produced are virtually indistinguishable from one another – like Shanahan and Casey's.¹⁵⁴ Finn and Sweeny are written out of existence because they refused to have a dialogue with their audience. This is one of several examples in *At Swim* in which authors who establish dialogue with their predecessors are privileged over those who do not: "but *the author must be consciously aware of and attentive to this dialogue*. If he isn't, the texts produced risk being involuntarily formulaic" and unchallenging (87-8). *At Swim* may be seen as O'Nolan's own mediational dialogue with ancient and modern Irish literature. In the student's ideal model of literature, existing texts should be borrowed at will because everything has already been said. This entails a fine line between plagiarism and the witting appropriation of other texts for the purpose of innovation, or of revitalising sleeping narratives.

Four Characters in Search of an Author to Roast

Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey are an important feature of Trellis's Red Swan manuscript, but they are actually the creations of the student narrator. They usurp authorial control from Trellis in an attempt to find their own voices and lead a life outside Trellis's despotic narrative. Effectively, when Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey take the author's seat, they do find their own voices. Given *At Swim*'s thematic engagement with the consequences of mechanical reproduction, such as increased availability of and accessibility to models of textual creation, allows us to see that he denies, at least to some extent, the existence of an authentic and all-authoritative tradition. For O'Nolan, like Benjamin, "tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable" (Benjamin 572). When Orlick takes a break from creating his revenge palimpsest in Trellis's Red Swan manuscript and the others take over, the original is unmoored from the tradition and appropriated for mass culture. Benjamin sees this as emancipatory, and while I think O'Nolan recognises this potential, he is wary of what the usurpers, Shanahan and friends, are doing with it: exacting

¹⁵⁴ O'Nolan may be thinking of formulaic, midwived Gaelic autobiographies or derivative revivalist literature.

revenge, but ignoring aesthetic quality.

Having relished the punishment Orlick was exacting on Trellis via the Pooka, Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey wish to give Trellis “a little hiding of [their] own. A side-show, you understand” (*ASTB* 181). They take turns writing about the torture of Trellis, and agree to put him back exactly as Orlick left him before he left the room. Though Orlick had been cooperatively incorporating a number of their ideas, he had also patiently dismissed a great many and criticised the men’s desire to get straight to the violent revenge tactics. With Orlick away, they take this opportunity to punish Trellis in their own words and style, without “the fancy stuff” as Shanahan calls the register of classical satire Orlick uses for his version of this co-opted Sweeny narrative.

The opportunity of telling a story in their own words enables them to make identity claims on the story. They redefine its significance, simultaneously rejecting the value of the original and the subsequent versions of it they have heard so far in the novel, while giving it new meaning. For them, the earlier versions of the Sweeny story were elitist and little more than a display of linguistic prowess. By appropriating it for the man in the street – for mass culture – they manipulate it to serve their thirst for revenge; thereby giving it personal relevance and making it correspond to their desires, making it a cosy narrative in which to set up camp.

Furthermore, by usurping authorship of this story, they join a long line of authors who have used some version of this narrative for other ends and thus extend the tradition. Riding the coat-tails of already established tradition, Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey affirm the authority of the tradition while they also change their relationship to it by making the narrative, in their eyes, more pleasing and topical. They think the story is fine in that it is worth telling, but feel it lacks verve and think the fancy language Orlick was using distracts from the action they are more interested in. For them a good story is defined by what happens rather than how it is told.

This is one of many examples of how O’Nolan explores the conflict of interests between what authors believe constitutes literary quality and innovation, and what an audience wants to read. Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey want the power that they believe authors have (we should not forget that Trellis and the student narrator have been making them do their will). With Orlick out of the room, they take their chance to exercise authority and agency of their own, while also adjusting the narrative flow to resemble what they want to read, in the contemporary language of the masses.

Orlick’s account of the torture of Trellis has the Pooka speak in the same high philosophical

discourse he used in his colloquy with the Good Fairy.¹⁵⁵ Each time he inflicts torture on Trellis, Trellis responds with a classical profanity, such as

“You hog of hell,” “You leper’s death-puke,” “You black bastard,” and so on (*ASTB* 177).

When Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey pick up the narrative shortly after this, they reject the register of the Pooka-Trellis dialogue in Orlick’s story and transform it to fit their own language, as in the following example:

Down flew the Pooka...with a pipe in his mouth and the full of a book of fancy talk out of him as if this was any consolation to our friend, who was pumping blood like a stuck pig and roaring out strings of profanity and dirty foul language [...].

Enough of that, my man, says the Pooka...Enough of your dirty tongue now, Caesar. Say you like it.

I’m having a hell of a time, says Trellis. I’m nearly killed laughing. I never had such gas since I was a chiseller (181).

Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey enjoy Orlick’s story, but cannot identify with the highly stylised language Orlick employs. Having started as stock characters hardly differentiated from one another in Trellis’s *Red Swan* manuscript, they heartily enjoy this promotion to rebellious co-author and the attendant sense of power writing gives them. In accepting authorship, they also appropriate a model of authorship. As characters aware of the fact that they exist only in fiction, they are used to having their reality shaped by an all-powerful, despotic author who forces his characters to do exactly as he says. The written word shapes their reality, and they subject their characters to the same condition in their own voice. Their modern gloss on one of many torture scenes endorses the reinvigorated Sweeny tale while also making it their own. They engage with it as an existing narrative and cooperate to make it work for them, and in this way, O’Nolan gestures towards “a dialogue between an implied (even contrived) author and reader” and collapses the distinction between “two familiar modes of reading: fiction and criticism” (Bohman-Kalaja 57).

Some critics, such as Clissman and Wäppling, have argued that the modernised appropriations of *Buile Suibhne* in *At Swim* and their juxtaposition with Finn’s epic verse translation are intended to mock their object (here, *Buile Suibhne*) and show that it is no longer relevant to the post-independence Irish subject. Others have claimed that the close proximity of high and low narratives, ancient legends about kings and warriors and novelistic discourse about everyday

¹⁵⁵ The dialogue between the Pooka and the Good Fairy is modelled on the talk of the two philosophers in James Stephens’s *The Crock of Gold* (1912).

nobodies, is intended as a critique of the novel as a genre,¹⁵⁶ or that the contemporary language of Lamont and his friends is inferior to the “real old stuff of the native land” is intended to diminish modern literature and language (*ASTB* 75). While O’Nolan clearly voices disgust with some elements of modern literature and language, as we have seen above regarding the reception of Jem Casey, there is a far more likely interpretation of the encounters between ancient and modern literature in the novel. Denell Downum describes it as follows: the “modern interpolations serve to bring the stories into relationship with one another, showing how storytelling begets storytelling as words and themes move” back and forth between characters in a dialogic relationship (308). The restyled palimpsest inserted into Orlick’s manuscript by Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey comes as a result of their decision to embrace authorship through appropriating and adapting earlier Irish literary narratives that have helped to shape their sense of belonging to a great storytelling tradition. Even if they feel that the distance between them, so-called men on the street, and *Buile Suibhne* is insurmountable, they recognise its cultural value and perform their relationship to Irish literary tradition. While their rendition of the modernised *Buile Suibhne* shows them to be far removed from the original, it also shows how they acknowledge and approve of it. Thus although it partially destroys the value of the already corrupted original, coming to it as they do in a derivative state (Orlick’s version), this destructive turn enables them to create a new version that has contemporary relevance. At the same time, they reflect on their position in a long tradition, by accepting their responsibility as heirs to it, who have now come into their own enough to consciously manipulate the process of selection that determines how that tradition will be practised and live on in the modern world.

In the context of post-independence Ireland, O’Nolan’s first novel presents a rebellious alternative to the State-approved monologic narrative of Ireland as Gaelic, rural and Catholic. The legendary and contemporary residents of the Red Swan hotel co-habit and co-author.¹⁵⁷ They live together and listen to each other’s stories as well as appropriate elements from these in order to make a new narrative, one which is perhaps more representative of Ireland’s diversity. The near proximity of translationese and epic verse with biographical reminiscences, excerpts from Victorian textbooks, mock journalism and contemporary Dublin speech (to name just some of the various

¹⁵⁶ See Mellamphy 22.

¹⁵⁷ The Red Swan Hotel is located in Croppies Acre, a site associated with rebellion and renewal. The name of the site recalls the rebellion of 1798 and the so-called Croppy Boys, or farm labourers fighting in the rebellion. The sites of their “often mass burials” were alive with growth the following spring, as “the seeds carried in their pockets sprouted,” hence the association of renewal and rebirth (Evans 107) Evans argues that the student narrator’s selection of this spot (and O’Brien’s one narrative level up) gives Trellis’s writing activities a rebellious, possibly criminal character.

discourses in the novel) produced by several different authors highlights this diversity. Furthermore, that certain of these authors reproduce versions or elements of traditional and emergent narratives circulating in O’Nolan’s Ireland as well as use them as points of reference and background information is highly important. It shows post-independence Ireland to be an amalgamation – a text compiled and written by several authors. This amalgam defies a monologic view of the Irish nation and exposes it as a dialogic collage.

In this way, O’Nolan acknowledges the underlying value of Irish mythology and folklore and its influence on modern Irish literature. But as we have seen in Chapter 1 in relation to *The Poor Mouth* and the development of modern Irish literature in conjunction with revivalism, he questions what he considers the exaggerated presence of these narratives in contemporary culture as well as the extent to which they are sometimes uncritically appropriated as models for creative production. O’Nolan is more than eager to demonstrate that these supposedly unadulterated narratives from Irish tradition were in fact authored by many people and are actually compilations. *At Swim* demonstrates the cooperative process of compiling a narrative as a positive process, due to the dialogue it requires. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the text’s combination of oral tradition, written tradition, and importantly, translation – including all its erasures and inclusions – parodies authorship while questioning the ethical and aesthetic responsibilities that attend it.

Despotic Authors

The ethical responsibility to tradition and commitment to good art is further developed in relation to O’Nolan’s conception of the despotic author. The student’s theory of literature holds that “[t]he novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic” (*ASTB* 25). This is why he eventually allows his characters to co-opt Trellis’s narrative that contains them, on the premise that if given the proper circumstances and opportunities, they can take control of their own lives. Several critics, including Eamonn Hughes, have noted how *At Swim* attempts to be democratic and create meaning on the basis of proportional representation instead of imposing it from above, like a despot or tyrant. Seamus Deane calls it “a ‘novel’ constructed on the principles of proportional representation rather than on the single transferable vote system that is the political equivalent of the representing narrator in realist fiction” (158). The democratic principle is certainly pursued here, but only as an ideal that is not actually fulfilled in *At Swim*. Eventually, the student, and O’Nolan behind him, must choose and impose their will on the characters and unity on the novel.

At Swim is filled with authors who attempt to exert total control over their characters and stories. The most despotic of them all, Trellis, compels his creations to live in the Red Swan Hotel with him to monitor their behaviour and “see that there is no boozing” (*ASTB* 35). Given the opportunity to take control of Orlick’s manuscript, Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey almost immediately abuse their power by seeking brutal revenge on Trellis. Finn and Sweeny though, are “equally authoritarian figures” according to Hughes (127). Finn, as both a despotic storyteller and a victim of tyrannical storytellers, uniquely illuminates the problems that authors face if they desire – or are compelled – to represent historical or quasi-historical characters realistically and accurately.

Realistic and accurate representation was largely expected from Irish authors in the 1930s, particularly if they were trying to write something national. This is similar to the audience’s expectations of seamliness and plausibility and their objections to *The Playboy of the Western World* as I discussed in Chapter 1. With more and more print appearing everywhere, readers had a greater say in what they chose to read, and many of them wanted seemly (if not flattering) and accurate portraits of Irish life. Irish writers were acutely aware at this point in time of the extent to which they were held accountable for what they wrote, whether by the Censorship Board or the reading public, both of which could potentially affect their careers.¹⁵⁸ If writers wanted people to buy their books, they could hardly ignore what their audience wanted and expected.

In *At Swim*, O’Nolan also reflects on what characters want. Considering a few examples from the trial scene of how characters feel about the way they are represented in fiction as well as Finn’s experiences as representing author and represented character, allows us to rethink perceived notions of an author’s moral and ethical responsibility to represent characters accurately, and what the consequences of telling stories in Ireland could be in the 1930s.

The capacity of literature to represent reality accurately, and represent characters – fictional, historical or both – fairly or even considerately is a particularly fruitful theme in O’Nolan’s work. He regularly deflates the widely held assumption, at the time of his writing and today, that authors can actually recreate reality accurately. He also toys with the idea that authors have an ethical responsibility to represent characters and their reality faithfully and completely. This is clearer in *At Swim* than in any of his other novels, and is illustrated in the student narrator’s plea for attending to the individual rights of characters, as well as in the trial towards the end of the novel. The trial of

¹⁵⁸ It is also significant that this book was written in the midst of what seemed like unceasing catastrophe and crisis in Europe and the rise to power of real-life violent despots. Hughes addresses this in his article, claiming that the abundance of exaggeratedly authoritarian characters in O’Nolan’s work dovetails with 1930s debates about totalitarianism and the nature of authority in both cultural tradition and history (112).

