



Brian O’Nolan / Flann O’Brien / Myles: Playing / Spoiling

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Brian O’Nolan / Flann O’Brien / Myles: Playing /
Spoiling

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A peculiar feature of Brian O’Nolan (1911-66) was his claim to have written many a work that he didn’t. His biographer Anthony Cronin puts this down to ‘his general mendacity and love of puzzle-making’.¹ It could also be attributed to his delight in fictionalising himself which is reflected in the several pseudonyms he adopted during his writing career: the better known ones were Flann O’Brien for his novels, plays and stories, and Myles na Gopaleen for pieces published in the Dublin paper *The Irish Times*. Although the diversity of names, like the variety of his writings, also suggests a fitful, perhaps uneasy spirit, he has the reputation among Irish readers of being one of the funniest and most outrageous writers of his day. This paper will suggest certain Irish characteristics of his work with examples from his shorter pieces and from the last of his novels *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).²

A facility for playing ironically with language, and all that follows from it, is something O’Brien has in common with contemporaries like Joyce and Beckett. Since at least the time of Swift there has been a thread of Irish writing which is irreverent, if not iconoclastic, with a spoiling humour that delights by its virtuosity yet leaves the reader uneasy by its sardonic undertones. When Joyce writes, ‘O Ireland my first and only love / Where Christ and Caesar are hand and glove’, we sense the rebel and the patriot, cynicism and distress lightened by ridicule.³ O’Brien’s long and testy relation with the reputation of Joyce, his anger at being repeatedly assessed in terms of Joyce is evident in much that he wrote. His ambivalence towards Joyce has often been discussed. Even so O’Brien admired much in Joyce, particularly his humour, and it is important for an understanding of O’Brien to look more closely at this ironic facility in Joyce.

In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a crucial moment in the development of Stephen Dedalus’ consciousness towards identity and disillusionment occurs during a conversation with the university dean; he reflects that English is not his native language.⁴ English is the language of the conqueror and in many respects has brought with it the conqueror’s ideology: ‘The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine... I have not made or accepted its words... My soul frets in the shadow of his language’. Yet that language is the medium through which he chooses to express his identity, his difference from Ireland’s conquerors. The images of flight and escape at the end of that novel affirm a desire for freedom from Ireland as shaped by a stagnant culture, and by the authoritarianism of both English politics and the Catholic Church. Stephen’s desire at the end ‘to forge... the uncreated conscience of my race’ requires that he press the English language into the service of the Irish imagination. The cultural paralysis of Ireland, so persistently evoked in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, was the stimulus for Joyce, as it had been for the English language against its erstwhile masters, to posit an alternative discourse to that of the Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Irish intelligence, to subvert its Protestant moral proprieties by displaying them as arid, as agents of death to Ireland rather than life. In addition Joyce fashioned the English language to expose the Irish to themselves as victims, as the dead, a people lost in a winterland of political and religious prejudices. The display takes its energy not just from protest or disagreement, but from otherness, from a vision other than that offered by either the English or the Catholic Church.

¹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (1989; Paladin, 1990), p. 246.

² Flann O’Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, London: MacGibbon and Key, 1964. Since Brian O’Nolan is better known as Flann O’Brien I frequently refer to him in the paper by this pseudonym.

³ From ‘Gas from a Burner,’ *Collected Poems in The Essential James Joyce* (Penguin, 1963), p. 349.

⁴ Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) in *The Essential James Joyce* (Penguin, 1963), p. 200.

For Joyce the 'indomitable Irishry' were not the heroic or romantic people evoked by Yeats;⁵ they were a race in search of a lost soul. The prejudices of the Citizen against Bloom in *Ulysses* — 'I'll brain that bloody jewman'⁶ — reflect the sorry state of the Irish character. Joyce counteracts Yeats' heroics with the mock-heroics of Dublin citizens as innocuous as Bloom and as duplicitous as Molly. Joyce's language impales the likes of the Citizen while it liberates Bloom, and in both processes the language is fraught with irony.

