

# Who's afraid of James Joyce? : Or Flann O'Brien's retreat from modernism

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WHO'S AFRAID OF JAMES JOYCE?  
OR  
FLANN O' BRIEN'S RETREAT FROM MODERNISM

Flann O'Brien began his career as a modernist and later reverted to a kind of naturalism — in a reaction to James Joyce. His early, experimental novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* clearly borrows from (and satirises) *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*, but after the publication of *Finnegans Wake* O'Brien changed direction. He made a number of barbs at Joyce in his daily *Irish Times* column (written under the name Myles na Gopaleen) and finally ridiculed him as a character in *The Dalkey Archive*. Yet O'Brien also rejected everyday, ordinary language as clichés and empty, and thus created for himself, in his later 'naturalistic' novels, an unresolved impasse.

Brian O'Nolan wrote four novels in English (one 'experimental' and three largely naturalistic) under the name Flann O'Brien, and a novel in Irish and a column in the *Irish Times*, six days a week for over twenty years, under the pseudonym Myles na Gopaleen. O'Brien, to use the best known name of the three, seems to be the only writer to have begun his career as a modernist and then reverted to a kind of naturalism, and the change seems to have been a reaction against the later writing of James Joyce.

O'Brien's early experimental novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, owes much of its shape and inspiration to Joyce. It clearly satirises *A Portrait of the Artist* and uses the multi-level parodic technique of *Ulysses*. Yet after the publication of the 'unreadable' *Finnegans Wake* O'Brien rejected the 'Joycean' use of language. He made a number of pointed barbs at Joyce in his newspaper column and finally ridiculed the man as a character in his last novel. However O'Brien also rejected as clichés and empty 'everyday', 'public' language, and thus created for himself an unresolved impasse.

The narrator's statement of his aesthetic beliefs, his "explanation spontaneous and unsolicited" of his "spare time literary activities", goes a long way towards describing the nature of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.<sup>1</sup> He says that the reader of fiction is frequently "outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for illusory characters... The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic." He goes on to explain that "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity." (p. 25)

*At Swim* dismantles the realist novel, and the notion that art imitates reality. O'Brien later wrote that if this were the case the writer would be but "a Turkish bath attendant." His first novel is indeed a self-evident sham, composed of a compendium of literary styles, a collection of competing voices, and a succession of anecdotes and plots, including a novel-within-a-novel-within-a-novel.

The illusory 'naturalness' of 'realist' fiction depends on its summoning up in the reader's mind echoes and resonances of other texts which similarly simulate reality by way of 'transparent' language. The text is suspended in the network of all other realist texts which use similar situations and characters, and similar phrases, images and clichés — all the received configurations of speech. The process of connotation by which the reader makes sense of the text is given the illusion of denotation.

O'Brien's narrator believes in a far more radical form of intertextuality. He believes that:

Characters should be interchangeable between one book and another. 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 puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference... A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantly with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations, and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbliggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature (p. 25).

Although O'Brien's characters are largely original, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is 'a work of reference' in the sense that it contains a multitude of literary styles and references, and extracts from

other works, each of which the reader is expected to have the literary competence to recognise and give meaning to. The extracts, some genuine, others bogus, are from narratives, poems, newspapers and discursive writing of various periods, and from the narrator's own novel-in-progress. There are also 'autobiographical' episodes and incursions into Irish history and mythology. The narrator's idiom is different from that of the narrator of *his* novel, which is in turn different from that of *his* novelist. Other characters in these various works speak in Dublinese, 'medieval' disputation, transliterated Gaelic (an example of which is the novel's title,) etc.

The narrator interrupts his biographical reminiscences by naming figures of speech unknowingly used by his acquaintances (perhaps a parody of the vast number of rhetorical devices in the newspaper office scene in *Ulysses*,) and by semi-catechistic descriptions such as:

... I denied this.  
*Nature of denial:* Inarticulate, of gesture.

and

... Brinsley was at the window giving chuckles out.  
*Nature of chuckles:* Quiet, private, averted.