Trellis makes it clear that while it is one thing to strive after accuracy of representation and to take into account the full subjectivity of a character, it is quite another thing to execute and achieve an accurate representation thereof. This last point is illustrated in the testimony of the cow who was engaged “to discharge [her] natural functions in a field” in a novel called *The Closed Cloister* but ended up suffering great discomfort as a result of the author’s failure to have someone attend to milking her regularly (*ASTB* 203).

The climax of *At Swim* is the trial, at which almost all the characters that have appeared in any of the various narratives of the novel are present. Many of them are given the opportunity to confront Trellis with the representational wrongs he has done them, while some are also allowed to act as judges. Another notable example is Slug Willard, one of the cowboys, whom Trellis employed as a tram conductor, but failed to provide with warm undergarments and even forgot to tell him that his employment had been terminated, all of which “occasioned considerable mental anguish” (197). Such details may seem unimportant for creating a compelling character, but if the characters are intended to hold up a mirror to real life, concerns such as regular milking and warm clothing are very important indeed. This parodies readers’ desires to see real life portrayed plausibly and in full while it also indicates the level of detail that authors must consider if realism is their aim. O’Nolan seems to suggest with this that proportional representation extended to the realm of fiction is an ideal worth having, but one that authors can never truly live up to. Furthermore, given O’Nolan’s philosophy that it is impossible to know anything fully, how could you ever hope to represent a character in the fullness of their subjectivity and reality? If the novel should be a “self-evident sham” as the student believes (*ASTB* 25), it is almost unfair of readers to expect authors to represent reality in all its facets.

The democratic ideal of letting everyone write in this novel and determine their own fate is abandoned once Trellis’s manuscript is burnt by the chambermaid Teresa. The ultimate fate of a character or a plot is determined by the author, and in having Teresa burn the manuscript, the very “pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends,” the student reassumes authority and control of his narrative (215-6).¹⁵⁹ He claims that finishing the trial scene

¹⁵⁹ O’Brien immediately highlights the artifice of how the student narrator saves Trellis by calling attention to another form of artifice with a pun. Once home, under the impression that he has been hallucinating and sleep walking, Trellis meets Teresa at the door. As he follows her upstairs he observes that he can see her corset moving her skirt in time with her steps:

It is the function of such garments to improve the figure, to conserve corporal discursiveness, to create the illusion of a finely modulated body. If it betray its own presence when fulfilling this task, its purpose must largely fail.

Ars est celare artem, muttered Trellis, doubtful as to whether he had made a pun. (216)

may have proven beyond his literary abilities. Killing all of Trellis's characters in one fell swoop solves that problem, but also makes him just as tyrannical as Trellis and other unscrupulous writers. Downum observes that what is "dramatized in Trellis's outrageous trial, [is that] all writers are tyrants, attempting to compel their characters and language to do their will, and all writers are plagiarists, using words and themes that have already been recorded by others many times before" (312).

Finn knows that he has been represented in fiction, but regards most writers with suspicion. He also presents the writer as a tyrant who does not venerate his subjects with a flattering portrayal, but instead abuses his power by mis-representing characters for personal glory. On the one hand, the full and accurate representation of character is impossible – there will always be gaps. On the other hand, deliberate misrepresentation of a character is a disservice to their pride and denies them the (proper) identity they would give themselves. Finn is aware of the pitfalls of both representation and misrepresentation in a literary work, but also realises the important role stories play in how a figure of memory will live on in literature and collective remembrance. Even more, he seems to understand that whether a representation is perceived by an audience as authentic depends on the extent to which it encapsulates and mobilises the shared values (and expectations) of the community, in this case, the listeners.

In the first excerpt in which Finn speaks, "*Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn Mac Cool and his people, being humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology,*" Finn is asked to relate various stories and memories of his experiences (ASTB 13-20). More than once, he refuses to tell particular stories or expand further on others. Asked to tell specific tales, such as "the tale of the feast of Bricriú," "the Bull of Cooley" and "the Tale of the Enchanted Fort of the Sally Tree or [...] the Little Brawl at Allen," Finn declines, stating: "I cannot make it [...] It goes beyond me," and of the last two requests, "They go above me and around and through me [...]" (18). His claims that he cannot "make" the story emphasise that the process of creative construction that goes into writing stories is also involved in telling existing stories authored by someone else. Even if the story is not original, each version is unique. In order for Finn to feel fit to relate a certain story, he must identify with it and approve of it. When stories penetrate or elude him, Finn denies that he is the right person to tell them. It is not exactly clear why he feels unfit for the task but his refusal seems motivated by at least two causes. First of all, he is temporally unsuited for telling certain stories because he was not present at the events they describe; many of the stories occurred after his own lifetime. Other stories Finn refuses to tell occur in different cycles in which

he does not feature.¹⁶⁰ Finn says that while he could actually tell the “story of the Churl in the Puce Great-coat,” he refuses to do so on the grounds that it is a “crooked and dishonourable story that tells how Finn spoke honey-words and peace-words to a stranger who came seeking the high-rule and the high-rent of this kingdom” (18). In other words, the story does not provide a flattering portrayal of “Finn that is a better man than God,” to use his own phrase, nor is it plausible (19). It certainly does not fit in the contemporary nationalist ideology’s canon of ancient Irish stories, showing him to be consciously aware of the contemporary storytelling ethos, because he has been invoked in the student’s late 1930s narrative.

For Finn, telling stories entails being held accountable for how the subjects are represented and he needs to approve of it in order to choose it in the first place. To tell it is to believe it is true in this approach to storytelling. He senses that stories are not just for entertainment, but are powerful tools that must be wielded carefully and ethically. They can stand as monuments in memory with the subject forever being associated with them. They can give strength to the hearers, set bearings and teach lessons. This resonates with O’Nolan’s concerns about people in the streets of Dublin modelling their speech on the inauthentic speech of a Synge play. He suggests that the storyteller has a moral or ethical imperative to select his stories wisely so that they are instructive, praiseworthy and entertaining. Selecting stories that do not meet these criteria is folly at best, and at worst, the unethical and selfish decision of tyrants.

The authority and accuracy of stories and storytellers is called into question as Finn lists other old Irish stories¹⁶¹ in which “ill-usage” has been done “to the men of Erin [by] the book-poets of the world and dishonour to Finn:”

[W]ho has seen the like of Finn or seen the living semblance of him standing in the world...? Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story? [...] Who could put a terrible madness on the head of Sweeney for the slaughter of a single Lent-gaunt cleric, to make him live in tree-tops and roost in the middle of a yew, not a wattle to the shielding of his mad head in the middle of the wet winter...? Who but a story-teller? (19-20)

From Finn’s perspective, to insinuate that he could be a traitor or to punish Sweeney so harshly for

¹⁶⁰ The Bull of Cooley (*Táin Bo Cuailnge*) is the central text of the Ulster Cycle, to which *Buile Suibhne* also belongs. The *Táin*, an epic saga, dates from the seventh and eighth centuries and is considered the greatest work in Irish classical literature. Leerssen notes that by the time Lady Gregory re-told the *Táin*, it “had come to be venerated as Ireland’s oldest and most authentic native epic” (198). The other tales Finn mentions are from the Fenian or Fionn cycle.

¹⁶¹ The other stories he mentions are *Caithréim/Beatha Cheallaigh* (The Career/Life of Ceallach), *Oidheadh Chloinne Lir* (The Tragic Story of the Children of Lir). I provide the Sweeney reference because of its significance in *At Swim*.

the murder of but one malnourished cleric, you would have to be insane or have a death wish. No-one in their right mind would dare offend such worthy and established heroes, that is, no-one but the tyrannical writer, who by “weaving a story-teller’s book-web” can only seek glory for himself if he does not glorify Finn or another subject (19). The term “book-web” aptly underscores the intricate connections and gaps that unite any story, as well as the process of fabrication. Finn’s assertion that “ill-usage” has been done to him and others belies a desire to rectify the misrepresentations that storytellers have promoted, and which have had such a lasting presence and impact that the misrepresentations have come to be remembered more clearly than what would presumably be the correct version.

O’Nolan playfully capitalises on Finn’s fear that inaccurate “book-webs” are being spun from various unreliable sources and accepted as truthful, by making this a driving force in his debut novel. Cathal Ó Hainle claims that several of O’Nolan’s translations in *At Swim* are parodies of English translations made by Standish H. O’Grady (24; 169). He argues that it is conceivable that Finn’s reference to a “sea-blue book” in which he is misrepresented is O’Grady’s *Silva Gadelica*, the 1892 edition of which was covered in blue floral patterns. *Silva Gadelica* is not a translation of Fenian cycle literature, but is a collection of medieval prose tales that includes several translations. In line with *The Poor Mouth*’s parody of Gaelic autobiography translations, I also believe that much of the parody in *At Swim* is directed at the translations of Fenian cycle literature as well as English language works inspired by it, such as poems like Yeats’s “Ossian” and others.¹⁶² After the decline of Irish as a vernacular language, many people would only have been able to read ancient Irish literature in translation, complete with mistakes, mistranslations and altered emphasis. All the translations, dubious or not, and Irish Literary Revival works inspired by *Fianniocht* literature, resulted in multiplications of the same stories and inevitable alterations to those stories and the persons they portrayed. Thus, the so-called original Old and Middle Irish versions of Finn are followed by the supposedly spurious Yeats’s Finn, O’Grady’s Finn, O’Nolan’s Finn and so on. The Greek epigraph of *At Swim* (*Εξίσταται γὰρ πάντ’ ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων δίχα*): “For all things go out and give place to one another” underscores this profusion of Finns and stories.¹⁶³ Just as those represented in

¹⁶² See also *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 9 May 1956 for O’Nolan’s well-balanced admiration of O’Grady. He admits O’Grady’s translations had their faults but praises him for his genuine love of the Irish language and his laudable efforts in the early years of the Irish language movement (laudable in that they precede what O’Nolan perceived to be the less genuine efforts of the Gaelic League).

¹⁶³ Downum writes that the phrase “aptly describes the way in which ‘all things’, including characters, events, words, and even storytellers, are fleeting and may be exchanged for one another, implying that *At Swim* offers no single primary portrait of the artist on which the others are modelled, but rather a potentially illimitable chain of artist figures” (306).

fiction, like Finn, are not able to control how storytellers portray them, authors also have limited control over how they and their intentions are perceived by readers. In 1941 when O’Nolan published *An Béal Bocht* he experienced first-hand some of the limitations of authorial (or editorial) power when many critics and readers misunderstood the object of that novel’s satire. A year later in *Cruiskeen Lawn* he would complain about the extent to which J. M. Synge’s plays had influenced the speech of real people in Dublin (28 Aug. 1942).

Once the art work is in the world, it goes beyond its creator’s control and becomes subject to the whims and interpretations of critics and other writers. Downum concludes that “O’Brien illuminates the dilemma of the writer who cannot fully cede authority and yet who also understands the false premises on which that authority rests” (313). Finn shares O’Nolan’s knowledge of this dilemma, which is ironically dramatised by his comments on whether storytellers have the right to tell particular stories and the attendant responsibility of doing so. Through the character of Finn, O’Nolan explores the double bind of the creative construction of narratives and the moral and ethical responsibility of authors to do justice to the characters that inhabit the stories they choose to tell.

Sacred Denial

I will now move on to consider related issues of authorship and authority in *The Dalkey Archive*, a novel which is also concerned with the pitfalls of authorship, but goes further than *At Swim* in examining the role that readers play in evaluating and canonising texts deemed culturally important in Ireland.¹⁶⁴ The extra focus on readers and interpretation enables O’Nolan to explore the cultural significance attached to these sacred cows and sacred texts, both literally and figuratively. This is achieved by constructing a dialogue between authors and their readers.

In *At Swim*, Finn’s main worry seems to be that he will be incorrectly remembered if inaccurate portraits of him become canonised in literature or even elevated to the level of spurious historical fact. He is loath to endorse his literary image. Similar issues concern Saint Augustine and James Joyce of *The Dalkey Archive*.¹⁶⁵ Augustine wants to limit his reputation to his own written

¹⁶⁴ *The Dalkey Archive* is also more bitter, as is most evident in the treatment of Joyce, against whom (and with whom) O’Nolan occasionally identified himself as a writer. *The Dalkey Archive* succeeds in showing how uncomfortable a writer can feel with the reputation ascribed to him by his audience and implies that this is a gross error on their part.

¹⁶⁵ Augustine (354-430) was Bishop of Hippo from 395-430. One of James Joyce’s (1882-1941) middle names was Augustine.

works instead of what others have written about him. Joyce does not want to be associated with the works that have been ascribed to him.

Unlike the majority of *At Swim*'s author figures, Augustine and Joyce are real authors known to the readers in the novel and of the novel.¹⁶⁶ Augustine is a saint in the Catholic tradition and Joyce is an Irish cultural saint. Both are vitally important cultural saints in Ireland: Augustine in the Church and Western philosophy and Joyce in international and Irish modernism. The texts referred to, *The Confessions*, *Ulysses* (1922), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), etc, are also real, canonical texts known to the reader.

