# A Combination of Contraries: Violence, Fragmentation, and Metamorphosis in the Modernist Celtic Aesthetic

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the ways in which the Celtic aesthetic emerges in case studies of four writers from the last century: Brian O'Nolan (under the pseudonyms Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen), David Jones, George Mackay Brown, and John McGahern. It considers a wide selection of their writing across literary genres, including the novel, the short story, the essay, and poetry, but privileges prose and fiction. This study undertakes a formal analysis of these texts using a conceptual, thematic, and critically biographical approach. The archival methodology informing such an approach brings new scholarship into focus that either aligns these authors for the first time or reevaluates their relationships. O'Nolan, Jones, Brown, and McGahern are united here because they put forward their own theories of the Celtic aesthetic and modernized these differing representational strategies when they applied them in their fictional practices.

My analysis of each writer begins with a definition of the "Celtic Aesthetic" then draws out how the Celtic is represented in his literary work, showing what we gain from reading the work within a modernist Celtic aesthetic. O'Nolan proposes a Celtic realism within a modernist understanding of the unity between form and content. He writes within a collaborative framework, retrieving modes of thought and literary effects from medieval Irish sources and scholarly texts. He and his peers were concerned with making an Irish-Celtic contribution to modern literature. David Jones develops a visual aesthetic in an Anglo-Welsh context, arguing that the Celtic enhances the potential for metamorphosis through a combination of contraries. Jones establishes a connection between the First World War and ancient Welsh tradition to symbolically pattern the experience of fighting in the trenches. George Mackay Brown shares this idea about Celtic metamorphosis and war. He claims the Celtic is a decorative aesthetic, one

that is bound up with Roman Catholic theology and his understanding of Eucharistic anamnesis. Writing almost exclusively about the Orkney islands, Brown portrays the Celtic as an aspect of the Orkney's archipelagic modernism, informed by his own Scottish Gaelic linguistic heritage but also connected by sea to Wales and Ireland. John McGahern implies his theory about Celtic style in his discussions of Gaelic linguistic inheritance and the effect this produces on his English writing. McGahern also shares Brown's mysticism and O'Nolan's practice of depicting eternity in the West of Ireland. There are thus three converging lines of inquiry that will frame this project: first, how does this minor strain in modernist literature animate this set of literary works? Second, how do those characteristics inform our understanding of what the term "Celtic" means in a twentieth-century context and for contemporary readers? And third, what does this contribute to the current field of modernist studies? The Celtic for these writers is transnational, hybrid, decorative, and the means through which their questions about violence and despoliation could find expression in twentieth-century literature.

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## Introduction

The term "Celtic" raises several difficulties not only for modern Irish literature but for modern twentieth-century literature in English generally. In relation to modernity, "Celtic" texts have been imagined as predominantly "Catholic" and post-colonial (Castle, *Celtic Revival* 6), as a cultural tradition within what Sarah Cole has called the "Irish Celtic canon" (146),[1] and as a textual system of references generating an idealistic interior world, which is seen to be especially true of *Finnegans Wake* (Barlow 152). The term in its "insular Celtic" context applies to hybrid populations (in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England, but also to the Isle of Man and the Hebrides, Shetland, and Orkney), with their long histories of resisting Anglo-centric imperialism. Jennifer Paxton, a historian of Celtic and monastic history, has suggested that the spread of Celtic art from mainland Europe to the west can be understood in modern terms as an art fad.[2] Ancient peoples liked the Celtic art style, and aesthetic appeal spread the culture through trade and transmission. This thinking informs the best practices for exploring the Celtic concept, which is to say through the aesthetics that the term implies. For instance, Jason Marc Harris has historicized a Celtic aesthetics in relation to the use of folklore in British literature. Using Matthew Arnold as his touchstone, Harris argues that nineteenth-century writing faced the problem of an "English unimaginative, unaesthetic, anti-intellectual materialism," and that one proposed solution to such aesthetic sterility was "integrating a

[1] Sarah Cole notes how a modern Irish/Celtic canon emerges from Ireland's Easter Rising in 1916, arguing that "[r]evolutions are incubators of symbolic language […] they wrench from violence an abundant cultural value" (131).