Ireland's otherness stems not least from this ironic relation with language, an openness to its possibilities rather than a determination to discipline or be disciplined by it. For Joyce, as for Swift before him, the ambiguity of language is an attractive strength. One pleasure of using words is to disclose multiple layers of meaning, which in itself is an acknowledgement of the complexity of social interaction. Molly Bloom's final words in *Ulysses* — 'yes I said yes I will Yes' — express an openness to life's abundant possibilities. Language is more interesting for what it lets loose than for what it confines.

Comic elements in the writing mentioned above have little in common with the comedy of say Goldsmith, Sheridan or Carleton. O'Brien makes a scathing attack on the comedy of his day as 'playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy'.⁷ The humour of Swift is by contrast seldom palliative or redemptive. The conventional features of comedy found in say Plautus or Shakespeare, are often absent — reconciliations, weddings, the promise of children, a new life and fresh perceptions. There is a dark undercurrent of feeling in Swift, as in O'Casey and O'Brien, which complicates the humour, tempering the laughter with a consciousness of despair. Serious issues, such as man's desire for perfection in the last book of *Gulliver's Travels*, or Ireland's fight for freedom in *The Plough and the Stars*, are fleshed out as travesties. The result is not a mixture of tragedy and comedy but a contest in which the comic subverts and mocks the tragic. Swift differs as much from Goldsmith as Joyce does from Wilde.

Swift is the father figure of this strand of Irish writing. His point of attack is the presumption that language means what it says. For Swift, as for Beckett and O'Brien, it repeatedly means other than it says. They scorn the authority of the word to be master of literal sense or reality. As a result language keeps generating other texts from the one visible on the page. There is a constant tension between the actual text of say *A Modest Proposal*, which is literally absurd, and the implicit readings which that text generates. The literal becomes subordinate to the ironic; irony displaces and ridicules the literal. The rational good sense of Swift's proposal to resolve Ireland's problems of too many children and too little food becomes a laughing stock, an absurdity. But the comic force of the ridiculous project cannot be divorced from the possibility that the scheme differs only in degree and not in kind from England's manner of solving Ireland's problems.

Thus language becomes a weapon against the importunities of a miserable world. To mock despair is a way of spoiling it. To do this writers show frequent contempt for the demands of unambiguous clarity and reason, as well as for the value systems associated with these. Seriousness gives way to play, which in turn unsettles the reader because the writer has modified the accepted modes of mediating and organising experience. The conventional mainstays of sanity — language and logic — are no longer used for their familiar ends. The actual world, whether trivial, mundane, tragic or desperate, becomes an occasion for ironic play. At times, as in Swift's *Bickerstaff Papers*, this vitality is manifest in ironies of logic and fanciful elaborations, at other times it conjures up the ghoulish Struldbruggs or repulsive

⁵ W.B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulbin,' *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 400.

⁶ Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1962), p. 445.

⁷ *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'*, ed. Kevin O Nolan (1968; London: Picador, 1977), p. 234. O'Brien's column 'Cruiskeen Lawn', meaning little brimming jug, appeared from 1940 until the time of his death in 1966.

Yahoos. The escape route from what O'Brien once called 'the awful human condition' is irony.⁸ By foregrounding itself at the expense of the world it signifies, irony establishes a critical space in which several meanings can play against one another.

No realm of experience is privileged against this playfulness. Death for example is a commonplace subject, be it in *Malone Dies*, or at Paddy Dignam's funeral in *Ulysses*, or Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*. Humour and wit take precedence over heroism, tragedy and morality, not because such noble preoccupations have no value: they are too narrow and overbearing for the kind of Irish imagination that shows a particular energy in subversion, be it by hyperbole, cynicism, logical extension or comic reversal. In the early period of O'Brien's work this playful mode was prompted by what he regarded as a philistine public indifferent to literature and by his isolation as a writer. Joyce's response had been to go into exile; O'Brien, like Patrick Kavanagh remained to wrestle with their publishers, their public and their alienation.⁹ Virtually every aspect of Irish life was worsted in the ironic rout. The playfulness included a good deal of spoiling. The reason was that O'Brien could seldom divorce humour from its darker side: talking about humour in Joyce, he calls it 'the handmaid of sorrow and fear'.¹⁰ As Nell says in Beckett's *Endgame*, 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. I grant you that'.¹¹ Laughter is the key to survival in a harsh world. It gives birth astride the grave.¹²