Saint Augustine is conjured up by De Selby's DMP substance in an underwater cave south of Dublin, at Dalkey. De Selby, who considers himself a "theologist and physicist," has discovered that "time is a plenum," a space filled with itself (*DA* 12; 16). He discovers this by accident while researching how to destroy the world. Removal of the oxygen from the air using DMP "cancels the apparently serial nature of time and confronts us with true time and simultaneously with all the things and creatures which time has ever contained or will contain, provided we evoke them," making it possible to summon people who lived at any time in the past (21). Of course, it also renders life on Earth impossible, and that is the ultimate end to which De Selby hopes to use the DMP. In the meantime though, he is concerned with theology. De Selby uses the DMP to arrange interviews with various saints and biblical figures. He has no control over who will appear and is never certain of the spectre's identity.

De Selby's reading of the Bible and research into the Church Fathers left him with doubts about the truth of particular biblical stories and aspects of doctrine. An underwater interview with John the Baptist convinced him that God indeed was the victor of his "awesome encounter" with "the rebel Lucifer" (21).¹⁶⁷ He has also met Jonas, who was a "bit of a ballocks," an opinion De Selby claims he shares with the Lord (67-8). This encounter proved to him that Jonas actually spent three days and nights in the belly of a shark, not a whale. A meeting with Saint Francis of Assisi "did little but verify what is now received knowledge of him" (69). All De Selby's interviews aim at

¹⁶⁶ In correspondence with Niall Montgomery about the working draft of *The Dalkey Archive*, referred to as TDA, O'Nolan wrote "(i) TDA will be read by middle-class chinners 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 exegetic bullshit or are aware of its absurdities is too tiny to be expressed. If Augustine is to 'bewilder' readers, what will mention of the more recent holy man do?" (9 Jan. 1964). The more recent holy man must be Ignatius of Loyola.

¹⁶⁷ Booker observes that De Selby's doubts regarding the truth of this story rest on the notion that history is told by the victors, therefore it is not possible to know whether "the biblical account of Lucifer's rebellion is accurate" (109). De Selby's remarks on the subject are worth quoting: "For if—I repeat *if*—the decision had gone the other way and God had been vanquished, who but Lucifer would be certain to put about the other and opposite story" (*DA* 21).

clearing up what he considers ambiguities or paradoxes that have resulted from knowledge being recorded in the first place, and the subsequent loss of information through translations or uneducated interpretations. He also displays a deeper interest in biblical characters who were profligates before they saw the truth (Francis, Ignatius of Loyola, Augustine, etc). De Selby invites Mick, the novel's narrator, and his friend Hackett to join him in the cave to see the DMP at work.

One of the ways that *The Dalkey Archive* illustrates its concern with reading and forming interpretations of texts culminates in De Selby's dissatisfaction with received interpretations. This allows O'Nolan ample opportunity to further confound the reader's expectations and challenge received knowledge. De Selby's reading has made him suspicious and he uses the diabolical DMP as a tool to confront dead writers (among others) about their texts and personalities. In one example of confounding expectations, the North African saint turns out to be Irish. Augustine's "Dublin accent [is] unmistakable" and he claims that his father, "*a proper gobshite*," was named Patrick (32-3). Augustine refers to his Irish heritage to dismiss De Selby's accusations that he was a "debauched and abandoned young man," claiming that he "*wasn't the worst*" of his pagan brethren (33). Like the appropriation of foreign texts and writers into the Irish tradition, such as the Nicene Creed in *The Dalkey Archive*, and British authors like Keats and Huxley in *At Swim*, by making Augustine (a Berber) Irish, O'Nolan shows that popular imagination and memory can flexibly co-opt elements of other traditions and unwittingly integrate them almost seamlessly.¹⁶⁸

Augustine's youth is the first subject De Selby wishes to discuss, particularly the difference between the saint's sexually promiscuous youth and his "hagiarchic senility" (33). He finds it unfair that Augustine's saintliness has overshadowed his profligacy. De Selby demands to know whether Augustine ever engaged in homosexual "ruttings," to which the saint replies:

-Heterononsense! There is no evidence against me beyond what I wrote myself. Too vague. Be on your guard against that class of fooling. Nothing in black and white.

-My vocation is enquiry and action, not literature.

-You're sadly inexperienced. You cannot conceive the age I lived in, its customs, or judge of that African sun.

(33)

Augustine equates binary thinking with foolery. As a dead man without "whereness" and only with "condition," he believes that all knowledge must be considered in its proper temporal context (38). Augustine does not believe that De Selby can judge him on the basis of modern standards and accumulated knowledge. He prefers to limit interpretations of his life and work to his written word

¹⁶⁸ In *At Swim*, numerous French authors, like Rimbaud and Balzac, are still associated with a racy and debauched tradition, but in *The Dalkey Archive* (and by the 1960s) their status is somewhat more respectable – even a woman, Mick's girlfriend Mary, can read and speak about French literature without it being disgraceful.

alone, which he believes speaks for itself. But De Selby does not consider this relevant to his vocation of “enquiry and action,” which can be approached, in his point of view, as black and white.

De Selby’s scientific chauvinism acknowledges the existence of different spheres of knowledge, but he still thinks that science is superior to other disciplines and believes that his methods can be applied to any discipline indiscriminately. As I have argued in the previous two chapters, O’Nolan maintains that even the most confident disciplines should consider other possibilities beyond what can be observed in their own field. De Selby fails to bridge the dialectical gap between his thought and Augustine’s. Booker has argued that *The Dalkey Archive* is the climax of O’Nolan’s career-long critique of authority and mastery. For him, *The Dalkey Archive*’s critique is ultimate thanks to the entirely complementary contradictions embodied in the discourse between Augustine and De Selby. Their opposed discourses are revealed to be less opposed than they may like to admit. Both take their own area of expertise to be straightforward. What they detest in each other’s (and others’) systems of belief and knowledge can also be reciprocally identified.

In the quotes above, Augustine’s claim that De Selby cannot even begin to imagine what it was like to live in his time conforms to the historical Augustine’s theory of memory and narrative, in which the present always determines how one looks at the past or the future. He scolds De Selby for applying modern moral standards to his time, but his theory of memory and narrative holds that De Selby cannot help but view the past through the eyes of the present. But while he claims De Selby is incapable of understanding his life and times and should take him on his written word, he still urges him to try: he has an ethical obligation to avoid thinking dualistically, he must try to account for things which he has no understanding of such as the African sun. Augustine charges him thus with the impossible task of empathising with his chronotope, in which, for example, homosexuality was not regarded in the same light as it was in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Still, De Selby is not able to go back in time and live as Augustine lived, even if they may now be able to briefly share a present chronotope with the help of DMP. This conundrum characterises the authorial dilemma of trying to convey the fullness of a particular moment with insufficient knowledge and means.

Further contradictions arise in the interview between De Selby and Augustine. While Augustine condemns (part of) his own oeuvre as exaggerated bravado, he also retreats behind the protective screen of his other writings as an excuse not to have to explain himself and be held accountable to anyone but himself. In *At Swim*, this has its parallel in the trial of Trellis, which is not only “an examination of [his] dictatorial crimes, [but also] a reminder of the ways in which real

texts can be used against real authors. [...] [H]is condemnation underscores the inseparability of aesthetic and ethical textual corruption” (Bohman-Kalaja 94). But *At Swim* privileges creation over reception and *The Dalkey Archive* reverses this paradigm by having authors defend themselves and refuse to conform to their readers’ expectations.

Augustine is one of the “philosophical founders of the Catholic revulsion with the physical” (Booker 108). De Selby delights in confronting Augustine with his earlier concupiscence, assuming that it is very embarrassing for the saint to recall his “earlier nasty gymnastiness” and his estranged, non-Christian wife and child, to name but a few of his transgressions (*DA* 33, 36).¹⁶⁹ Augustine claims this is nonsense, as he just “*invented obscene feats out of bravado, lest [he] be thought innocent or cowardly*” by his peers, “*low companions, sweating from the fires of lust*” (33). He denounces Book Two of his *Confessions* as “*shocking exaggeration*” and takes refuge in the fact that he “*lived within [his] own rough time*” and still managed to remain a Christian (33-4). In other words, he was just making it up to seek approval from his peers and prefers to be judged on the whole of his life’s work instead of just one youthful exaggeration. O’Nolan’s personal views about *At Swim* are hard to overlook in this regard. Even after its re-issue in 1960, he continued to denigrate it, imploring Angela Connolly to “remember that it was ‘written by a schoolboy,’” and in 1964 [in a radio interview] he said, ‘I cannot express my detestation for that damn book’” (Cronin 211-12). As to why it was critically acclaimed, he thought that ““there must be some diabolical code, some anagram buried in it’ that he had not intended” (212). Readers and authors do not always see eye to eye. Being able to ask an author about his intentions is often seen as producing new insight into a given literary work. But as Augustine and De Selby show, as does O’Nolan in the interview quoted above, authors and readers have different demands and criteria for their appreciation of a book.

De Selby asks Augustine whether Judas suffered from any physical affliction and whether he is in heaven despite his betrayal of Jesus. Augustine, becoming annoyed, states curtly: “—*You have not read my works. I did not build the City of God. At most I have been an humble urban district councillor, never the Town Clerk. Whether Judas is dead in the Lord is a question notice of which would require to be given to the Polyarch*” (38). In this rebuttal, Augustine highlights that he was working with borrowed material and is not the ultimate source or expert on the matters he discusses

¹⁶⁹ In Book Eight, Chapter 7 of his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote of his reluctance to convert: “[A]t the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you for chastity and said: ‘Grant me chastity and continence—but not yet.’ I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress” (145).

in his work. This is clear in his ambiguous reference to his *City of God*, and the way in which he positions himself in the hierarchy of divine knowledge and organisation. By saying he was never a town clerk, he admits he never had control of or access to all the records of the City of God, he is not an archivist in that City, but “at best” an urban district councillor, working with the documents and information available to him. Any questions exceeding that vast yet limited territory must be submitted to the “Polyarch,” a term which Booker has defined as the “chief administrator of [Augustine’s] heaven,” a mysterious being whose divine or diabolical nature is never determined in the novel (Booker 109). Augustine regards the impertinent questions De Selby puts to him as the result of the latter’s failure to have read Augustine’s works carefully. Had he read them, we are led to believe, then he would have understood that Augustine’s knowledge was limited and he could not be expected to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of Judas’s whereabouts. Augustine would only call himself an expert on his own text because he claims he told all he knew.

De Selby proceeds to confront Augustine with the lack of precision and clarity in his writing as compared to that of Descartes, another object of parody in this novel. This prompts Augustine’s valuation of Descartes as a mere “*recitalist, or formulist, of what he took, often mistakenly, to be true knowledge*” and the accusation that Descartes plagiarised Cogito Ergo Sum from him: “*Read my works. He stole that. See my dialogue with Evodius in De Libero Arbitrio, or the Question of Free Choice*” (38). This is ironic given his comments about working as an archivist with existing materials. By recommending that De Selby go back and read *De Libero Arbitrio* or other works to understand Augustine better and by scolding De Selby for not having read well enough, Augustine fails to practise what he preaches. He has already told De Selby that he cannot possibly understand him anyway, but he is forever sending him back to pick up and read (*tolle lege*).

Augustine loses patience when De Selby demands he explain his earlier admiration for Manichaeism with the savant and directs him to the appropriate text instead: “*Why ask me when you can read the treatise against this heresy which I wrote in 394?*” (40). Texts should speak for themselves in Augustine’s view. Rather than put it into context for De Selby, he instead resorts to insulting him, a game which De Selby is more than willing to play. The contradictions inherent in Augustine’s advice about how to read his own work, how to weigh material and put knowledge into context serve to highlight the fact that authors always want to control the texts they create, even if they know they cannot remove the element of chance affecting not only reader response, but also how characters will behave. Augustine, though, does not seem aware of his complicity in promulgating this contradiction. Like De Selby, he is stuck in the limits of his language and

worldview. O’Nolan as author is the true victor in his “study in derision” because he leaves both De Selby and Augustine totally unaware of the extent to which they ignore their own advice and principles and are guilty of that which they revile in others (O’Nolan, Letter to O’Keeffe 15 Nov. 1963).

Writing as assembly or accretion

Several aspects of the models of writing presented by the author characters of *The Dalkey Archive* and *At Swim* anticipate debates on intertextuality in the 1960s between Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and others, as well as deconstructionist critiques of citation and the primacy of the text. The student-narrator of *At Swim* states for instance that “[t]he modern novel should be largely a work of reference” (25). *The Dalkey Archive*’s Joyce, on the other hand, asked by Mick if he is writing any new books, claims that “[w]riting is not quite the word. Assembly, perhaps, is better – or accretion” (DA 125). The student expounds on the benefits of inserting a “wealth of references to existing works,” this process would “acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature” (ASTB 25). His description corresponds closely to what Kristeva claims of the modern novel as being in dialogue with the whole of existing literature (*Le Texte* 67-9; *La Révolution* 59-60).¹⁷⁰ It is also useful to place O’Nolan’s work in this context.