[2] Jennifer Paxton's theory points to the spread of Celtic art and language. She contradicts earlier historians who used the Celtic migration model to suggest ancient people migrated across huge distances, bringing their language and culture with them. DNA research continues to reveal new problems with the migration model. Paxton's theory about migrating art styles, and especially its central premise about the dissemination of a Celtic aesthetic, remains prescient for thinking about twentieth-century Celtic literature. See her *The Celtic World* for this theory.

sense of native culture—specifically Celtic literature" (J. Harris 205). Gregory Baker has connected the Celtic aesthetic to local historicism and modernist reception, arguing that "the aesthetic of Celtic literary modernism did not emerge from or produce an ossified 'classical tradition' of predetermined significance. Instead it catalyzed a variety of insurgent ideologies, literary idioms and experimental expressions across languages – forces that left, in their wake, compelling stories for a new age" (xvii).

In such ways the Celtic forms part of the island of Britain's native cultural history but sits apart from it, and this view has persisted well into the twentieth century. Like Harris, Richard Barlow has argued that the "Celtic-Saxon contrast presents the Celt as having artistic, spiritual, and emotional characteristics while the Anglo-Saxon is a materialist" (152).[3] However, this dichotomy either becomes false in the context of modernity or, if it is to hold, must be nuanced to such an extent as to render its distinctions almost meaningless: one unified Celtic culture spread by a specific group of people who shared a common genetic descent likely does not exist. "Celtic" is neither a racial designation nor a unified linguistic identity; but taken aesthetically—that is as a representational strategy setting out how a text should convey beauty, emotion, and meaning in a work of art—the term is productive and generative. Moreover, one major lacuna in modernist literary studies is the apparent lack of conceptual investigation of Celtic literature using modern prose forms in English as its case study. To date, British modernist studies have neglected to conceptualize a modern Celtic literature as part of and nucleated within the wider discipline of modernist studies. In this regard, Adrian

[3] Barlow implicitly agrees with Harris's reading of Matthew Arnold's Celtic aesthetics when he reads Joyce as opposing the materialist Anglo Saxon tradition. He also claims Joyce's own world of Celtic idealism was influenced by James Macpherson's *Ossian*, which was also a source of inspiration for Arnold (Barlow 151-154).

Frazier has claimed that even English modernism reveals its own "un-Englishness" by the number of prominent modernists writing in the English language who were not English (114); one must therefore define modernism by the manifest traits of modernist works, such as "mythic parallels to contemporary life and demythologising treatment of Christianity," among a host of other traits (Frazier 113). One can apply this same approach to Celtic modernism as a facet of an un-English British modernism, and as an Irish, English, Welsh, and Scottish socio-cultural imaginary more generally. There is no unified Pan-Celtic program within British modernism, yet the texts we call Celtic share a startling affinity.

Anyone who undertakes a project to define a modern Celtic literature operates with the understanding that a distinctly modern Celtic aesthetic emerges in twentieth-century literature. Rapid modernization and war in Europe engendered various metamorphoses within fragmented texts; these works reveal an essential tension between the potential/threatened loss of what we might broadly consider a Celtic imaginative alongside an evolving modernity. In this respect I am building on scholarly-critical work begun by Thomas Dilworth in his studies of David Jones and medieval Welsh sources such as the *Y Gododdin* and *The Mabinogion*, as well as ongoing work by Fionntán de Brún on the dynamics of renewal in modern Irish texts that trace a chronological path from Old and Middle Irish sources to the modern and contemporary. I am endeavouring to show how the Celtic aesthetic emerges in the work of four writers from the last century: Brian O'Nolan (under the pseudonyms Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen), David Jones, George Mackay Brown, and John McGahern. This study considers a wide selection of these authors' writing across literary genres, including the novel, the short

story, the essay and poetry, privileging modern prose forms. Rather than focusing on formal analysis of their texts, the approach undertaken is conceptual, thematic, and critically biographical. These writers put forward their own theories of the Celtic aesthetic and modernized these differing approaches when they applied them in their fictional practices.[4]

The central texts in this study are essentially narratives that employ Celtic mythical transformation in a modern context where they represent the despoliation inflicted on contemporary victims by military violence (Jones and Brown), transform language, revealing how Celtic languages inform the production of modernist modes through their juxtaposition of artificiality and realism (O'Nolan and McGahern), and inscribe spaces, transmuting national geography and imbuing rural poetics with anamnesis and a sense of being outside of time (O'Nolan, Jones, Brown, and McGahern).