The notion of survival is crucial to an understanding of that playful body of Irish writing of which O'Brien's work is a part. Boyle's final judgement in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, 'Th' whole worl's...in a terr...ible state o'...chassis!',¹³ is humorous for its surprising wit in a tragic situation, yet tragic for its apparent nonchalance in the face of domestic disaster. The combination is a mode of survival: it speaks neither surrender nor victory, and in its very juxtaposition avoids both. The paradox lies in a zest for the miserable, which is alluded to in O'Brien's dedication of *The Hard Life* to Graham Greene, 'whose own forms of gloom I admire'.¹⁴ One could argue that this propensity, even dexterity in evading the serious, making fun of the tragic, refusing to bow to the demands of common sense or moral seriousness are deep ingrained habits of a national psyche which learned through some eight centuries of English domination that authority in whatever guise is usually the will of the enemy, and that therefore the very notion of authority is a suspicious customer.

Examples of many of the features discussed above are to be found in the writings of Brian O'Nolan, be he alias Flann O'Brien or Myles na Gopaleen. As so often in Swift the narrative voice adopts a rhetorical stance which presumes sincerity, honesty, thoroughness, concern for the well-being of society and above all sanity. Invariably the voice shows initiative and resourcefulness in the face of a world bedevilled by prejudice, incompetence or malice. The voice poses as an authority to be trusted. As if to reinforce these qualities, to reassure readers that they are in trustworthy hands, the narrative pays meticulous attention to those tactile, visual, mundane details which establish a familiar world. The settings and preoccupations are essentially democratic, plebeian, unpretentious. Every effort is made to allay suspicion. The text meanwhile energetically disrupts the authority of its own narrator or its centre of consciousness.

Disruption of authority, be it by evasion or subversion, has both negative and positive connotations, some of which depend on the expectations the reader brings to the text.

⁸ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *Irish Times*, 2 March, 1966.

⁹ See Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p. 235.

¹⁰ Cited by Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p. 191.

¹¹ Beckett, *Endgame* (Faber, 1958), p. 20.

¹² Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 1956), p. 89.

¹³ Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* in *Three Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 73.

¹⁴ Flann O'Brien, *The Hard Life* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1961), [p. 5].

Convention or cultural mores set up presumptions about necessary guidelines for our sanity and comprehension of the world. Such authoritative markers may be artistic — such as coherent grammar, logical thought, the role of the narrative voice — or institutional, as in the legal system, the police, the Church, priests, rituals. Disruption of these, often achieved by undercutting humour, can be both destructive of such presumptions and yet assertive of alternatives such as ingenuity in outwitting authority, liberation from convention, together with a refusal to succumb to the ubiquitous discomforts and anxieties that go with the myth of a fallen world. In O'Brien, as in Joyce and O'Casey, this myth is a noted weapon of the Irish Catholic Church.

The complex workings of O'Brien's narrative voice, which in turn generates much of the humour, are well illustrated in his short story 'John Duffy's Brother'. The story concerns a Dublin man who works in a solicitor's office: he rises, goes to work, returns home for lunch, then returns to the office. The only relief in this plain and uneventful life is provided by an experience which he keeps secret, and because it is a secret it presents problems to the narrator as he explains in the opening paragraph,¹⁵

Strictly speaking, this story should not be written or told at all. To write it or tell it is to spoil it. This is because the man who had the strange experience we are going to talk about never mentioned it to anybody, and the fact that he kept his secret and sealed it up completely in his memory is the whole point of the story. Thus we must admit that handicap at the beginning — that it is absurd for us to tell the story, absurd for anybody to listen to it and unthinkable that anybody should believe it. (p. 91)

The paragraph is self-defeating, and in a rational world this is the point at which the reader and / or the writer should put away the story (which has not been told in fiction or in fact). Given that there are six pages to go, one reads on.