*At Swim* is thus constructed on a variety of planes of reality, each in a different mode, although unlike *Ulysses* the transitions between the hybrid styles are often opened and closed by 'stage directions' such as:

Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn MacCool and his people, being humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology.

and

Temporary discontinuance of the foregoing.

The 'real world' of Dublin is dissolved into the multiple worlds of literary convention. O'Brien demonstrates that there are different ways of representing reality. His narrator's own perceptions are shown to be entirely subjective and shaped by self-interest, so that:

*Description of my uncle:* Rat-brained, cunning, concerned-that-he-should-be-well-thought-of. Abounding in pretence, deceit. Holder of Guinness clerkship the third class (p. 30).

can give way to

*Description of my uncle:* Simple, well-intentioned, pathetic in his humility; responsible member of large commercial concern (p. 215).

The reader is expected to appreciate the different literary styles and the use of rhetorical devices. To use O'Brien's phrase, "upstarts... and persons of inferior education" will indeed have difficulties appreciating *At Swim*. Specifically, a reading that isn't informed by a knowledge of Joyce's first two published novels would be as circumscribed as a reading of *Ulysses* that didn't draw on the *Odyssey*.

One possible solution to the problem of incomprehension caused by external reference is to turn the novel in on itself, which O'Brien also does. In his bedroom the narrator of *At Swim* has a few books, "ranging from those of Mr. Joyce to the widely-read books of Mr. A. Huxley, the eminent English writer." Huxley's *Point Counter Point* contains a novelist as a character, and some excerpts from his notebook, including this one:

Put a novelist in the novel. He justifies aesthetic generalisations, which may be interesting, at least to me. He also justifies experiment. Specimens of his work may illustrate other possible or impossible ways of telling a story. And if you have him telling parts of the same story as you are, you can make him a variation on the theme. But why draw the line at one novelist inside your novel? Why not a second inside his? And a third inside the novel of the second. And so on into infinity... (Chapter 22)

This is merely a variation of the well-used technique which Gide, in his *Journal*, termed the "mise-en-abîme". Gide gives examples from painting (notably Velasquez) and literature (the play-scene in *Hamlet*,) and one can think of many more (Hugo, in his essay on Shakespeare, found a mise-en-abîme in all but two of his plays.) In the renaissance the mise-en-abîme was but a second reflection in miniature, an extension of the idea that art imitates nature. In the modernist text such as *At Swim*, the 'mir-

ror' distorts or refracts, disrupting rather than reflecting the primary narrative.

Yet whether "a work of reference" or self-referential, the modernist novel is in its own way as 'artificial' as the conventional fiction of a single reality. This is something that O'Brien perceived, as he abandoned his experimental techniques after *At Swim*. This may have been a direct reaction against the 'excesses' of *Finnegans Wake*, which was published in May 1939, two months after O'Brien's first novel.

\*

Nothing was published under the name Flann O'Brien between *At Swim* in 1939 and *The Hard Life* in 1961, although from 1940 onwards O'Nolan wrote the daily "Cruiskeen Lawn" column in the *Irish Times* under the name Myles na Gopaleen, which name he also used for his novel in Irish, *An Béal Bocht*, published in 1941. Yet O'Brien had written a second novel in English soon after *At Swim*. It was rejected by several publishers, after which O'Brien pretended to friends that he'd lost the MSS. He eventually took all the material he still liked from this novel and transposed it into *The Dalkey Archive* (1964). The original *The Third Policeman* was finally published posthumously in 1967.<sup>2</sup>

The change in style between *At Swim* and the essentially naturalistic *The Hard Life* was immediately apparent, although it was later to be seen that O'Brien had rejected the Joycean conceptions of the plurality of language and psychological representation as early as 1940 in *The Third Policeman*. Excerpts from *Finnegans Wake* had been appearing in periodicals for some years, and Beckett and others had written their *Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, so O'Brien must have been aware of what Joyce was writing, but it was only after the book's publication that he abandoned his own experimental techniques and took to calling *At Swim* "juvenile scribbling" and "adolescent trifling".