In a similar vein, Renate Lachmann claims that “[l]iterature is culture’s memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions that include the knowledge stored by a culture, and virtually all texts a culture has produced and by which a culture is constituted” (301). The title of Tiphaine Samoyault’s 2001 overview book of intertextuality is likewise telling: *L’Intertextualité: Mémoire de la littérature*. Both Lachmann and Samoyault highlight the ideological and semiotic aspects of intertextuality as more than just the simple appropriation of existing texts: “l’intertextualité comme détournement culturel, comme réactivation du sens ou comme mémoire des sujets --, elle permet de travailler avec précision les phénomènes de convergence et de divergence, d’unité et de fragmentation, d’intégration et de désintégration”

¹⁷⁰ In “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” Kristeva likens Bakhtin’s dialogism in the novel to intertextuality. She writes “[w]hat allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the ‘literary word’ as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context” (*Desire* 65).

(Samoyault 28). Both citation and intertexts, functional intertexts in particular, activate memory's associative powers, helping readers to position the text they are reading in relation to other texts, which aids readers in finding their own bearings. Furthermore, the use of distorted intertexts "indicates gaps or borders of culture. It is a sign of cultural discontinuity" (Orr 818). Distorted intertexts, then, can be likened to ghosts of other texts. It is this ideological side of the use of intertext in these two novels that I will focus on below, intertextuality as a mnemonic literary tool which exposes cultural attitudes to existing texts and their role in Irish culture, while it also highlights cultural disjointedness and dialogue between texts and contexts.

At Swim reproduces texts and rewrites many of them while *The Dalkey Archive* reproduces readings of texts and challenges their canonicity. The way the latter novel invites authors to discuss their texts (or coerces them to do so) with readers adds to the ongoing dialogue taking place in the body of Irish culture's important texts and emphasises the inevitable gaps between authorial intentions and readings, as well as drawing explicit attention to the selection process that determines which texts become canonical. These novels fit hand in glove with a conception of intertextuality as a dialogue with existing literature, the past and the already said. O'Nolan's appropriations of other texts and readings of texts is both transformational and relational. In this way, his use of citation and intertext is more than just a dialogue with the (literary) past. As his rewritings and reuse of existing texts transforms the texts he satirises or employs as a code to identify a set of cultural attitudes, it also positions his own writing (*ASTB* and *DA*) in relation to the whole of literature at large, and to the microcosm of literature he selects his appropriated texts from. Outside the sprawling boundaries of *At Swim* and *The Dalkey Archive*, a text which O'Nolan transforms, such as *Buile Suibhne*, carries the transformations it has undergone on and out into the external world and continued life of texts. *Buile Suibhne* was an unstable amalgamation even before it was ever transformed by O'Nolan, then by the student-narrator, and finally by the student-narrator's rebellious creations. Unstable to begin with, it will never be the same after *At Swim*.

As a marker of cultural discontinuity, intertextuality can subversively trigger dialogue between texts, reshaping them and creating a new text from many texts in dialogue. Using intertexts with the intention of undermining or changing the established canon is a subversive act, and both *At Swim* and *The Dalkey Archive* seek to establish what could be called a subversive continuity or continuity with a difference. The subversive element of intertextual creation is most evident in *At Swim* when the student's characters explicitly co-opt Orlick's text to undermine Trellis's authority. Both novels assert their connection to established traditions but seek to expand them

simultaneously. The cited text simultaneously converges with and diverges from the reader's expectations. Ida M. Samperi argues that texts constructed of many texts subversively insert themselves back into a wider chain or network of (textual) culture (165). To create an intertext is to look back and to look forward, to assess the value of various texts from multiple vantage points. Affirming that texts simply do not emerge out of a vacuum, Samperi likens the process of textual creation to looking in a car's rear mirror:

each book is in communication with all preceding books, each book looks back, like in a rear mirror, for its predecessors, it must confront its antecedents, it is impossible to elude what came before, for a book is the result of the history of culture and narration. To look back is absolutely necessary to go forward, just like looking back in the rear mirror of the car is necessary for us to drive safely. (Samperi 165-6)

Samperi's description also applies to O'Nolan's method and that of his author characters. The above discussion of Shanahan, Lamont, Furriskey and Orlick's rewriting and palimpsestic practices regarding Finn's telling of the *Frenzy of Sweeny* illustrate this principle well. They create new texts by drawing them directly out of another text, which is itself derived from another version of that text, and so on and so forth, almost into infinite regress. While it is true that all texts do this to a certain extent, O'Nolan foregrounds the process in *At Swim* by writing about and repeating it dozens of times. This makes the communication between previous texts more readily identifiable than it is in *Ulysses*, for example, where one needs a vast knowledge of literature to pick out the references. *At Swim*, in many cases, points the intertext out to the reader.

Furthermore, many of the texts O'Nolan borrows are functional intertexts, borrowed texts that have the function of presenting readings or interpretations of existing works. Like spectres, they work to transform the texts in which they are invoked. Mick's analysis of Joyce's oeuvre, and specifically *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, are functional intertexts. These appropriated readings explain or reveal something about a particular character's beliefs, actions or vision of where he fits into his culture (Orr 818). The functional intertext of *Portrait* is both a "literary artefact," like *The Dalkey Archive* which uses it as well as "a sign with shared and conventional cultural associations" (818). The particularised utterance of the work of the historical Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive* shows the reader the extratextual significance of Joyce's work in the mid-century Ireland, where his work is of continuing value and Joyce is a powerful cultural icon. Mick shares this view, even if he has a few criticisms of Joyce's work. The distortion of Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive* is such that the reader and Mick are shocked to hear Joyce describe his "roughly received" *Ulysses* (though he denies authorship) in the language of a disgruntled critic, as "[p]ornography and filth and literary vomit"

(DA 167). Joyce describes *Ulysses* as a “sort of practical joke” and an “exploit,” expressing the view that *Ulysses* and particularly *Finnegans Wake*, were little more than extended jokes intended to confound critics for all time. With these unexpected words in his mouth, the Joyce character’s critical descriptions reminds the reader that books, like all things have a history and a life outside the text itself beyond the author’s intentions. They generate more books and accumulate critical baggage, which in turn changes the way that they are read. The process of integrating literary criticism into literature underscores Joyce of *The Dalkey Archive*’s theory that writing (and reading) is a matter of assembly or accretion. Joyce knows then, that he is adding to what has already been said before.

The student-narrator of *At Swim* uses functional intertexts to explain his own experiences. Shaped by the reading he has done in his early his life and his recent past at university, he conveys his background and beliefs to the reader through citation. His “*Biographical reminiscence, part the first*” aims to describe his first drink, but is interrupted by an “*Extract from Literary Reader, the Higher Class, by the Irish Christian Brothers*” which deals with the evils of drink. The interpolated textbook extract serves to acquaint the reader with the student-narrator’s socio-cultural background and attitude to alcohol. He was educated by the Christian Brothers,¹⁷¹ and was taught that alcohol was poison and would make any person who took it into a “helpless imbecile” (22). The textbook excerpt tells us that the student is uneasy about taking a drink, but because he knows plenty of people who do drink, and does not consider them imbeciles, he determines that “[p]ersonal experience [was] the only satisfactory means to the resolution of [his] doubts” (22). An interrogation reminiscent of the Keats and Chapman mode of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is integrated in the narrative, illustrating that in addition to doubt and fear, he also feels a sense of romantic excitement about the prospect of his first drink: “*Nature of interrogation: Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air? What mad pursuit? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?*” (22).

The main narrative of the reminiscence then resumes, culminating in the student violently vomiting in the street outside. Like *At Swim*, the student has been shaped by the history of his culture and of narration. Without any personal experience as yet to judge by, he looks to his internal library for guidance and to describe his unfolding experience. Downum points out that “startlingly little distinction is made between things the narrator has himself done and those he has read about,”

¹⁷¹ The Christian Brothers provided Catholic education for the lower to middle classes, as opposed to Jesuit schools like Joyce’s own alma mater, Clongowes Woods, which were traditionally for better-off boys.

a fact which she claims underscores “the already-written nature of experience” (305). The opposition of the two texts demonstrates the ambivalence he feels towards the prospect of drinking. While the former is an educational tract intended to scare young men away from alcohol, the latter celebrates the draw of the unknown, the excitement that alcohol can give and the camaraderie it can inspire – an alcoholic modality the student is also familiar with from his reading which he finds infinitely more appealing than the message of the Christian Brothers text.¹⁷² This experience also quickly generates another text in the student’s manuscript, prompted by his friend Kelly’s “eulogy:” “a pint of plain is your only man” (*ASTB* 22).

Bohman-Kalaja sees the student’s practice of borrowing texts to frame his own life as a type of filtration system: “the narrator’s immediate experience is filtered through his memory of existing texts, which seem to form a repertoire out of which even the author’s private thoughts are drawn” (63). Without personal experience of life outside fiction, the student and his characters rely on “vicarious recollection” to find a suitable frame of reference to give meaning to their experiences in such a way that others can relate to it (Rigney 15). The student’s characters recount their lives in relation to the fictions in which they have appeared like actors in a play, as if they are recollecting the history of their lives. Their experience is vicarious to begin with, but they also attempt to relate to other stories and tell new ones extravaciously, by appropriating still other stories familiar to their listeners and the reader as their frames of reference.

The only difference between their lives and the student’s is that theirs takes place in fiction while the student’s takes place in the external frame of reference, [EFR] realistic Dublin, the world outside *At Swim* to which the novel refers. The lives of the fictional characters are based in a hybrid, fictional Dublin (and beyond) that is the internal frame of reference [IFR]. Two examples are noteworthy in this respect. At the birth of Furriskey, who “was born at the age of twenty-five and entered the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it” Lamont and Shanahan are present in the next room (*ASTB* 9). When they meet, Lamont and Shanahan tell Furriskey stories about their lives up to the present to acquaint him with their personalities and experiences.¹⁷³ Lamont recounts an adventure that “befell him in a book when teaching French and piano-playing to a young girl of delicate and refined nature” and Shanahan, “an older man...who had appeared in many of the well-known tales of Mr Tracy” recounts a “brief though racy account of his experiences as a cow-puncher in the Ringsend district of Dublin city” (*ASTB* 52-3).

¹⁷³ Their stories also provide Furriskey with a model of how he can position himself in society and define his identity in relation to future experiences.

Shanahan's story is based on the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), an eleventh-century epic concerning Queen Maeve's attempt to capture Donn Cuailgne (the Brown Bull of Cooley) and the wars between Ulster and Connaught that resulted.¹⁷⁴ His version and the student's rendering of it allow the IFR and EFR of Dublin to seep into one another.

O'Nolan shows how great a debt real people actually owe to fiction for acquainting them with life. For most of the characters of *At Swim*, their IFR and EFR are in based in fiction. Press excerpts interrupt the retelling of *The Cattle Raid* to comment on the good work the western writer Tracy did for Dublin in clearing away slums in the districts of Irishtown and Sandymount to accommodate cattle, horses and the Circle N ranch, which can, according to the press excerpt, be readily reached "by taking the Number 3 tram" (55-6). A description of the architecture of the Circle N ranch illustrates the eclectic mix of internal and external frames of reference of Dublin, England and the American Wild West:

The Circle N is reputed to be the most venerable of Dublin's older ranches. The main building is a gothic structure of red sandstone timbered in the Elizabethan style and supported by corinthian pillars at the posterior. Added as a lean-to at the south gable is the wooden bunk-house, one of the most up to date of its kind in the country. [...] The old Dublin custom of utilizing imported negroid labour for operating the fine electrically equipped cooking-galley is still observed in this time-hallowed house. (55-6)

Taken from a faux press excerpt, this is the student's mediated description and not Shanahan's. It clearly incorporates a number of divergent themes and concerns the student wants to involve in his manuscript in a bid to portray Dublin in all its contemporary complexity: it merges Irish mythology with the wild west of contemporary (American or American-influenced) pulp fiction and the hybrid influence on Ireland of Britain and the classical world as evidenced in the mixed architecture of the ranch.¹⁷⁵ The inclusion of the false Dublin custom of imported slave labour is perhaps the bizarre pinnacle of this highly stylised fictional Dublin.