With this introduction and a conclusion, this thesis comprises four chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular author and theme characterizing the modern Celtic aesthetic, using for its methodology the same research-based, citational, and comprehensive composition designed to relate these literatures beyond their national confines. I draw evidence from biographies, correspondence, book reviews, notes, and early drafts of texts (in instances where they are illuminating) because my goal is to historicize an emerging modern aesthetic and shared literary production. Each chapter begins with a rehearsal of the relevant literary criticism and historical context. Authors

[4] In a similar way, Gregory Baker points out that he selected W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, David Jones, and Hugh MacDiarmid for his study, *Classics and Celtic Literary Modernism* (2022) because they are "prominent Irish, Anglo-Welsh and Scottish writers […whose] thick historical contexts that molded their forms of reception (and transformed their reputations) are parallel, if not altogether shared" (xvi).

are then linked theoretically and thematically.

The remainder of this introduction is divided into seven short sections. The first three inform the argument of the study: they give a brief account of the modern Celtic aesthetic as it is employed throughout, outline a theoretical framework and methodology, and provide a short explanation for the absence of female writers. The introduction ends with summaries of each dissertation chapter.

**Modernist Metamorphosis and the "elusive indigenous aesthetic"**

The poet and painter David Jones was one of the earliest modernists to develop a specifically Celtic aesthetic theory. (The origination of this theory coincides with the aesthetics and Celtic scholarship set out in Brian O'Nolan's MA thesis discussed in chapter one.) While his theory is outlined in detail in chapter two, I want to draw attention here to what Jones has discussed in his letters as the literary effect of Celtic interweaving, which refers to meandering poetic lines that are strongly rhythmic but flexible, in which unity is prized and every peripheral part is as essential as the central text. This effect has affinity with Gerard Manley Hopkins's concept of "instress," which informs Jones's theory and writing and, as Bernard Bergonzi has claimed, even exerted influence over Joyce's writing in *Finnegans Wake*. Dilworth has argued convincingly in several studies that Hopkins's metaphysical poetry profoundly influenced Jones; he situates Jones's work "in a tradition of modern poetry that begins in the poems of Hopkins" (Dilworth, *Shape of Meaning* 25). *Finnegans Wake* also became hugely important for Jones during the summer of 1930, when he was "learning by heart the recorded pages" of Anna Livia Plurabelle, (chapter 8 of *Finnegans Wake*); and, according

to Dilworth, Jones regarded Joyce "as the pre-eminent modern writer and the *Wake* as the paradigm of literary art" (*David Jones* 124). Bergonzi once suggested that similar analogical thinking relates Hopkins' poetry to medieval and Jesuit thought, and to Joycean aesthetics:

> [An] analogical state of mind relates Hopkins to the intellectual habits of the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation. But it has a more familiar aspect, insofar as it looks forward to the secular, verbal and aesthetic analogies and paradoxes that haunted the Jesuit-educated James Joyce. (Bergonzi 160)

For instance, Hopkins' representational strategy in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" morphs reality into textuality. Bergonzi believed this was also a feature of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, arguing that the alliterative language of "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" ("Evening strains to be time's vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night") had intertextuality with "the haunting evocation of nightfall from the 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' section of [the novel]":

> Can't hear with the waters of. The chittering waters of. Flittering bats, fieldmice bawk talk. Ho! Are you not gone ahome? What Thom Malone. Can't hear with bawk of bats, all thim liffeying waters of. Ho, talk save us! My foos won't moos. I feel as old as yonder elm. A tale told of Shaun or Shem? All Livia's daughter-sons. Dark hawks hear us. Night! Night! My ho head halls. I feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me of Jolin or Shaun? Who were Shem and Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night! (*FW* 215-216)