In *Ulysses* Joyce had violated syntax, played with compound adjectives, hybrid idioms, polyglot constructions and elaborate patterns of imagery. He demonstrated a command of a wealth of literary and non-standard, popular spoken forms, all in the name of accurate psychological representation. The young O'Brien had been influenced by this. Yet in *Finnegans Wake* Joyce went fur-

ther, truncating and splicing words, using anagrams and malapropisms and vocabulary from various foreign languages, in an attempt to extend the accurate portrayal of the waking consciousness to the sleeping consciousness. At this, O'Brien demurred.

Although he believed that there were a variety of ways of recording reality, he felt that each attempt to do so has only a limited meaning. He wrote in "Cruiskeen Lawn", perhaps not entirely seriously:

Synge was perhaps the most monstrous phony and buffoon ever to enter our celtic toilet, but he won international fame and money because foreigners extracted strange meanings and nuances from the language he used. Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses* is very popular abroad, yet nobody but a Dublin Paddy could get more than ten per cent of its meanings: it is manifest that foreigners DO get meanings, but meanings which are other. *Com-pren, eh? The Magic of Misunderstanding.*

*(The Hair of the Dogma, p. 166.)*

In *The Hard Life* O'Brien all but abandoned his experimentation with narrative forms. This novel, in some respects an extension of the biographical reminiscences of *At Swim*, set in the Dublin of Joyce's youth, employs a largely naturalistic first-person narration of the sort Joyce had abandoned with *Stephen Hero*. Yet the narrator is not of the omniscient sort attacked in *At Swim*. He admits authorial shortcomings and ignorance of scenes at which he was not present. Events are largely described in hindsight; O'Brien does not vary the form and style of episodes to fit the different stages of the narrator's consciousness and linguistic ability. No attempt is made at psychological accuracy.

O'Brien had retreated from modernism to a kind of realism, though his last three novels in English have plots no realist would contemplate. O'Brien had criticised Irish realism, but for its limited subject matter rather than for its form. For example he had characterised the short stories of Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor as:

stories about wee Annie going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals, old men in chimney nooks after fifty years in America, will-making, match-making, just one long blush for many an innocent man like me, who never harmed them.

*(The Hair of the Dogma, p. 103.)*



Despite settling for a largely realistic narrative form, O'Brien still distanced himself from everyday language. Like Joyce, he was able to imitate many oral Irish forms, and also to parody and extend them. But unlike in Joyce, when O'Brien's characters use malapropisms, neologisms, and 'incorrect' grammar, one suspects that the author is satirising ignorance and limited linguistic competence.

O'Brien also makes great use of puns (including, in "Cruiskeen Lawn", many in Irish, Latin and German: O'Brien's whole sense of language, rather like Beckett's, is heightened by his command of foreign languages.) Yet when O'Brien plays with words the effect is the opposite from the one produced by Joyce. O'Brien's puns are 'decreative'. He separates meanings which in Joyce collapse into one another; by comparison he makes Joyce's use of words appear a selfish indulgence. With pedantic accuracy and precision, both in *The Hard Life* and "Cruiskeen Lawn", O'Brien dismantles clichés, idioms, metaphors and unrecognised ambiguities, revealing the inadequacy of the received configurations of speech that we habitually substitute for considered expression.

O'Brien wrote a 'Catechism of Cliché' in "Cruiskeen Lawn". Unlike Swift's *Polite Conversation* and perhaps Flaubert's "Dictionnaire des idées reçues", which just accumulate empty words and phrases to comic effect, O'Brien positions the reader and makes him do the work himself, by splitting the cliché. For example, a satire of newspaper reports:

What happens to blows at a council meeting?  
 It looks as if they might be exchanged.  
 What does pandemonium do?  
 It breaks loose.  
 Describe its subsequent dominion.  
 It reigns.  
 How are allegations dealt with?  
 They are denied.  
 Yes, but then you are weakening, Sir. Come now,  
 how are they denied?  
 Hotly.  
 What is the mean temperature of an altercation, therefore?  
 Heated.  
 What is the behaviour of a heated altercation?  
 It follows.  
 What happens to order?