The version of *The Cattle Raid* presented in *At Swim* is envisioned through the western – a lens more readily available to the modern, urban Dublin subject, such as the student. Mediated through Shanahan, who has no first-hand experience of eleventh-century Ireland or rearing cattle in the country's urban centre, *The Cattle Raid* is given the shape and local colour of a cowboy story, complete with "Red Indians up in the Phoenix Park" (57). If literature is your realm of experience, which it certainly is for Shanahan and to a lesser extent for the student, then there is little difference

¹⁷⁴ Hereafter referred to by the shortened English title, *The Cattle Raid*. Queen Maeve wants Donn Cuailgne, the greatest bull in the country, to win a power struggle with her husband about whose wealth is greater. Given this theme, *The Cattle Raid* is a text that corresponds well to *At Swim*.

between a founding story of Irish mythology and a more recent import.¹⁷⁶ Without any experience or personal memory of either, there is little motive to differentiate their components as one being more real, fitting or valuable than another. Another important point that O’Nolan may be referring to is the fact that cattle are no longer such a dominant feature of the Irish agricultural landscape; sheep replaced cows as farming became less of a communal endeavour.¹⁷⁷

Shanahan’s appropriation of the earlier story of *The Cattle Raid* and his retelling of it illustrates the effect of convergence in Foucault’s principle of scarcity which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, Rigney designates as the organising principle of how societies enact cultural remembrance. This particular narrative provides Shanahan a cultural framework within which he can insert his own (fictional) experience and revitalise the earlier story through his own retelling of it, thus “infusing [it] with new cultural significance” (Rigney 19).

The vertical access to texts in this retelling of *The Cattle Raid* goes from O’Nolan to the student to Shanahan. The latter’s frame of reference and experience are determined by the student, whose situation is determined by O’Nolan. The version Shanahan tells and the several interruptions and interpolations of multiple other texts underscores not only the common textuality he shares with the student, but also with the novel’s author, and in extension, O’Nolan’s culture and society. The texts circulating in the novel in this way reflect the texts circulating in O’Nolan’s society. Their overlapping in the novel illustrates the way in which they converge in the public imagination and memory, accreting new memorial layers in the process (Rigney 19). The weave of cultural texts takes a different shape from that illustrated in *At Swim in The Dalkey Archive* though, where the object of intertextual appropriation is not so much other texts as other readings of texts.

Reading in *The Dalkey Archive*

The Dalkey Archive challenges readings of and attitudes to Joycean, sacred, philosophical and scientific texts outside the mainstream canons. In this novel O’Nolan wanted to challenge their canonical authority, as with Joyce’s claims that *Ulysses* and *Dubliners* were spuriously attributed to him. Canonical texts are treated as apocryphal, and characters like Hackett attempt to change the status of known apocryphal texts, like the Gospel of Judas.¹⁷⁸ Through persistent reference to

¹⁷⁶ Though he does not mention it, the cinema would certainly have mediated the student’s knowledge of Wild West imagery.

¹⁷⁷ I am grateful to Ann Rigney for pointing out that the North Circular Road in Dublin was in fact the site of a very large cattle market until the late 1960s.

¹⁷⁸ *Apocryphal* here is used in the sense a text that is of doubtful authenticity, though widely circulated as true. Thus

apocryphal texts, O’Nolan questions the authority of the already doubtful apocryphal texts and extends that doubt onto canonical texts. He tries to reclaim certain apocryphal texts while he re-evaluates the process of selection that determines canons.

Mick’s friend Hackett becomes obsessed with the idea of rehabilitating Judas Iscariot, who according to Hackett, unfairly “got the worst deal of the lot” (*DA* 62). Hackett thinks that Peter, who denied Christ, was “a worse louser and lackey” because he “perpetrated his low perfidy *after* Judas had betrayed his Master, and got nothing but thanks for his day’s work” (62-3). Hackett hopes to have part of the Bible rewritten to amend the record and include the Gospel according to Saint Judas (63). Mick thinks this is silly, because Judas “told nothing,” but Hackett reminds him of the existence of Apocrypha in the Roman Church’s Bible, the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Barnabas, John, Judas and so forth, books which did not make the final cut. Mick forces the conversation to a halt though: “Suppose you did find an historically plausible testament and then found Judas saying something you didn’t expect at all, something dead contrary to your argument?” (63). This scene takes place before Mick has learnt of Joyce’s continued existence and denial of the literary oeuvre ascribed to him. Had he directed this ironic question to himself upon learning of Joyce’s residence in Skerries, perhaps he would have proceeded more cautiously in the knowledge that he might discover something he does not want to know, something contrary to his critical estimation of Joyce for example, or worse. The realisation that something you have always taken to be true is actually untrue or not exactly as you thought it was can radically change your perception of the world. Challenging truth is thus not to be taken lightly.

Hackett’s point about the different consequences faced by Peter and Judas for their betrayals of Jesus corresponds also to the novel’s inversion of “the reputations of Augustine and Joyce, the reformed saint and the unrepentant sinner, [which] exposes the tenuous distinction between them” (Taaffe 200). The representations of Joyce and Augustine confound the reader’s expectations because they are completely contrary to their culturally accepted and iconic images. Judas’s bad deal versus the praise for Peter despite the similarity of their sins and the inverted reputations of Joyce and Augustine are two examples of how *The Dalkey Archive* introduces alternative readings of history into the novel. *The Dalkey Archive* everywhere attempts to invert or unsettle expectations, including the reader’s impression of Mick as a reliable and honest narrator. By plotting to thwart De Selby’s plans, Mick fancies himself a redeemer of humanity, but Hackett cautions him that he might not be acting as philanthropically as he thinks: “You magnify what are mere impressions and you

it includes but is not confined to scriptural Apocrypha.

give yourself a status of grandeur. You know what happened to one Redeemer of humanity. Do you want to be another?" (65). The ambiguous reference to the Redeemer could be to Lucifer or to Jesus – either way, Mick would probably want to avoid their fates of banishment or crucifixion.

Political history is also shown to have multiple possible readings that differ according to how well a certain reading suits an individual agenda. The opening of the novel describes the view of Dalkey on approach, a view which includes a monument not to a great Irish person such as Parnell or Johannes Scotus Erigena, but to Queen Victoria (8).¹⁷⁹ Booker states that "though O'Brien is writing within the context of an Ireland that has been ostensibly free of British rule for forty years" the Victoria monument "suggests that British domination has still not been completely overcome" (111). The Queen Victoria statue is another reminder of the colonial past, testifying to the existence of yet another reading or version of history and suggesting that the historical trajectory could just as easily have been different.

Different accounts of the Irish potato-famine are given too. Sergeant Fottrell engages Mick in "weather-talk," which leads Fottrell to claim that "the Irish potato-famine of the black eighteenth-forties [was] due to nothing else but weeks of the blackest frost in the history of mankind!" (149). The exclamation mark betrays Mick's disagreement with that view. Earlier he voiced his own opinion of what caused the famine to a Protestant clergyman he met while looking for Joyce. The clergyman declares that income tax is immoral and will "kill this young State if they're not careful" (122). But Mick "remind[s]" him:

[T]hat this country has for centuries been subjected to vicious over-taxation and exploitation, both by the British Government and a cabal of corrupt and pitiless ruffians called absentee landlords. The Famine was one result of that régime.

-Ah there were bad times in the past.

-And I don't offend your reverence, I hope, by bringing to mind the horror of the tithes, when a beggared peasantry were compelled to support a Church in which they had no belief and of which they had no use. (122)

Despite the clergyman's genuine concern that the future of Ireland is at stake if heavy income tax remains, Mick implies that the clergyman is in some way anachronistically guilty of collusion through his connection to the Church in question. For Mick, the Famine was the result of British colonialism and a foreign Church, of which the clergyman is a member. Fottrell's account of the cause of the Famine excludes politics and history, Mick's excludes bad weather conditions. Both

¹⁷⁹ The Irishness of both Parnell and Johannes Scotus Erigena has also been the subject of some contestation.

were contributing factors, and each man's description fits with their respective down-to-earth and nationalist world views.

These examples illustrate discontinuity in what people tend to accept as historical continuity. Hackett's attempts to rehabilitate Judas are motivated by his belief that those in authority are trying to keep some valuable information out of mainstream knowledge. Mick and Fottrell's different accounts of what caused the Famine also demonstrate that there is more than one way of narrating the same story. In both cases, choices must be made about which details to emphasise, who will be the main protagonist and so on and so forth. Despite his own obsessions, Hackett is right to point out that trying to dig up and expose the unauthorised version is never without risk, for doing so could change both the way the past is viewed as well as the way the future unfolds.

Unauthorised Versions

The novel's inclusion of apocryphal texts and the referrals to alternative traditions and historical trajectories achieve what Tim Woods describes as the only way to "renew the course of history," namely, by "releasing the suppressed otherness" of a "conception of temporality [purified temporality] which generalizes the here-and-now as a once-and-for-all," a process which can only be accomplished by "confront[ing] this temporality with its (invisible) ghosts" (118-9).¹⁸⁰ *The Dalkey Archive's* ludic reassessment of scriptural and literary canons had the potential to change the course of history. Written while the Second Vatican Council was being held, the Council which introduced more reforms than ever before to the Catholic Church and particularly on the level which concerned the average parishioner on a day-to-day basis, O'Nolan's last novel questions why certain texts were taken by the Church as foundational canonical texts while others were excluded.

Augustine's dismissal of Book II of his *Confessions* enhances the novel's ironical re-evaluation of the Church's authority. The glee with which he inverts Augustine's received reputation is also evident from his letters.

Probably the most abandoned young man of his day, immersed in thievery and graft and determined to get up on every woman or girl he meets, he reaches a point of satiation and meekly turns to bestiality and buggery.

¹⁸⁰ In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Augusto Boal discusses the actor's obligation to ask what happened after the final scene to better understand a particular character's motivation (204). He provides examples from Shakespeare, noting the importance of asking how characters would have ended up had Hamlet declared his love to Ophelia or had Desdemona been pardoned by Othello. The idea behind this is to expand the actor's repertoire of possible reactions and actions while it is also intended to help people in general better understand how history (or a story) could have ended up otherwise, and by extension, provide them the tools to change their current situation.

(His Confessions are the dirtiest book on earth.) When he had become saintly, he was a terrible blister in the side of organised Christianity because he angrily held (and he was one of the Fathers of the Church) that there was no such place as Purgatory. (Letter to Tim O’Keeffe, 21 Sept. 1962).

Other than just finding the fact of Augustine’s profligate youth a delicious irony, this sort of reassessment allows him to emphasise that things we take for granted were not always that way, as in the case of Augustine who was an embarrassment to the Church before he became one of the Church Fathers.

Hackett’s obsession with the Gospel of Judas strengthens this point with regard to the Church, which was still seen as unchanged and unchanging in the early 1960s, a perceived immutability which was finally challenged by Vatican II. The dialogues engaged in during the Council, and the dialogic assessment of apocryphal texts in the novel, show the Church to be just as textual as any other institution, such as a critical literary industry. The Church and the literary industry both select and reproduce their defining texts, all of which are heavily edited. The parallels he draws between the Church and literature seem to ask why it is okay to question the authority of critics but not the Church itself.

Foregrounding the presence of these apocryphal texts and possibilities draws attention to alternative, unwritten or secret histories of writers, saints and sages. No single view is allowed to prevail. Mick’s uncertainty grows as he accumulates and archives information. By the end of the novel, he is no longer able to act but can only think and weigh possibilities. The apocryphal and spurious texts that we are not supposed to see haunt the novel openly, highlighting gaps and ambiguities, thus “releasing [the] suppressed otherness” of these literary and historical narratives (Woods 118). Once released, the otherness of the alternatives creates a spectral disturbance of the established order of the Church in *The Dalkey Archive*. This in turn opens the narratives under discussion up to pluralistic possibilities and thus provides a way to rethink Church history and doctrine in a way that is less smotheringly once-and-for-all. For as one critic has argued, attending to the ambiguities in narratives that tend to be taken for granted as authoritative and true by deconstructing the spectre that emerges from the gap “represents an opening to pluralism” and a way to dispute their supposed authority (Del Villano 7). Once the seams have burst, once cracks in the surface have been exposed, they must be explored, their texture examined – who can resist looking into a crevasse?

O’Nolan exceeded his original intentions of taking critics of the Church, god and religion to task in *The Dalkey Archive* – perhaps an instance of poetic justice, since the author seems to have

lost control of his text to a certain extent. He always maintained that he had “no intention to jeer at God or religion; the idea is to roast the people who seriously do so, and also to chide the Church in certain of its aspects. I seem to be wholly at one with Vatican Council II” (Letter to O’Keeffe, 15 Nov. 1963). We might see the novel as O’Nolan’s private Council. By lambasting the types who do jeer at God or religion, O’Nolan points out the gaps and holes in the received texts of the Church and the textuality of religious belief. This is illustrated in the scientist De Selby’s desire to correct details in the Bible and biographical details of the lives of the saints. Joyce’s desire to set right hundreds of years of Church history with an etymological treatise on the use of the word *pneuma* is yet another example. By signposting such narrative holes, O’Nolan invites the reader to peer in and see what might be missing. At the same time, he attacks those who openly despise religion and exposes the Church as an institution which is by the same account, asking to be criticised for the various omissions it has effected in the body of texts that constitute it. In the end, he cannot roast the one without roasting the other.