Both texts transform "the whole of reality into language" (Bergonzi 188). And while I agree that "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" provides a poetic model for the ending of chapter eight in the *Wake*, I disagree with Begonzi's suggestion of textual reality. Joyce and Hopkins share obvious verbal similarities.[5] However, the material essence of the *Wake* text is not an imitation of reality but rather an imitation of an artificial dreamworld, an unreality that licences constant metamorphosis. Barlow has also contradicted the interpretation of Joyce that Begonzi suggests, arguing that "the Celtic interior world Joyce creates in *Finnegans Wake* is idealist, skeptical, marked by internal contrast, and crucially, a forgery" (152).[6] John McCourt has claimed this aspect of Joyce's writing is the secular myth of a "Celtic Eden" in tension with an Irish Catholic Golden Age of saints and scholars (*Joyce in Context* 20). This notion of a Celtic Eden is also profoundly important for George Mackay Brown and John McGahern in that their writings are tied to space, for Brown the islands of Orkney, and for McGahern the lanes of Leitrim and the lakes and rivers in the West of Ireland. Both authors treat these locations as anamnetic spaces – places that exist outside of time and increase the potential for metamorphosis and transcendent interpretation.

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[5] G. M. Hopkins likely influenced *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce uses Hopkins' (very common) surname twice: "But as Hopkins and Hopkins puts it, you were the pale eggynaggy and a Hs to tilly up" (*FW* 26).

[6] Joyce's "palimpsestuous" language (Burgess, *Joysprick*, 146), or heavy patterning and artificiality, the seemingly endless interweaving which Barlow signals as characteristic of his Celtic aesthetic, finds unique expression in the Buckley and the Russian General episode of the *Wake* during Butt and Taff's dialogue in Part II, chapter three. Butt and Taff are sent into battle and told: "For Ehren, boys, gobrawl!" (*FW* 336). Here Joyce writes in English, punning phonetically on Irish, using "Ehren" for "Éirinn," the dative case for Éire, and "gobrawl!" which plays on "go bréa!" ("Nicely! Finely!") but also contains the imperative command "go" + "brawl!" In the midst of fighting, Butt metamorphoses into a satirical emblem of the "Celtic Twilight": "his face glows green, his hair greys white, his bleyes bcome broon to suite his cultic twalett" (FW 344). Butt's face glows green because of illness; his hair whitens from shock; "his bleyes"—which is a composite word standing in for "blue eyes"—"bcome broon," or "become brown," and this completes his Celtic toilette. The final pun in the sequence above implies Joyce's ambivalence about the nationalism of the Celtic Revival.

The Joycean concept of "Celtic interior" prepares the field for later writers, primarily O'Nolan, who is the most concerned of any writer in my study with the Irish Catholic Golden Age of saints and scholars, that is with making art into life rather than life into art, as J. C. C. Mays has suggested. O'Nolan is foremost a native speaker of the Irish language and a scholar of medieval Gaelic poetry, but his interest in this Celtic tradition is connected to an aesthetic practice of hybridizing English. While O'Nolan seems to hold with the artificiality addressed above with respect to Joyce, Louis de Paor has suggested that O'Nolan developed a kind of "Celtic Realism" in his Irish language MA thesis. O'Nolan's poetics derive from his reading of early Irish literature:

> Ó Nualláin's thesis argues that early Irish literature is the primary source for a particular attitude to the natural world which is characteristic of the Celtic imagination at its height. He draws comparisons with Welsh and Scots-Gaelic poetry but points to the greater antiquity of the Irish material to support his argument that the Celtic attitude to the natural world originated in Ireland. (de Paor 197)

I agree with de Paor's claims that O'Nolan's "nostalgia for a less alienated sensibility that would integrate the carnal and the spiritual aspects of human existence is crucial to the treatment of Finn and Sweeny in *At Swim-Two-Birds*" (de Paor 199), and these views are mobilized in the second chapter when I discuss his second novel written in English but not published until after his death, *The Third Policeman* (1967).