It is restored.  
 Alternatively, in what does the meeting break up?  
 Disorder.  
 etc.

(*The Best of Myles*, pp. 219-220.)

Far from suggesting a plurality of meaning in language, O'Brien stresses the poverty of conventional usage.

The everyday language of *The Hard Life* is relieved by Collopy's limited repertoire of Anglicised Irish insults (occasionally indecent, although the English reader is unlikely to know this), by the mock-scientific tone of Manus' letters which contain a lot of 'extrinsic', technical, medical vocabulary, largely lifted from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (although it is clear that he doesn't really understand what he is stealing), and by a trilingual encounter between Collopy, Father Fahrt the German priest, and the Pope (on the subject of the scandalous under-provision of ladies' lavatories in Dublin), although the Holy Father's Italian and Latin are translated into English.

\*

O'Brien's last novel, *The Dalkey Archive*, is among other things a reworking of the then-unpublished *The Third Policeman*. Both these novels examine one of the themes of *At Swim*, the delusions of individualism, solipsism or selfhood. They attempt to demonstrate that there is no one reality, that our idiosyncratic perceptions are largely subjective.

O'Brien gives examples in the "Conclusion of the book, ultimate" of *At Swim*.

One man will think he has a glass bottom and will fear to sit in case of breakage. In other respects he will be a man of great intellectual force... Another man will be perfectly polite and well-conducted except that he will in no circumstances turn otherwise than to the right (p. 217).

The narrator of *The Third Policeman* is not without his own foibles, and he suffers greatly when his particular perspectives are challenged. A murderer, murdered in turn by his co-conspirator, he is trapped in a hell of his own imagining. He recognises that his consciousness is not functioning quite normally, but he is completely unaware of his death. On the last page of the novel, we realise that the narrator's hell is circular.

His chief idiosyncrasy is his obsession with the works of the deranged philosopher/scientist de Selby. He has dedicated his life to studying the 'savant's' works, and those of his commentators. (The novel is interspersed with footnotes giving detailed bibliographical references for these imaginary writers.) Although he remarks that de Selby was "ever loath to leave well enough alone" and that "it is a certain enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of night and day) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena," the narrator committed his fatal attempted robbery to finance his further study of the man's work. For his pains he now finds himself in a world which seems to substantiate several of de Selby's idiotic notions.

O'Brien's satirical targets are people blinded by selfhood (*der Selbe*). These include both de Selby who reappears (with an upper case D) in *The Dalkey Archive*, the policemen of both novels, and James Joyce, who appears as a character in the second.

Sergeant Pluck, who speaks in a complicated argot, full of malapropisms and neologisms, which the narrator can neither understand nor imitate, has observed the workings of the "atomic theory": how the interchange of atoms between man and bicycle over long rides on bumpy Irish roads leads to the bicycle becoming more human than the rider.

This idea is very likely taken from the hobby-horses of some of the characters of *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne says that "By long journeys and much friction it so happens that the body of the rider is filled as full of HOBBY-HORSICAL matter as it can hold."<sup>3</sup> Yet O'Brien's version curiously parallels Beckett's later image of the bicycle as the perfected human body. Beckett's characters, often in the throes of acute bodily decay (as in *Molloy*) look back wistfully to the days in which they at least had a bicycle. As Hugh Kenner puts it, Beckett's Cartesian Centaur, man in excelsis, is a man riding a bicycle. Cartesian man deprived of his bicycle is a mere intelligence fastened to a dying animal.<sup>4</sup> The policemen cannot comprehend the narrator's lack of a bicycle, but being a dead man, blown to pieces by a bomb, it is natural (by Beckettian logic) that he should be without a body/bicycle.