This is also made clear in the treatment of Joyce as well. Booker notes that presenting Joyce “as an ultrapious Catholic” is just one contribution to the religious parody “but it simultaneously contributes to a similar parody of *attacks* on religion, which are often just as dogmatic and authoritarian as religion itself. [...] Joyce’s virulent and sustained attack on the church showed that he was in fact much more saturated with Catholicism than he would like to admit (114). Furthermore, Joyce’s revelation of spuriously attributed authorship also forces the reader to question the authority of literary critics and authors. If Sylvia Beech had *Ulysses* written for Joyce and he had nothing to do with the text as we know it, is *Ulysses* still a valuable and authoritative work of literature? To what extent is its popularity dependent on the cultural iconicity of Joyce himself? The reader is forced to think about what makes a text authoritative as well as whether – and how – its authority can be tested and proven.

Close examination of the gaps in received narratives demands that we accept and never forget that our reality is mediated. We have to think about what has been omitted and excluded and ask why this text and not that one, why this version and not that one? Readers have an ethical responsibility to question the narratives they receive that corresponds to the author’s ethical responsibility to select which narrative he relates. Writing and reading, seen in this way, is a pact – or a conspiracy – between at least two parties. Readers are implicated as conspirators who affirm the validity of certain privileged narratives, they are the final ratifying party in creating an official version in that they must decide to identify with it and reproduce it for posterity. Deciding what to

identify with, “to *reaffirm by choosing*” whether consciously or unconsciously is, in the words of Derrida, a question of sifting and criticising: “*one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles*” (SM 16). Confronted with an heterogeneous inheritance, in this case the heterogeneity that makes up the whole of what can be selected from, the body of narratives that comes to a generation and from which that generation must piece together their identity. One must select and inhabit particular narratives and reject others, in much the same way that the various gospels included in the Bible were selected to create a coherent whole, a coherent narrative that is singularly about the life of Jesus and not the lives of Jesus, *and Judas and Simon Peter and Paul*. O’Nolan destabilises narratives that have been taken for granted; what he uncovers may be unsettling – Joyce and Augustine may not be who we thought they were. The discomfort which this can occasion begs the question of what else we might be mistaken about, and in this way, O’Nolan shows that we as readers must also “sift and choose,” and choosing is an ethical and political act.

Clissman argues that O’Nolan in *The Dalkey Archive* “emerges as a deeply religious man” (323) in what she regards his essential adherence to Augustine’s imperative that “*it is our final duty to believe, to have and to nourish faith*” (DA 39). For Clissman, O’Nolan’s attitude in the novel to all the “unanswerable” questions it raises, is that they “will one day be answered completely” if only we believe (Clissman 323). I do not reject this possibility outright, but the obvious delight O’Nolan takes in parodying and “chiding” the church, in challenging blind acceptance of literary and historical narratives would suggest that belief alone is not enough – there must also be doubt, first and foremost because there is always doubt. Denying doubt in favour of ideal belief does not obviate it. I think O’Nolan anticipates Derrida’s rejection of the existence of a pure present and a single, authoritative reading. He too highlights not only the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present” (SM xix) but also points out the “plurality of spirits,” pasts and narratives that make up the layered and mixed temporality of the living present (Montag 71).

O’Nolan’s work is spectral because it emphasises the wavery, mirage-like quality of thereness. The spectral is noncommittal: it “causes reality to tremble but makes no promises in return” (Woods 108). The parallels between O’Nolan’s vision of history and Derrida’s are striking and many, as are the similarities between their understandings of the flexible ability of texts to have multiple interpretations. Derrida argues against pure being and against history without spectres and rejects what Fredric Jameson has aptly called the “unmixed” (43-49). Woods and Jameson both regard Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* as his critique of Marx’s desire for pure being and for history unfettered by haunting traces, and a rejection of Marx’s impulse to do away with, or exorcise, all

ghosts.¹⁸¹ Woods states that Derrida's work is focused on "the tracking down and stigmatizing of just such nostalgias for some originary simplicity, of the unmixed in all its forms, in favour of mixed, miscegenated, hybridized and multivalenced forms" (108-9). O'Nolan's literary project is likewise deeply concerned with debunking nostalgic and simplistic monologic narratives. Both *The Dalkey Archive* and *At Swim* reveal the absence of simple or pure histories and narratives by foregrounding the intrusions of other histories and narratives in narratives often presented or perceived as unchanging and immutable, whether it be a favoured narrative of heroic suffering epitomised in the selective retellings of the *Frenzy of Sweeny* or the accuracy of Augustine's influential *Confessions* (and by extension, the validity of the *Confessions*' canonicity).

After the rejection of *The Third Policeman* and the critical blurring of boundaries between Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan and Myles na Gopaleen, O'Nolan painstakingly sought to distance himself from the literary reputation he had acquired with what he came to consider the juvenile pyrotechnics of *At Swim*. He tried to develop a reputation as a serious and commercially successful writer with his later novels *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, both of which are markedly more realist and less experimental than his early work; both late novels clearly attempt to avoid inscrutability while they also aim to shock and disturb. But despite these stylistic changes, his aesthetic and thematic concerns remain largely the same throughout his career. How he deals with these – for example the stubborn materiality of language – undoubtedly changed over the years and from book to book, but what continues to unite all of his work is his characteristic "ability simultaneously to see things from several, apparently conflicting points of view," and his "impatience with the belief that only one view of reality is possible" (Ó Hainle 35-6).

In this respect, O'Nolan shows that he is also critical of the unmixed and takes pains to point out that history is a nebulous amalgamation of narratives and points of view. His rejection of singular and monologic realities is one of the things that make him such a comic writer. But it also explains his uncanny ability to deconstruct the banal beyond the point of absurdity into the realm of accidentally hitting the nail on the head in identifying conundrums and paradoxes in his society's monocular view of reality. From his ambiguous and hypercritical vantage point, he can criticise both the church and those who would criticise it, he can heap praise on Joyce's abilities as a writer and question the validity of his iconic position in Irish letters. Ó Hainle rightly points out that this is also evidenced in O'Nolan's use of early Irish literature in *At Swim*; he simultaneously employs it as "a crucial element in the construction of [ASTB], thereby proclaiming his regard for that literature,

¹⁸¹ See Woods 107-113 and Jameson 44-50.

which he nevertheless presents in a highly comic version, while at the same time upbraiding those who would fail to take it seriously” (36). In *The Dalkey Archive*, O’Nolan chides those who take things too seriously or fail to question the limitations of language and narrative to represent reality accurately. His ironic criticism covers all sides, effectively allowing him to have his cake and eat it too. But, one suspects that O’Nolan would hardly be in the mood for cake, unless it were heavily flavoured with rum to alleviate the at times painful ambivalence that is diagnosed everywhere in his work – an inevitable side effect of calling everything into question.

The mixed temporality that unites multiple historical periods that characterises both novels reveals an ethical concern at the heart of O’Nolan’s work that can best be described as spectral in its presentation of unstable identities and cloudy constructions that deny that existence can ever be described in essentialist terms. Woods states that the (postmodern) novel is a “temporal experimentation field” that is conducive to “reintroduc[ing] ‘spectrality’ [and] confronting history with its ghostly others” (119). Both of these novels are largely concerned with exactly that – revealing the gaps in the written weave of historical narratives and imploring us to ask what is hidden in these gaps. What untold stories lie beneath that could change or renew the way we make sense of the living present? Indeed, the same could be argued of *The Poor Mouth* and *The Third Policeman*, but *At Swim* and *The Dalkey Archive*, his first and last novels, self-consciously foreground their indebtedness to other texts more explicitly.

At Swim’s student’s narrative strategy enables several characters from different periods and settings to co-exist in a unified (if only by chaos) environment and to share in that present. According to him, this would ensure that the “modern novel...be largely a work of reference” in which interchangeable characters are “allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living” (ASTB 25). If being fair to real people starts with being fair to literary representations, then necessarily the task which faces the writer is to represent characters in a way which respects their difference. Then, all that remains is to extend this practice to real life, if life is bound to imitate art. While it may be impossible to represent either a fictional or real-life character in all their fullness, then O’Nolan suggests that authors have an ethical obligation to try, if only to understand them better. In many cases, as the mixed temporality of these novels betrays, this means experimenting with temporality itself, conflating several times and perspectives, often leading to highly comic constellations, while it also leads to an openly, often impossibly hybridised and multivalent, representation of the subject represented. This is achieved in *At Swim* through the multiple retellings of the seventh-century story of Sweeny from the points of view of the multi-

centuried Finn (third to twelfth century) and the twentieth-century fictional characters.

The Dalkey Archive's scientifically achieved obliteration of time altogether makes it possible for the dead Saint Augustine to discuss Descartes with a twentieth-century scientist. Temporal experimentation of this kind adheres to what Woods terms "[t]he *movement...of spectrality*" which is, according to him, "to think the otherness of temporality and history" (112). Building on what Woods describes as the case Walter Benjamin makes for "the use of spectrality, the resuscitation of the past in the present as a form of blasting away the nostalgic promises of a pure present and temporal transparency" O'Nolan collapses the linearity of narrative, making what once seemed static narratives appear absurd and comic while also opening up possibilities, alternative routes of interpretation, revealing how things could have been otherwise and in turn, how it might be possible to change the status quo in future. To quote Woods: "As orders coalesce out of apparent chaos and disparity, meaning emerges not as a predictable derivative but as an unforeseeable, unprecedented transformation and an aleatorical departure from tradition" (117). Rather than exorcise all ghosts of the past and silence all the spectral voices of stories told and re-told, O'Nolan in these two novels has them convene in a dialogic council. In this council, which spans centuries, genres and disciplines, we find a way not to become stuck in narratives or views of reality that proclaim their unique indubitability. In the words of Derrida, by "inscribing the possibility of reference to the other" and the other ways in which narratives can be told, reproduced and transformed, O'Nolan calls attention to the ethical responsibility facing both authors and readers to sift, choose and reaffirm, to inhabit a narrative wilfully. He underscores the element of choice in such matters, an aspect of his work which can be potentially transformative and liberating, or debilitating and confining. And though he may not be able to have the final word in the stories we sift and choose from, he always leaves a signature, which while it can be effaced or replaced over time, will always leave his ghost in the text.

Conclusion

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

(T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" 111-119)

Brian O’Nolan’s firsthand experience of government, his status as a cult figure in the guise of Myles and his experimental literary activities as Flann O’Brien gave him a unique insight into Irish society and culture that can hardly be matched by any of his contemporaries. For the sheer breadth of issues, his work provides a dazzling vista from which to view mid-century Ireland’s dynamic and complex debates about how modernity was given shape in a nation which staked its right to exist in a past fraught by conflict with foreign oppressors and conflict within. It would be going too far to claim that in his career as a writer he dealt with all aspects of human experience in independent Ireland from the 1930s to the 1960s, but there were certainly very few topics that eluded his Underwood typewriter.

Two or three subjects stand out though, namely women, sexuality and religion. More than any other critic, Hopper has addressed the absence of sexuality and women in O’Nolan’s work. His view that this is a result of censorship and the dominance of “Catholic triumphalism” is convincing and widely accepted (61). Both Brooker and Taaffe have built on Hopper’s reading to a limited extent and some articles have appeared dealing with this relative lacuna. Religion remained out of view in much of his early work; if it featured at all it was as an accepted fact and was hardly discussed. However, *The Hard Life* (1961) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) are so concerned with the Catholic Church as to make up for his earlier silence.

He was a prolific and hard-working writer, who began his career as an agitating satirist while still a schoolboy. One of his teachers at Blackrock College was John Charles McQuaid, later Archbishop of Dublin, whose handwriting and style the young O’Nolan learnt to copy at school (Cronin 34). With his brother Ciarán and some friends, he undertook his “first foray into the field of

the manufactured correspondence” in the *Catholic Standard* writing about homework, with spurious letters from parents and teachers (35). Cronin notes that these were written on the dining room table of the O’Nolan’s home at Avoca Terrace where he would later write “so many thousands of words” (35).

Indeed, *Cruiskeen Lawn* alone has at least 4 million words, while the rest of his work includes several short stories, five novels, two full-length plays and some shorter plays, television scripts, and numerous essays. There remains plenty of work to be done on O’Nolan. Further consideration of the vastness of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is one irresistible area of research that should be developed more in relation to contemporary cultural debate. In future, I intend to do more research into his criticism of the (heritage) tourism industry in Ireland and to conduct a study about his playwriting, which also merits more scholarly consideration in spite of its comparatively poor reception.¹⁸²

Mid-century Ireland has until recently usually been portrayed as having been hallmarked by a stifling climate of stagnation or paralysis and a “paucity of indigenous intellectual creativity” (Ferriter, *Transformation* 359). Wills’s *That Neutral Island* has nuanced the stagnation claim by showing how much was actually happening on the cultural scene in the war years, and to some extent, in the 1950s. Artists and writers during the war years had to make the most of the resources they had at home and could not depend on London or New York audiences to make a living from their work. Diarmaid Ferriter claims that Terence Brown’s characterisation of Irish anti-modern sentiment as having Stalinist proportions goes too far, as it fails to do “justice to the complex layers of Irish society during this era” (359). Where Brown denies the existence of a “self-confident bourgeoisie,” Ferriter argues that the success and abundance of satire from as early as 1922 testifies both to “the political maturity of the state” and the existence of “an Ireland that had been hidden by the revolution: Catholic and nationalist, but also smug and conceited” (346-7). Nevertheless, the fact remains that many of O’Nolan’s contemporaries felt that early- to mid-century Ireland was intellectually suffocating, regardless of claims to the contrary. Personal experience rarely finds the cosy accommodation of its choosing in historical narrative.