Philip O'Leary has categorized the Celtic aesthetic as emerging from the Gaeltacht, the regions of Ireland where the Irish language is spoken. In his 2003 "Foreword" to *The Sea's Revenge*, O'Leary attributes an "elusive indigenous aesthetic"

to Séamus Ó Grianna's writing (8). O'Leary discusses this idea in connection to Brian O'Nolan's satire *An Béal Bocht* (1941) and "art Gaelach," claiming that Ó Grianna stands out as a "pre-eminent […] authentic voice of the Gaeltacht" (8), making an implicit comparison to O'Nolan's performative voice. O'Leary gestures at the aesthetic criteria of "Art Gaelach," distinguishing this term from what he calls "Art Éireannach in Irish fiction: a morphing of various traditional genres, folktale, yarn, reminiscence, short story, novella," which he classifies as "generic hybridity" (9). O'Leary points to art in the Irish language tradition on the one hand and to a generically hybrid literature on the other hand which uses the older Celtic tradition in a modern fashion.[7]

Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928) is one Irish language writer who shares O'Nolan's sense of such generic hybridity. Using Ó Conaire in a comparative approach helps clarify O'Nolan's conceptualizing of the modern Celtic aesthetic. Their essential difference from Ó Grianna is that O'Nolan and Ó Conaire fuse elements from Irish storytelling with the English and European tradition in a modern format and language. Angela Bourke has situated Ó Conaire within Irish modernist aesthetics. She notes how Ó Conaire synthesizes elements from the oral storytelling tradition (àla Éamon a Búrc, who Bourke claims directly influenced Ó Conaire), as well as European and English influences. Aodán Mac Póilin has noted the same tendency to recognize Ó Conaire as the writer who inaugurated modern literature in the Irish language. Mac Póilin argues that by adopting modern forms, "Ó Conaire took an ideological stand as a realist, primarily as a

[7] This dissertation primarily focuses on twentieth-century Celtic literature that aligns with O'Leary's modern and generically hybrid concept rather than on translation and/or re-presentation of Celtic language material and its reception in English. It is for this reason that Lady Gregory's Cúchlainn stories, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), and her collection of material on Fionn and Fianna, *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), are only briefly discussed in the chapter on O'Nolan. He very likely read these collections. Eglantina Remport has argued that Gregory's writings were generative for O'Nolan (229-244). However, as we will see in the next chapter, such translations were contrary to the modern Celtic project O'Nolan developed.

reaction to the sentimental romanticism, the puritanism, and the exaggerated nativist ultra-Gaelic orthodoxy that threatened the emerging Irish language literature at the beginning of the 20th century" (xv). Mac Póilin also correctly asserts, "Ó Conaire was no realist, but a thoroughgoing romantic" (xv). Ó Conaire's contribution to modern Celtic aesthetics is not a matter of discerning whether his influences were Irish or English, nor can it be decided by interpreting his work in a romantic mode or within a wider realism: Like O'Nolan's, Ó Conaire's fiction is Celtic for its mythological and folkloric elements and modernist for how it anticipates and incorporates formal innovation from European sources. This interest in alternative modernisms to English models extends as well to continental European and Russian literary forms. Bourke convincingly argues, for instance, that Ó Conaire's *Deoraíocht* "anticipate[s] Franz Kafka's *The Hunger Artist* (*Ein Hungerkünstler*, 1922) by twelve years" (60). However, Ó Conaire's interest in pre-revolutionary Russian writers (if not in Kafka) and the short story form warrants further discussion.[8]

Nineteenth-century Russian writers for instance, exert influence over twentieth-century Irish literary production. For instance, we will see in the first chapter that O'Nolan's circle was deeply influenced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Likewise, Ó Conaire has credited "Tourgéníbh," or rather Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), with influencing Irish language writing and aesthetics.[9] As Liam de Paor argues, "nineteenth-century Russian literature with its preoccupation with darker

[8] A full discussion of Ó Conaire's indebtedness to European forms and aesthetics is outside the scope of this study (which is primarily concerned with modern Celtic fiction published in English). There has been exciting new scholarship in this area. For example, Brian Ó Conchubhair has argued that Ó Conaire has Polish influences in Joseph Conrad (Ó Conchubhair 83-100).