(A more mundane source for O'Brien's "mollycule theory" might simply be that Dublin is, or used to be, one of the most bicycle-ridden towns in the world.)

The policemen, bicycles and De Selby are recycled in *The Dal-*

*key Archive*. The major difference between the first novel and the second is the addition of the character Joyce.

The reader of *Dalkey* is immediately ambushed by unusual language. Dalkey (a little town to the south of Dublin) is described as the “vestibule of a heavenly conspection”. The reader is invited to ascend Vico Road, “*per iter*, as it were, *tenebricosum*”. To his right he will see a wooded hillside which is “vert, verdant, vertical, verticillate, vertiginous, in the shade of branches even vespertine”, a string of adjectives followed by a phrase whose meaning will not become clear for forty pages, “Heavens, has something escaped from the lexicon of Sergeant Fottrell?”

This is followed by a kind of catechism, which includes the question:

But why this name Vico Road? Is there to be recalled in this magnificence a certain philosopher’s pattern of man’s lot on earth — thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos? Hardly (p. 7).

*Finnegans Wake*, by implication, has already been rejected.

Fottrell’s lexicon turns out to be largely unchanged from Sergeant Pluck’s, written twenty five years earlier, full of ingenious malapropisms and inventively misused adverbs. O’Brien was clearly pleased with this Joyce-speaking character — at the time of his death he was planning a comic tv series based on him — but his speech is intended to be risible rather than to suggest a richness of meaning.

Saint Augustine, who appears in an under-sea cave just off the coast, is given a ludicrous Dublin accent, and like all the best stage-Irishmen he occasionally forgets it. Other characters — including the overweening Mick who believes that it is “his long-term duty to overturn the whole Jesuit order”, and De Selby who merely plans “to destroy the whole world” by “the annihilation of the atmosphere” — are given a sprinkling of real and invented Greek/Latin vocabulary: plenum, katabolism, astrognosy, geodesy, christophobe, theopneust, periculums, etc.

As deluded as Mick and De Selby is a third character, one James Augustine Joyce. O’Brien admitted in a letter to his publisher, “It is true that James Joyce has been dragged in by the scruff of his neck,” but as he wrote elsewhere, “I’ve had it in for that bugger for a long time and I think this is the time.” The book, he wrote in a third letter, “is really an essay in extreme derision of literary attitudes and people.”<sup>5</sup>

When Joyce's rumoured existence is first mentioned, the pompous Mick proffers a fairly balanced criticism of his writing:

I think I have read all his works though I admit I did not properly persevere with his playwriting. I consider his poetry meretricious and mannered. But I have an admiration for all his other work, for his dexterity and resource in handling language, for his precision, for his subtlety in conveying the image of Dublin and her people, for his accuracy in setting down speech authentically, and for his enormous humour (p. 103).

But a later remark, "*Finnegans Wake*, though, and all that line of incoherent trash be damned!" reflects the attitude O'Brien had long revealed elsewhere:

I hear there's not two consecutive words of English in that book *Flannagan's Awake*.

("Cruiskeen Lawn", 18/3/44)<sup>6</sup>

What was really abnormal about Joyce? At Clongowes he had his dose of Jesuit casuistry. Why did he substitute his home-made chaosistry?

("A Bash in the Tunnel", 1951)<sup>7</sup>

He often committed that least excusable of follies, being 'literary'. His attempted disintegration, dissipation and demolition of language was his other major attainment, if you can call it that. What would you think of a man who entered a restaurant, sat down, suddenly whipped up the tablecloth and blew his nose in it? You would not like it — not if you owned the restaurant. This is what Joyce did with our beloved tongue that Shakespeare and Milton spoke.

("Cruiskeen Lawn", 7/7/58)

(One assumes that the last comment was made in jest. O'Brien did not own the English language any more than Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Fottrell, Earwicker or anyone else, and besides, tablecloths can be washed!)