¹⁸² *Faustus Kelly* (1941) is a play about what O’Nolan considered the inane structure of Irish political debate. The play probably failed because it successfully captured the tone and feeling of a political meeting. It was too like a county council meeting to be entertaining, despite the inclusion of the Devil and his decision to retire entirely from Irish political life. The 1943 *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green* (*The Insect Play*) is an Irish adaptation of the Czech Čapek brothers’ *The Insect Play*. As a play it is constructed much better than *Faustus Kelly*, probably because it was an adaptation. It translates the factions of the Second World War and Irish political and public life into the internecine squabbles of warring insects in one of Dublin’s most famous parks. Both plays display not only O’Nolan’s keen ear and ability at orthographically transcribing regional Irish accents (the Northern Orange ants and the Cork crickets aspiring to civil service dignity), but also his acute understanding of the complications of Irish politics.

The small world of Irish politics overlapped with and existed alongside an even smaller art world in Dublin. It is often pointed out that everyone knew everybody in early- and mid-twentieth-century Dublin, but the same holds true for most compartmentalised worlds – the artists know the artists and the politicians know the politicians. Dublin is still a relatively small city, and within its individual pockets of artists, musicians, bankers and politicians, everyone still knows everyone – to the extent that we should ever believe that. It is generally true that if a person lives in a place long enough and feels unappreciated for long enough, they will eventually call the place they live a desperate cess pool – or worse – certainly if that person happens to be a creative intellectual. But Dublin was O’Nolan’s adopted home, and he loved it and hated it just the same as any Dubliner by birth.

O’Nolan illustrates the truth, at least for himself, of the claim that everybody knew everybody in an article on Dublin pubs written in the late 1950s which describes individual pubs and their clientele throughout the years; the civil servants in the Scotch House on Burgh Quay, the journalists, artists and intellectuals in the Palace Bar in Fleet Street, and the students at Grogan’s in Leeson Street, or Higgins’s in Pembroke Street (and so on). This article reads like the prose equivalent of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and O’Nolan had “known them all,” and at some point in his life had belonged, at least marginally, to all these groups (Eliot, line 49). He drank and partook in arguments with politicians and civil servants, artists and ordinary people, if not as an active participant, then as an observer and eavesdropper. This was one of the means by which he became so well-acquainted with people’s attitudes to current affairs, what they thought about and expected from public men, art, public transport, taxes and so on and so forth. People say that drinking is a waste of time – but being a barfly undoubtedly helped to shape his perspective, and provided material for the musings of the Brother and the Plain People of Ireland in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. All the same though, it can hardly be contested that his drinking also significantly contributed to the more embittered satire of the late column and the later novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*.

All this shows how O’Nolan’s wide range of experience as a civil servant, a journalist, a novelist, a brother, a husband, a son etc, made him familiar with so many different aspects of contemporary Irish life. He had learnt that every story has a counter story and that five people who witnessed one event would all use different words to describe it and probably pick out different aspects to emphasise. He understood that a person who tells the same story over and over again will rarely tell it exactly the same way twice. Perhaps this is why he was so unsatisfied with monologic

worldviews, and so annoyed by people who insisted that their way was the only way. His work insists on reaching a flexible meaning achieved through dialogue and debate while it also insists that multiple versions of the truth and the past be acknowledged. He took this to extremes at times, certainly in *Cruiskeen Lawn* where he would regularly argue one thing one week and the complete opposite the next.

Irish traditions and the past were enshrined by the State and cultural revivalists to instil pride in the nation. But at times this could have the opposite of the intended effect and make people feel ashamed for wanting to listen or dance to jazz instead of traditional music, or make those who did not speak Irish feel inferior to those who did. O’Nolan debunked the “mystical relationship between the jig, the Irish language, abstinence from alcohol, morality and salvation” and showed how this conflation actually had little to do with the way things had been in the past, and more to do with contemporary morality (*CL* 15 Mar. 1943). The marriage between the Gaelic past and the Catholic religion also excluded many people who had ties to neither tradition and they struggled to find a place for themselves in the dominant paradigm of Irishness. “It is extremely difficult to save your soul if you happen to be an English person,” O’Nolan pointed out, illustrating how exclusively praising things Irish tended to work to the detriment of imported culture and gave some people the impression that any manifestation of culture that could not have been found in Ireland before 1800 was simply an abomination (15 Mar. 1943). This type of revivalist evangelist, O’Nolan believed, was not only humourless, but would be shocked “if he could read what remains to us of the literature of our tough and bawdy ancestors!” (15 Mar. 1943).

After the Second World War was over, *Cruiskeen Lawn* frequently focused on the confusion that partially characterised post-war priorities and planning in Ireland. With wartime censorship of the press lifted, the newspapers were becoming more international in outlook and made more information about the atrocities of the Second World War available to Irish readers. Newspapers ran reports like “*British-U.S. Aid To Starving Nations, Five Atom Bombs Could Destroy Half U.S.A., G.A.A. President’s Plea For Language Revival*” (*CL* 26 Apr. 1946). Irritated by the preciousness he saw in a renewed push towards reviving the language now that the seriousness of war was over, Myles mocked the President’s public statement that ““something more than the mere playing of games was expected of members of the G.A.A.”” (26 Apr. 1946). He indirectly compares the significance of Gaelic games to more serious matters by bringing this discussion into close proximity with reports on the shortage of food, the importance of “washing the Hans, combing the Herr” and so on (26 Apr. 1946). Myles claims he agrees with the President – “Oh yes indeed—

games isn't everything" – but his hilarious and scathing qualification of his standpoint brings certain disparities in international post-war planning into view:

In the tragic aftermath of war, items such as pestilence and famine blind unthinking people to their duty in the matter of customs, games and dances. Probably at no time in the history of the world has there been such exigent need for sixteen-handed reels and those other boons which come under the term 'customs'—stirabout, potheen, gaelic coffee, putting elderly farmers down wells, etc., etc. I think the Germans and Japanese might be well advised to look to their games and dances, too,—though not, of course, if war happens to be one of their games. (26 Apr. 1946)

The selective invocation of the past to vindicate Irish identity that was proud of its traditions was not something O’Nolan could let slip by unnoticed, as the above examples show and as is illustrated by *The Poor Mouth*'s refutation of the Gaelic myth's ability to liberate Irish people and provide them with a model of living their lives in modern times. But O’Nolan was equally wont to defend Irish traditions if they were attacked by critics who had not enough regard for them.

The emphasis on the past could also make people feel that they were living in Gomorrah and should eschew modern inventions and technology, as we saw in Chapter 2 in my discussion of O’Nolan’s depiction of the pros and cons of making more room for the innovations of modern science and technology. The fear of losing touch with the glorious past was also a sure sign that the past had truly been superseded by modernity, but this posed new problems of a different kind.

The practical side of modernisation carried on, despite being abated by the past at times and despite ignoring to a large extent the negative ways in which the past continued to hold the present in its grip. An example of this is found in the IRA's continued campaign of political violence which did not stop once independence had been declared in 1921. Many of those who did not support the Anglo-Irish Treaty and did not go into politics despite their objections to the Treaty and the partition of Northern Ireland continued to take up arms in the struggle to see the island of Ireland united under one Irish government. While many of the political leaders in the Irish state were themselves veterans of the 1916 uprising or the Anglo-Irish War that paved the way for Treaty negotiations, the Treaty put many who had fought together in the past on different sides of a political conflict. The government took a hard line against political violence through the internment of political dissidents and the introduction of the death penalty for those found in possession of weapons – which meant that the government executed some of their old comrades in arms from earlier violent political struggles. The bloody conflict that had led to Irish independence could not be condoned by the government if Ireland was to be accepted as a modern and independent nation by other nations. The ghost that had compelled them to fight for independence had to be ignored if the future was to be

forged peacefully. But that same ghost was still calling others to arms. What was on the one hand a gesture to the rest of the world that Ireland had become a modern nation that no longer needed political violence was, on the other hand, a betrayal of the ghosts of the past that had enabled independence in the first place.

The beloved burden of the past could be both inspiring and debilitating. The “myth of a rural nation played a spuriously unifying role by giving a common vocabulary to Irish people who were, in fact deeply divided on many issues” (Kiberd, “The War Against the Past” 42). Cultural nationalism achieved what political nationalism had not been able to. The selective past had an uncanny ability to disguise the deep rifts which still ran throughout Irish society. Doing justice to the ghosts of the past in some ways prevented the future, as Tom Garvin has persuasively argued in *Preventing the Future: Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?* In the case of compulsory Irish in schools, I share O’Nolan’s belief that revering the past certainly thwarted readiness for the future; compulsory Irish combined with romantic nationalist historiography did little to prepare younger generations to take jobs in modern industries.

In this study, I have explored the ways in which O’Nolan’s work responded to the use of narratives of the Irish past in shaping Irish modernity and identity in independent Ireland.¹⁸³ He was scathingly critical of the selective privileging of narratives about an Irish nation that could only be Gaelic, Catholic and rural. His work constantly invokes other narratives and perspectives in order to show that Irish society was more diverse than the dominant view would have. The dialogic nature of his newspaper column as well as the emphasis on dialogue between competing points of view in his novels show that monologic narratives can never be sufficient – there are always gaps and ghosts that demand our attention and investigation.

Chapter 1 examined O’Nolan’s complex relationship with the Irish language movement and his criticism of the way the rural, Gaelic past was invoked by the State and cultural organisations which seemed uncritically to wish to restore a romantic version of that past. I argued that O’Nolan showed his awareness of how cultural memory is created through recursivity and processes of conflation, processes which he parodied in *The Poor Mouth* (1941). This parody of Gaelic autobiography was not a satirical attack on the Irish-speaking Gaels as some contemporary critics thought, but a parody of the urban Gaelic revivalist’s perverted view of the Gael, with their

¹⁸³ As I have noted, O’Nolan did not often engage with narratives about Irish political history. The scope of this dissertation has not allowed me to discuss in any great depth his engagement with political issues. However, as Myles, he did become embroiled in a number of debates about significant political issues such as the Central Bank affair, The Mother and Child Scheme and as I have mentioned, the Irish Beveridge Plan. For more on O’Nolan’s engagement with politics, see Taaffe 119-125; 157-67 and also Curran.

idealised equations of poverty with purity and romantic notions of pre-modern rural pagans at one with the land. O’Nolan insisted that the literary portrayal of Gaelic life was nothing more than a romantic exaggeration of real people trying to make ends meet with limited skills and resources in a changing, modernising country. I also contend that he thought that the institutionalisation of language revival actually compounded the already limited chances of ever restoring the Irish language as the vernacular, while the focus on language revival further distracted from more vitally important problems Ireland was facing as it developed into a modern nation.

Chapter 2 looked at how Irish tradition was called upon in debates in the 1940s regarding the Irish scientific spirit. Ironically, tradition was appealed to both to advocate and deny the need for a greater role for science in education and industry. Opponents of science argued that it was un-Irish because it was too abstract; the only science the Irish needed, they held, was rural or nature science to boost and maintain an agricultural economy. Advocates of more science, such as Eamon de Valera, harked back to the Irish contribution to astronomy and mathematical physics to support their claims that science had always been a respectable pursuit in Ireland. In a context of Bakhtinian dialogism, I showed how Myles na Gopaleen synthesised and tested popularly held attitudes to the science question in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and directly engaged in the debate, for example by lampooning the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and Erwin Schrödinger. O’Nolan’s contribution to the debate about the role of science showed that what was at stake was not so much finding the right spot for science in society, but whether science could actually fit into the State’s prescribed national identity. Was it a threat to Irish spirituality and Catholicism? Would it destroy the agricultural economy? O’Nolan satirically shows how these questions were too often answered monologically. For example, certain pundits of the Church argued that the Einsteinian revolution in physics was taking the soul out of humanity, but they did so to protect their own interests instead of on the basis of an informed and objective position. In this chapter I also claim that the State’s official language revivalism and quietist attitude to education directly impeded the teaching of science in primary education. The column’s dialogic interaction with competing attitudes to science makes an implicit argument for more dialogue in society by parodying the pitfalls of the singular point of view and displaying how complementary points of view can achieve consensus even among the most opinionated. This chapter also considered how the State tried to give the modern institutions it established a distinctive Irish flair.