O'Brien moves forward from this seemingly contradictory start by saying he will do the man 'one favour': he will not mention his name: 'This will enable us to tell his secret and permit him to continue looking his friends in the eye' (p. 91). The narrator then tells us that his name was Duffy — because his brother was Duffy — but, he argues, as there are thousands of Duffys in the world the man's anonymity is assured, his secret more or less respected.

The secret is that on the morning of 9 March, 1932 this man, Duffy's brother, went to work insisting that he was a train, 'long, thunderous and immense, with white steam escaping noisily from his feet and deep-throated bellows coming rhythmically from where his funnel was' (p. 94). As always in O'Brien this notion is given concrete and logical particularity. The reader is further reassured with the detail that Duffy's brother was a particular train, 'the 9.20 into Dublin. His station was the bedroom.' (p. 94) When he arrived at work and was greeted by a fellow clerk as Mr Duffy, he resented the greeting: 'Can you not see I am a train?...Why do you call me Mr Duffy?' (p. 95) His colleagues smirked and cracked jokes, but played along with the fiction. At lunch-time Duffy, 'let out another shrill whistle and steamed slowly out of the office...' (p. 96); but as he sat at his lonely table the fiction evaporated, and the rest of his day passed in weary disappointment. The ensuing ennui was 'a good excuse for buying more liquor' (p. 97).

The narrative voice plays a highly ambiguous role in this story. As he tells us in the opening paragraph the story is absurd; it is unthinkable that anybody should believe it — if by 'absurd' and 'anybody' we imply conventional social behaviour or rationality. The story would not interest Mr Ordinary living his mundane and boring life. That is the profile of the reader O'Brien implies in the first paragraph. In another sense the story is not absurd. The humour and energy which the narrative voice brings to the story are contemptuous of such conventions and such a reader. The pathos is that Duffy is eventually subsumed back into that profile — but he has the compensation of his secret. His passion to be a train, however

¹⁵ Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' *Stories and Plays* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973), pp. 91-97.

absurd, is a reminder that once in his life he lived the fancy, he broke free from the constrictions of life epitomised by the patronising amusement of his colleagues. We laugh at the absurdity of the fiction, but our laughter is also a sharing in the freedom which we know fiction allows and society and / or our inhibitions deny.

What Duffy's story shares with many another fiction by O'Brien is the pursuit of an obsession. Duffy's single-minded desire to be a train, to be or do other than what the reader would normally take seriously recurs in much of O'Brien's fiction. Its genesis lies in the fanciful projectors of Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*. Within the obsession lies an incontrovertible logic, an energy to pursue every possible logical consequence — in the guise of reason — so as to achieve a thoroughness which itself is a pledge of total sincerity and trustworthiness. What is at risk here, and often so vulnerable to being made fun of, is the reader's deep seated respect for rationality, particularly logic, which the Aristotelian tradition has ingrained into Western thought as the foundation of sanity and the final security against madness. Swift's *Modest Proposal* is another ur-text for this characteristic of Irish writing.