[9] Ó Conaire created this Irish version of Turgenev's name in his 1908 essay on Russian literature.

aspects of human psychology and behaviour" served "as a model for prose writers in Irish" ("Irish Language Modernisms" 164). Ó Conaire outlined the aesthetic reasons prompting this model as follows:

> Nuair a thángadar aníos as an bpoll 'n-a rabhadar ag cuartughadh bhí rud salach smeartha a raibh dealbh duine air aca agus ghlaoidheadar amach i n-árd a ngotha: Seo é an duine! Seo é an fear! Seo í an fhírinne! Ach ní mórán áird a bhí ortha ar dtús. Do ceapadh go raibh an rud salach smeartha ró-ghránda le bheith 'n-a fhear … Ach ní raibh na hughdair úd, Gogol agus an dream a tháinig roimhe, go faitcheach scáthmhar. Do mhionnuigh agus mhóidigh siad go raibh an fhírinne faighte acu, agus tháinig Tourgéníbh agus móran eile 'n-a ndiaidh le cruthughadh go raibh an ceart aca – go raibh an mhaith agus an uaisleacht taobh istigh de shalachar agus de ghrándacht an deilbh úd a bhí fáighte aca.
>
> [When they came up out of the hole in which they were searching, they had a filthy, smeared thing with the shape of a human being, and they cried out at the top of their lungs: Here is the human! Here is the man! Here is the truth! But they weren't paid much attention at first. It was thought that the filthy smeared thing was too ugly to be a man. But those authors, Gogol and those who preceded him, were not fearful or timid. They vowed and they swore that they had found the truth, and Turgenev and many others came after them to prove that they were right – that the good and the noble existed within the filth and ugliness of that form they had found.] (Ó Conaire translated by de Paor, "Irish Language Modernism" 164)

In addition to this preoccupation with filth, ugliness, and human behaviour that de Paor notices, comprising the "content" of a text, Ó Conaire connects the Russian aesthetic with what he terms in Irish, "deilbh" – frame, figure, and shape—which are of course aspects of literary form.

A methodology for examining Celtic modernism through recognizing the influence of Russian writers has not been adequately developed despite Ó Conaire's interest in Russian form and content. One of the reasons for this is that critics generally avoid working in the Irish language and therefore cannot give a nuanced/multilingual account of Celtic modernism. For instance, Declan Kiberd has suggested that Pádraic Ó Conaire initially wrote stories "in English under the influence of Dickens and the Russians, before a fateful meeting with William Ryan, who urged him to try his hand at Irish" (*After Ireland* 188).

This lack of engagement with the Irish material creates an imbalance that overemphasizes the importance of the Anglo-Irish relationship. Both Terry Eagleton and Gregory Castle have argued that the Anglo-Irish Revivalists' ambivalent position between colonizer and colonized, their "in-betweenness was 'a version of the hybrid spirit of the European modernist, caught between diverse cultural codes' and that recourse to 'the celebrated formalism and aestheticism of the modernists' was an effective and defiant 'rationalization of their own rootless condition'" (Castle 3). This sense of dislocation or alienation had a counterpart in the despoliation felt by Irish language speakers who saw their language and folklore effectively plundered to achieve an authentic and indigenous "Celtic Revival." Using Yeats's lack of knowledge of the Irish language as an example, Castle contrasts a consideration of Anglo-Irish Revivalists'

"rootless" modern condition with their social authority in Ireland, arguing that they were "vulnerable to the charge of perpetuating certain forms of discursive violence" (6).[10] Gaelic writers were thus entitled to emulate the aestheticism of the European modernists precisely because their sources were not English. Following de Paor's argument, that modern Irish writers' expressions of dislocation, loss of community and dehumanization comprise their "own imaginative responses to European modernism" (171), one sees how Russian, European, and American literary forms constitute, in part, a de-Anglicising feature of Celtic literature.[11] But de Paor has also suggested that some Irish language writers reject the English canon as a way of getting around this problem (169-171).