Back in Dalkey, Mick wonders whether the De Selby problem could be solved

by bringing together De Selby and Joyce and inducing both to devote their considerable brains in consultation to some recondite, involuted and incomprehensible literary project, ending in publication of a book which would be commonly ignored and

thus be no menace to universal sanity? Would Joyce take to De Selby, and vice versa? Does a madman reciprocally accept a dissimilar madness? (p. 118)

In fact, Joyce has his own project on his hands. He questions the accepted idea of the Holy Ghost, claiming that it is an erroneous conception, stemming from the mistranslation of the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma* into the Latin *spiritus*. Conveniently this all ties in with Fottrell's pneumatic tyres and De Selby's "pneumatic chemistry". Unfortunately, as Joyce explains to Mick, he has difficulties putting his ideas on paper.

Writing is not the word. Assembly, perhaps is better — or accretion. The task I have set myself could probably be properly termed the translation into language of raw spiritual concepts... I'm rather at sea as to language. I have a firm grip of my thoughts, my argument... but communicating the ideas clearly in English is my difficulty... My thoughts are new, you understand, and I'm afraid... they tend to be ineffable (pp. 133, 135).

Although Mick speculates that in Skerries, the little town in which Joyce is living, one might have silence, exile and cunning, when he encounters Joyce he finds "the garrulous, the repatriate, the ingenuous." O'Brien's fictional Joyce is the artist divested of most of his pride. Unlike Stephen, who attempts to escape family, country and faith, and to attain a condition of independence from the normal demands of life, O'Brien's Joyce merely wants to join the Jesuits and, who knows?, perhaps end up as Rector of Clongowes! All he admits to having written are the stories in *Dubliners* — although Gogarty added all the vulgar bits — and some tracts for the Catholic Truth Society! He claims to have seen only extracts from Sylvia Beach's *Ulysses* — "artificial and laborious stuff... pornography and filth and literary vomit" — and he thinks that *Finnegans Wake* is an old ballad. As he wrote to his publisher, O'Brien was "finally cutting Joyce down to size."

It was impossible for an Irish writer in the middle of the century to ignore Joyce. O'Brien began his writing career very much under his influence, *At Swim-Two-Birds* being among many other things a clear parody of *A Portrait of the Artist* and parts of *Ulysses*. Following the publication of *Finnegans Wake* O'Brien rejected Joyce's narrative form, if such it can be called, and use of

language, and abandoned his own experimental methods. After spending years making jibes at Joyce in his newspaper column, O'Brien finally ridiculed him as a character in his last novel. Yet although he adopted an essentially realist form, O'Brien distanced himself from 'ordinary' language, and continued to employ 'extrinsic' technical vocabulary, a few transliterated Gaelicisms and occasional outbreaks of 'Joycean' speech. Turning his back on the 'modernist' novel, O'Brien attempted to use a form and a language which couldn't quite contain him.

Ian MACKENZIE.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, (London, 1939). Quotations are from the Penguin edition (1967).

<sup>2</sup> *An Béal Bocht* (Dublin, 1941). Translated as *The Poor Mouth* (London, 1973).

*The Hard Life* (London, 1961). London, Picador paperback, 1976.

*The Dalkey Archive* (London, 1964). Picador, 1976.

*The Third Policeman* (London, 1967). Picador, 1974.

Four volumes of pieces from "Cruiskeen Lawn" have been published:

*The Best of Myles* (London, 1968). Picador, 1977.

*Further Cuttings from "Cruiskeen Lawn"* (London, 1976).

*The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman and the Brother* (London, 1976).

*The Hair of the Dogma* (London, 1977).

All page references are to paperback editions, where they exist.

<sup>3</sup> Suggested by Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien, a Critical Introduction* (Dublin, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> "A Portfolio of Letters", *Journal of Irish Literature*, III: i, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Dated excerpts from "Cruiskeen Lawn" are taken from "An annotated Bibliography of Myles na Gopaleen's (Flann O'Brien's) Cruiskeen Lawn Commentaries on James Joyce," *James Joyce Quarterly*, IX: i, Fall 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted in *Stories and Plays* (London, 1973).