Brian O'Nolan, writing under another pseudonym, Myles na Gopaleen, frequently resorted to such obsessive fictions in his regular column for the Dublin newspaper *The Irish Times*.¹⁶ He suggests projects for manufacturing intoxicating ice-cream, for hiding Ireland, for 'emergency trousers' that will store four bottle of stout in each leg. Less obviously outrageous at first sight is his project to produce a limited edition of his verse. With typical boisterous familiarity he begins by cajoling the reader into his trust, posing as sane, knowledgeable in every detail of print and paper, and sharp in business acumen:

You know the limited edition ramp. If you write very obscure verse (and why shouldn't you, pray?) for which there is little or no market, you pretend that there is an enormous demand, and that the stuff has to be rationed. Only 300 copies will be printed, you say, and then the type will be broken up for ever. Let the connoisseurs and bibliophiles savage each other for the honour and glory of snatching a copy. Positively no reprint. Reproduction in whole or in part forbidden. Three hundred copies of which this is Number 4,312. Hand-monkeyed oklamon paper, indigo boards in interpulped squirrel-toe, not to mention twelve point Campile Perpetua cast specially for the occasion. Complete, unabridged, and positively unexpurgated. Thirty-five bob a knock and a gory livid bleeding bargain at the price.

Well I have decided to carry this thing a bit farther. I beg to announce respectfully my coming volume of verse entitled 'Scorn for Taurus'. We have decided to do it in eight point Caslon on turkey-shutter paper with covers in purple corduroy. But look out for the catch. When the type has been set up, it will be instantly destroyed and NO COPY WHATEVER WILL BE PRINTED. *In no circumstances will the company's servants be permitted to carry away even a rough printer's proof*. The edition will be so utterly limited that a thousand pounds will not buy even one copy. This is my idea of being exclusive.

The charge will be five shillings. Please do not make an exhibition of yourself by asking me what you get for your money. You get nothing you can see or feel, not even a receipt. But you do yourself the honour of participating in one of the most far-reaching experiments ever carried out in my literary work-shop. (p. 228)

By relentless logic Myles na Gopaleen arrives at a position where he can ask bibliophiles and lovers of poetry to do the honourable thing for his poetry by paying money for copies that are so limited in number as not to exist at all. The subversion of convention is complete: the reader goes away quizzically amused at the deceitfulness of logic, and more aware of the treacherous possibilities of language. Words, pushed to fulfil the meanings they pretend to, make fools of us.

Critics of O'Brien have noted the above features as particular manifestations of an attack on the conventions of fiction. One critic for example cites a passage from O'Brien's best known novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* as evidence of his work as anti-novel: 'a satisfactory novel should

¹⁶ See *The Best of Myles* (1968; London: Picador, 1975).

be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity.’¹⁷ My concern is not to dispute that argument but to suggest that the features mentioned so far — anti-heroism, evasion of authority, obsessive logic, bizarre projects, language as liberation, humour as survival — are recurring features of a particular facet of the Irish psyche and when taken together reflect a discernible tradition of Irish writing.

If Swift is the father figure, George Berkeley is a close relative. The contribution of George Berkeley to eighteenth century thought and later philosophy is that ‘he shows us the world from a new point of view’.¹⁸ The English, through Locke in particular, as well as such diverse contributors as Newton and Addison, had a respect for reason and logical clarity which Berkeley shared. But Berkeley’s scepticism about the material nature of reality, his oft cited phrase, ‘esse est percipi’, his opposition to the notion that language is a means of controlling the world, provide a philosophical approach to reality which has a peculiarly Irish flavour. One of the consequences within Irish fiction is the anti-novel, but to stress that at the expense of the Irish ironic sensibility is to locate one’s critical viewpoint and authority in the very Anglo-Saxon camp to which it was opposed.

O’Brien’s legacy from Swift and Berkeley is an irony that ridicules failure and an irreverence for the supposed certitudes of reason and the material world. Many of the consequences are evident in his more sustained work, in particular *At Swim-Two Birds*. They are also present in a more contentious piece, his last novel, *The Dalkey Archive*, which cost him much pain in revision and has been regarded with much less favour.¹⁹ The novel, said O’Brien, was not a novel,²⁰ and the title is a clue as to what is potentially yet another joke about conventions and expectations. *The Dalkey Archive* is set for the most part in Dalkey, just south of Dublin, and is archival in a number of ways. For example it includes reworked material from a manuscript which had been rejected and which was to be published after his death as *The Third Policeman*; it recounts an interview between one of the characters and St. Augustine; it reveals that Joyce spent his last years during the 1940s in Dublin — information which was new to many, since ‘Joyce’s last years were unknown, the only available biography coming to an end in 1939’.²¹ In respects like this *The Dalkey Archive* poses not as fictional but as archival; that is as documentary, self-validating material. It claims to be what it seems to be. The novel is at its most obviously fictitious when claiming the authority of factualness, most obviously a novel when pretending not to be.