Chapter 3 focused on *The Third Policeman* as a novel about haunted subjectivity and haunting. Here we saw some of the issues raised in Chapter 2 about the impact of the new physics

on the way people perceived and experienced the world developed at the level of individual subjectivity. While I did not argue against the typical reading of *The Third Policeman* as a critique of the possibility of mastering knowledge, I examined how O’Nolan presents his conclusion that knowledge cannot be mastered in relation to an aesthetic of spectrality and scepticism. I believe that O’Nolan exceeded even his own intentions for the novel by removing the concepts of linearity and chronology by setting the novel in the world of the dead. By doing so he was also able to uncover more about how people relate the experience of the unknown or unfamiliar to knowledge they have acquired. His work always focuses on processes of writing, reading and assimilating information and as such causes readers to attempt to read and think differently about what they think they know and how they came to believe that. I hope to have shown that *The Third Policeman* presents the generally accepted truths that we can never know everything and can never know anything with absolute certainty in dark and alienating light.

In Chapter 4, I discussed O’Nolan’s treatment of the ethical dilemmas of both authorship and reading in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Dalkey Archive*. Both novels foreground their reliance on intertextual borrowing and show how any one text can be interpreted from multiple perspectives and made to serve even opposed aims. Both novels are also sensitive to the important role that narrative texts play in shaping cultural and personal identity and repudiate uncritical acceptance or appropriation of narratives. *At Swim* presents a narrative world structured by chaos that borrows and decontextualises narratives until it degenerates into utter corruption and condemnation of authors as incorrigible tyrants seeking to impose their will on the reader. *The Dalkey Archive* challenges the validity of different attitudes to well-known authors and cultural texts and questions their authority by bringing readers and authors into dialogue about readers’ interpretations and authors’ intentions. Both novels raise questions and highlight ambiguities about the ability of language and narrative to depict life accurately or in all its fullness. O’Nolan suggests that authors are faced with an ethical imperative to represent their characters and subjects as truthfully as possible even as he insists that perfect truthfulness cannot be achieved due to disparities between the different subjectivities and desires of individual readers and authors. He shows how readers always judge the authors whose texts they read and often conflate aesthetics with ethics in their interpretation of a given text, regardless of the fact that these are rarely one and the same from the authorial perspective. As the relationship between readers and authors, interpreters and disseminators of narratives is bound to remain in conflict, O’Nolan tacitly argues for an unceasing dialogue about the texts that we read, appropriate and reproduce.

The novels and columns that I have analysed in these chapters demonstrate O’Nolan’s comic and critical stance to how narratives of the past informed and defined contemporary experience of the present and hopes for the future. By being open to other stories and trajectories of history that do not necessarily conform to the dominant paradigm, and by making this multiplicity of narratives an integral aspect of his work, O’Nolan advocates a pluralist view of a society that should never stop talking. The predominance of dialogue and dialogic discourse in his work shows how confronting the ghosts of history and suppressed stories can result in a radical transformation of how people position themselves in relation to multiple versions of the past, the present or the future. His literary project is one that exposes and debunks the subjective selection and manipulation of narratives that reaffirm current identities and “give us pleasure,” in the words of *The Poor Mouth*’s Maeldoon. O’Nolan’s is a comic and multivalent criticism of the way the State deployed narratives of the past to define its present and plot the course toward a more modern future. His dual stance, at once anti-everything yet able to see the arguments for everything is also a reflection of post-independence Ireland, with its own ambivalent demands on tradition and the past, and modernity and the future.

Here, finally, it must be pointed out how the T.S. Eliot stanza used as an epigraph above, is actually quite applicable to Brian O’Nolan’s conglomeration of literary personalities, though he swelled more than one progress and started multiple scenes and literary scandals in the pages of Irish newspapers from the 1930s to the 1960s. He could be deferential and politic but also unceremonious and imprudent at times. His writing was nothing if not meticulous, as reports of his rage at printers who corrected his intentional misspellings demonstrate, but he was certainly guilty of high-flown sentence, obtuseness and near ridiculousness. At times, he also played the fool, but he was equally adept at playing the savant, the sycophant, and the outraged bureaucrat, the Da, the Brother, and so on and so forth. I very much doubt that his like will ever be there again.

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Samenvatting: Brian O’Nolan: komisch-kritische herschepping van verhalen over Ierlands opgehemelde verleden: zoals verteld na de onafhankelijkheid, met bijzondere betrekking tot de periode 1938 – 1966

In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht hoe de Ierse schrijver, journalist en ambtenaar Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966) op komische wijze kritiek leverde op het gebruik van verhalen over het Ierse verleden teneinde een duidelijk onderscheiden Ierse vorm van moderniteit in onafhankelijk Ierland tijdens de jaren 1938 tot 1966 vorm te geven, te rechtvaardigen en te doorgronden. Het onderzoek bevindt zich voornamelijk in het veld van de literatuurwetenschap, maar is door zijn interdisciplinaire reikwijdte ook interessant voor wetenschappers op het gebied van culturele herinnering (*cultural remembrance*) en voor historici. De kritische visies die in dit onderzoek zijn gebruikt, omvatten het Bakhtiniaans dialogisme en de Menippische satire, culturele herinnering, alsmede *haunting* en spectraliteit. In dit proefschrift wordt uitvoerig bekeken hoe O’Nolans aanval op en inmenging in het tijdens zijn leven contemporaine Ierse culturele debat zich in zijn romans (uitgegeven onder de pseudoniemen Myles na Gopaleen en Flann O’Brien) en in zijn column in de *Irish Times* (“Cruiskeen Lawn,” 1940-1966) manifesteert.

O’Nolans literaire oeuvre – zowel zijn fictie als zijn journalistieke werk – wordt hier gelezen als een aanhoudende aanklacht tegen het selectief inschakelen van verhalen over het verleden die gebruikt worden om de Ierse identiteit tijdens de eerste 40 jaar van onafhankelijkheid te rechtvaardigen en te vormen. Vanuit de benadering dat O’Nolan een literair onruststoker zou zijn die altijd op zoek is naar conflict en debat, wordt aangetoond dat hij de uitvoerbaarheid van monologische wereldbeelden en de capaciteit van afzonderlijke verhalen van de hand wijst als mogelijkheid voor een diepgaand inzicht van de wereld in al haar volheid. Dit komt het duidelijkst naar voren in de manier waarop dialoog en dialogische perspectieven door zijn literaire alter ego’s en karakters uitgevoerd en zelfs gestimuleerd worden. Door in vier van zijn romans en diverse columns terugkerende thema’s die betrekking hebben op relevante historische perspectieven en ontwikkelingen te analyseren, wordt in dit onderzoek beargumenteerd dat het werk van O’Nolan niet alleen pleit voor dialoog, maar ook voor het aannemen van een sceptisch, dialogisch perspectief teneinde tot een veelzijdiger en vollediger interpretatie van de realiteit te komen. Voor O’Nolan geldt dat betekenis ontstaat door tussen de regels door te lezen – verhalen dienen te worden aangevuld door andere verhalen teneinde hun significantie zelfs maar gedeeltelijk te kunnen

begrijpen.

In hoofdstuk 1 wordt de complexe relatie van de tweetalige O’Nolan met de kwestie van Ierse taal onderzocht, alsmede de culturele bagage die hiermee wordt geassocieerd, in het bijzonder met betrekking tot *An Béal Bocht* (1941), dat is vertaald als *The Poor Mouth* (1973), en zijn “Cruiskeen Lawn” columns over de haalbaarheid en het nut van de wederopleving van de Ierse taal en cultuur. In deze werken komt zijn bewustzijn naar voren van hoe de culturele herinnering wordt gecreëerd door processen van recursiviteit en samenvoeging; processen die hij uitbuit in parodieën op populaire tropen als de lankmoedige Ierse boer, de centraliteit van de Ierse taal in opvattingen over de Ierse identiteit, en op de eigenaardigheden van de revivalisten. Op deze manier zette hij vraagtekens bij de heiligverklaring van de Ierssprekende boer en toonde hij aan dat een wederopleving van de taal het verloren Gaelische verleden niet kon herstellen, noch dat dat noodzakelijkerwijs wenselijk was.

In hoofdstuk 2 wordt O’Nolans inmenging in debatten over de rol van moderne wetenschap zoals theoretische natuurkunde in het Ierse onderwijs en de industrie besproken. In een discussie over de oprichting van het Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies komt naar voren hoe de visies van onderwijsdeskundigen, economen, politici, alsmede van de katholieke hiërarchie tegenover elkaar stonden. O’Nolans alter ego Myles nam in zijn column verscheidene en tegenstrijdige houdingen tegenover de wetenschapskwestie aan, waarmee hij de eigenlijke structuur van het debat weergaf. Deze samenvoeging van houdingen bracht de tegenstellingen en hypocrisie aan het licht die de oorzaak waren van het debat en toegeschreven konden worden aan intern tegenstrijdige politieke doelstellingen: modernisering en internationale concurrentie vs. de wederopbouw van een eenvoudige landbouwutopie waarin wetenschappelijke vooruitgang niet nodig was.

Hoofdstuk 3 is het meest theoretisch van de vier hoofdstukken, doordat de focus hier ligt op de literaire esthetiek van *haunting* in het werk van O’Nolan. In dit hoofdstuk wordt *The Third Policeman* (1940/1974) benaderd als een *haunted* roman over *haunting* door te stellen dat om de zin te kunnen ontdekken van zijn voortbestaan na zijn overlijden, de spookachtige verteller zijn solipsistische wereldbeeld en wetenschappelijke rationalisme moet laten varen in ruil voor een sceptisch en dialogisch perspectief. Deze houding is noodzakelijk voor de verteller teneinde effectief te communiceren met de vele Anderen in de roman, waaronder de man die hij heeft vermoord en de geheimzinnige politieagenten die erop gebrand zijn dat hij opgehangen zal worden.

Gesteld wordt dat een sceptische houding tegenover, bijvoorbeeld, (de mogelijkheid van) een leven na de dood en de geldigheid van verschillende wereldbeelden in combinatie met de bereidheid om de dialoog aan te gaan en de wereld vanuit een dialogisch oogpunt te beschouwen, de juiste omstandigheden kan creëren voor een bestaansvorm die ethisch is, juist omdat deze sceptisch is en weigert om de wereld vanuit monologisch oogpunt te beschouwen.

In hoofdstuk 4 worden O’Nolans intertekstuele engagement met het tekstuele verleden van Ierland en de Katholieke Kerk, de autoriteit van hun dominante verhalen en de rol van de creatieve auteur in het vormgeven van dergelijke verhalen onderzocht. *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) en *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) worden hier geanalyseerd. Ervan uitgaande dat alle teksten zowel worden beïnvloed als achtervolgd (*haunted*), “bezeten” door eerdere teksten, persoonlijkheden en principes, alsmede dat er een steeds sterkere gewenning optreedt met veelvoorkomende verhalen over het literaire, religieuze en historische verleden, wordt gesteld dat O’Nolan met het introduceren van vergeten of alternatieve verhalen over het verleden, de dominante verhalen over het verleden op een creatieve manier reconstrueert terwijl hij, al dan niet met opzet, lacunes blootlegt in het materiaal waaruit, onder meer, de Ierse katholieke identiteit en de sterke positie van de Kerk in de westerse maatschappij is opgebouwd. Dit spectrale proces van herschrijven kan de loop van de geschiedenis toegankelijk maken zodat het verleden, het heden en de toekomst in een nieuw, misschien minder beperkend licht kunnen worden gezien.

In de voornaamste conclusie van dit onderzoek wordt onderschreven dat het zeer kritische commentaar van O’Nolan op het door de Ierse cultuur selectief inschakelen van verhalen over het verleden na de onafhankelijkheid, een alternatieve, flexibelere manier suggereert voor het in verband brengen van het verleden met het heden en vice versa; een manier die draait om constante dialoog en het weigeren om genoeg te nemen met absolute waarheden. De succesvolle toepassing van dit dialogisch perspectief kan de ontketening tot stand brengen van het onderdrukte anders-zijn van verhalen die op een bepaalde manier beschouwd worden als zijnde te onsmakelijk of te weinig vleidend om deel uit te maken van het dominante (in dit geval het Ierse nationale) paradigma. Dit is op haar beurt een stimulans voor de creatie van nieuwe interpretaties van het verleden en voor de zoektocht naar nieuwe wegen naar een toekomst die leunt op het verleden, maar er niet aan gekluisterd is.

Curriculum Vitae

Alana Gillespie (1980, IRL/USA) read English language and literature at Utrecht University in The Netherlands, and English and History at the National University of Ireland, Galway. In 2005 she received her *Doctoraal* degree (equivalent to MA) in English Language and Culture from Utrecht University *cum laude*. She specialised in Modern Western Literature and wrote an MA thesis titled *Men Without Whereness: Spectres and Haunting in Flann O'Brien's The Dalkey Archive*. As a student she was active in student theatre – a passion she continues to pursue with a semi-professional bilingual theatre company based in Utrecht. She also writes plays and poetry. Since 2005 she has worked as an editor and translator and held temporary positions in the English Department at Utrecht University, teaching language proficiency and literature. In 2007 she received a PhD International grant from Utrecht University's Research Institute for Culture and History (*Onderzoekinstituut voor Geschiedenis en Cultuur*) to expand her research on Flann O'Brien/Brian O'Nolan, completing her dissertation in 2010. She is currently temporarily employed at Utrecht University, teaching courses in language and literature.