The story concerns ‘a lowly civil servant’, Mick Shaughnessy, whose mundane life is sparked into fanciful and heroic possibilities by three people - a scientist named De Selby, James Joyce and Mick’s girl friend Mary. De Selby has not only discovered how to suspend time, but is so disgusted with history as to have devised a chemical compound which will remove oxygen from the atmosphere and thus destroy the world. James Joyce he hears is not dead, but hiding in a pub in Skerries, a village near Dublin. Mick thinks he can prevent De Selby’s plan by introducing him to 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.
(p. 129)

¹⁷ Vivian Mercier in Eva Wappling, *Four Irish Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds: A Study of Flann O’Brien’s Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy* (Uppsala, 1984), p. 25.

¹⁸ Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648-1789* (Penguin, 1974), p. 164.

¹⁹ An account of the problems O’Brien had writing and revising the novel, as well as debates about its success, is given in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, pp. 249-55.

²⁰ Letter to Mark Hamilton, 28 November, 1963, cited by Cronin, p. 252.

²¹ Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp, *Flann O’Brien: an Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 130.

This logical and worthwhile project would in addition do honour to his girl friend, 'his virgin Mary', whose literary talents could be put to writing 'the true story of Joyce' (p. 115). Shaughnessy begins to see himself as a kind of saviour of the world, a priest of salvation: 'he was on the point of rescuing everybody from obliteration, somewhat as it was claimed that Jesus had redeemed all mankind' (p. 129). In a literal sense the world — including the supposedly dead Joyce, as well as De Selby — would be saved. And what for? For a future in which genius would be no threat to sanity, and great literary abilities would be ignored. It is possible that O'Brien meant this as a joke at both himself and Joyce.

In the event Joyce turns out to be less interested in De Selby than joining the Jesuits; he is interviewed by Fr Cobble who thinks Joyce is applying to be a gardener; finally he offers to put Joyce in charge of 'the maintenance and repair of the Fathers' underclothes' (p. 213). Meanwhile Shaughnessy employs the help of the local policeman to break into De Selby's house to steal the lethal chemical; he agrees to drop his plans to become a Trappist monk and opts to marry Mary, whom he discovers is going to have a baby. The final joke is double edged: either Shaughnessy's role as saviour includes saving Mary from her virginity, or we have to assume that her news, 'I am certain that I am going to have a baby' (p. 222), looks forward to a virgin birth. There is no escaping the parody of the holy family. These resolutions have an absurdity in fact and fiction which can be read as a retaliation on the absurdity of Shaughnessy's original well-intentioned project and on the very title of the novel. Critics have noted the novel's uneven performance, its links with O'Brien's earlier manuscript of *The Third Policeman*, and the hints at his anxiety, even anger, that Joyce in exile should be so respected while O'Brien in Ireland received so little notice.²² There are moments of merciless humour against Joyce. While the novel was being drafted O'Brien had said, 'I am not happy at all about the treatment of Joyce; a very greater mess must be made of him'.²³ But to focus on these points can be a distraction from another reading which, as I shall show, sees them as an integral part of the narrative.

The parody of Joyce through the second half of the novel is part of a wider reaching subversion which includes the Church and the police. Joyce is first mentioned in a conversation between Shaughnessy and his friends in a pub in Dalkey. No one doubts that Joyce, presumed dead, was a writer of deserved international repute: they refer to his 'wonderful international reputation,' his work was 'very fine and poetic', he was 'a well-known public man' (pp.106-7). One of the company, Dr Crewett, startles them by saying Joyce is not dead, that Joyce himself put about stories of his own death to escape public notice, and Crewett confides to Shaughnessy that Joyce is staying in Skerries, a village just north of Dublin. Shaughnessy fired by enthusiasm and respect tracks Joyce down to an inconspicuous pub in the village, and from their first meeting onwards the narrative plays havoc with Joyce's high reputation.

Shaughnessy reminds the diffident recluse that he is, 'a most remarkable writer, an innovator, Dublin's accomplished archivist' (p. 144). Joyce angrily denies all this: asked about *Finnegans Wake* he presumes Shaughnessy is talking about 'a wellknown song in my young days'(p. 147).²⁴ He has never heard of the novel. Later he denounces *Ulysses* : 'I have heard more than enough about that dirty book, that collection of smut, but do not be heard saying that I had anything to do with it' (p. 191). *Dubliners* he says was a joint effort with Oliver Gogarty. He now spends most of his time writing pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland — 'I am sure you know what I mean — those little tracts that can be had from a stand

²² See for example Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* , pp. 194-99 and Cronin, *No Laughing Matter* , pp. 188-91.

²³ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p. 252.

²⁴ Joyce took the title for *Finnegans Wake* from the ballad 'Finnegan's Wake' which is reprinted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 556-57.

inside the door of any church; on marriage, the sacrament of penance, humility, the dangers of alcohol' (p. 192).

While the narrative thus undermines Joyce the master of fiction it fictionalises him as a character longing for the very ecclesiastical and moral conventions which had driven him out of Ireland. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, during an interview with the Jesuit spiritual director, Stephen thinks to himself, 'How often had he seen himself as a priest wielding calmly and humbly the awful power of which angels and saints stood in reverence! His soul had loved to muse in secret on this desire'.²⁵ Soon after he totally rejects the prospect. In *The Dalkey Archive* the desire and the interview are re-enacted: this time the older fictionalised Joyce seeks out what the young Stephen rejected. O'Brien's joke is that the fiction repossesses Joyce for Ireland, reintegrates him into the Ireland he had fled. There is a hollow, even bitter truth in Shaughnessy's exclamation, 'Sweet God, had he found James Joyce?' (p. 143) He had and he hadn't. Joyce was not back from the dead but back to the dead.

O'Brien's irreverence for certain ikons of independent Ireland — a triumphal church, pious and stringent in its morality, a religious patriotism centred on St Patrick — is a development from Joyce and a source of much of the humour and the underlying cynicism of the book. The Ireland to which Joyce returns is a land of ghost figures from his earlier fiction: the prim Mary, the drunken Hackett, an officious parish priest, an indolent medical student, a pompous policeman, a self-satisfied Jesuit, the dangerous projector De Selby and the idealistic but bungling Shaughnessy. Drink and the Church figure large. The Church is repeatedly mocked. The paternalist bon viveur Father Cobble interviews Joyce for the Jesuits. His name says as much about his theology as about his underpants, which he admits 'are in flitters' (p. 213). Shaughnessy resolves at one stage to leave Mary to join the Trappists, an enclosed order of monks, whose name has more obvious connotations with trapping people in their religion than with its French origins. One of De Selby's scientific achievements is that he can suspend time and call up the dead; he interviews St Augustine in the company of Shaughnessy and Hackett. St Augustine — 'the Dublin accent was unmistakable' (p. 35) — abuses De Selby of a few pious preconceptions relating to Ireland and the Church. On the controversy as to whether there were two St Patricks, Augustine replies, 'Two St. Patricks? We have four of the buggers in our place and they'd make you sick with their shamrocks and shenanigans and bullshit' (p. 38).

As to St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, Augustine tells De Selby, 'You talk about me but a lot of that chap's saintliness was next to bedliness' (p. 37); the word from heaven is that, 'the Jesuits are the wiliest, cutest and most mendacious ruffians who ever lay in wait for simple Christians' (p. 38). The rhetoric is a coarse summary of Jesuits like the Prefect of Studies, Fr Dolan, who crossed Stephen Dedalus' path in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The absurdity of Joyce wanting to join them is matched only by Shaughnessy's desire to help him. A minor strain in O'Brien's ridicule of established markers of authority and respect in Ireland is provided by the policeman Sergeant Fottrell together with his assistant Pluck. Fottrell is introduced, as was Joyce, in terms of respect, only to be ridiculed for the rest of the novel: 'Here one beheld the majesty of the law — inevitable, procedural, sure' (p. 50). Whenever he opens his mouth there flows a string of pretentious malapropisms, as though the law can only make itself respected by speaking a language which is as ludicrously affected as it is meaningless. Commenting on the fact that he does not swim, Sergeant Fottrell says, 'I recede potentously from the sea... except for a fastidious little wade for the good of my spawgs' (p. 51). He likes to be recognised for his habits, and as Vladimir says in *Waiting for Godot*, 'habit is a great deadener'.²⁶ For example, because Fottrell has never been seen riding his bicycle he

²⁵ *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 175.

²⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p. 91.

never rides it, yet, 'For me to go out on the road or streets of this parish without my bicycle would be worse than going out without my trousers on me' (p. 167). The climax to his action comes when he helps Shaughnessy to break into De Selby's house in order to steal the dangerous chemical with which De Selby plans to destroy the world.

Much of his day to day work is taken up puncturing or stealing bicycles because he has a theory he calls 'bicyclosis': this refers to a process of molecular interaction by which people who ride bicycles 'get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycles' (p. 88). To prevent people becoming bicycles, and vice versa, he steals them or immobilises them. Certainly Sergeant Fottrell is 'inevitable, procedural, sure', but in his failings, not his virtues. In him the law is a laughing stock.

Much of *The Dalkey Archive* is a celebration of misdirected energies and the futility of trying to rescue people from their failings. Shaughnessy's projects, like Duffy's obsession to be a train, or Myles' scheme for a limited edition, are momentary excitements in a world dulled by failure and pretention. Beckett hints at a peculiarly Irish fascination with failure when he weighs success and failure in his own career: 'I feel much more at home with the latter having breathed deep of its vivifying air all my writing life'.²⁷ O'Brien's expression of this 'vivifying air' is an oblique indictment of a world peopled by philistines and bores, whom he had so vilified in *The Irish Times*; they are 'monsters', even 'troglydytic specimens'.²⁸ Fottrell is a bore, and it is a relief to be able to laugh at him.

O'Brien's Ireland, like Joyce's, is beyond redemption, but then redemption is not the issue. The function of fictive language for O'Brien is not to order a chaotic world, as Aristotle would have us believe, nor to moralise it as Johnson or Leavis would want; that would give literature a responsibility and authority which a certain Irish psyche would be sceptical of from the start. As was said earlier, language is a means of release, a liberating force which enables the writer to play with disaster. To take calamity seriously would be to succumb to it. Irony is a way to put distance between actualities and potentialities, between Locke and Berkeley, between death and life. The space between, a kind of playspace which is then created, becomes a killing-field where entrenched attitudes, presumptions, beliefs are massacred and the energy of the killing displaces the lassitude of the old order. When Stephen Dedalus talks about leaving Ireland to forge 'the uncreated conscience of my race' he was perhaps thinking of finding such a playspace; *Dubliners*, like *The Dalkey Archive*, is such a killing-field.

For O'Brien to bring Joyce back to Ireland, to have Shaughnessy marry his virgin Mary is comically absurd, but it is also wretched because the playfulness cannot suppress the lurking presence of the Ireland that prompted the irony in the first place. That face of Ireland can only be accommodated by a spoiling, aggressive humour which plays with it, insisting that nothing is funnier than unhappiness.

²⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* by Samuel Beckett, ed. R.Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), p. 106 .

²⁸ *The Best of Myles*, p. 290.