O'Nolan, Jones, Brown, and McGahern are united in the following four chapters of this thesis because they put forward their own theories of the Celtic aesthetic and modernized these differing representational strategies when they applied them in their fictional practices. O'Nolan proposes a Celtic realism within an international modernist understanding of the unity between form and content. David Jones establishes a connection between the First World War and ancient Welsh tradition to symbolically pattern the experience of fighting in the trenches. George Mackay Brown shares this idea

[10] The argument follows that Yeats could not speak meaningfully about Celtic folklore because he was not bilingual. Declan Kiberd has observed how Pádraig Mac Pairais (Patrick Pearse), for instance, thought in May 1899 that Yeats had no right to call his theatre company "Irish": "Against Mr Yeats personally we have nothing to object. He is a mere English poet of the third or fourth rank, and as such he is harmless. But when he attempts to run an 'Irish' Literary Theatre, it is time for him to be crushed" (Pearse qtd in Kiberd, 189-190, 511 n.5). Mac Pairais is violently nationalistic in this rebuke. His dismissal of Yeats, which is purely based on language, offers little nuance. His failure to recognize the importance of English language poetry in Ireland is deeply problematic.

[11] The term "de-Anglicisation" is deployed somewhat ironically given the claim for Russian influence above and taken from Douglas Hyde's 1892 essay, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland," in which Hyde poses the questions, "why should we wish to make Ireland more Celtic than it is -- why should we de-Anglicise it at all?" He proposes a "definite program" later elaborated by Stopford Brooke in his 1893 lecture to the London Society: "Irishmen of formative genius should take, one by one, the various cycles of Irish tales and, grouping each of them round one central figure, supply to each a dominant human interest to which every event in the whole should converge" (Brooke qtd. in Cunliffe 251).

about Celtic metamorphosis and war. He claims the Celtic is a decorative aesthetic, one that is bound up with Roman Catholic theology and his understanding of Eucharistic anamnesis. Writing almost exclusively about the Orkney islands, Brown portrays the Celtic as an aspect of the Orkney's archipelagic modernism, informed by his own Scottish Gaelic linguistic heritage but also connected by sea to Wales and Ireland. John McGahern implies his theory about Celtic style in his discussions of Gaelic linguistic inheritance and the effect this produces on his English writing. McGahern also shares Brown's mysticism and O'Nolan's practice of depicting eternity in the west of Ireland.

There are thus three converging lines of inquiry that will frame this project: first, how does this minor strain in modernist literature animate this set of literary works? Second, how do those characteristics inform our understanding of what the term "Celtic" means in a twentieth-century context and for contemporary readers? And third, what do exploratory answers to those questions contribute to the current field of modernist studies? The Celtic for these writers is transnational, hybrid, decorative, anamnetic, and the means through which their questions about violence and despoliation find expression in twentieth century literature.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This dissertation examines a set of prose texts and the modern changes that have arisen in one particular civilization situated in the "Insular Celtic" region—or as per an earlier incarnation, Hibernian and Roman-British/Celtic Christendom. These changes, notably the loss of a temporal connection to Celtic languages and tradition, which mattered to people in the North Atlantic region, constituted more specifically here as the area of

Ireland and the British Isles, still matter today, especially respecting literary aesthetics. I fully recognize that terms like "Insular Celtic" or "Celtic fringe" are slippery—partly because, as alluded to above, these distinctions have been constructed or redefined in the very processes of modernity.

This shifting context reveals several central facets of the modern Celtic aesthetic. For example, the Catholic and post-colonial outlooks shared by O'Nolan, Jones, Brown, and McGahern, along with their aesthetic similarities, reveal a coherent modern Celtic aesthetic arising in multiple modernities. The Celtic constitutes one aesthetic amongst others, making its way (with some success) in a broad and diversifying modern milieu. In deploying this pluralistic and possibly paradoxical term (i.e. both a "modern" and "Celtic" concept), I have modelled my approach on Charles Taylor's concept of multiple modernities within a singular social imaginary. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor suggests taking up a set of issues of universal concern but deals with them within a regional compass; for present purposes this entails focusing on a Celtic modernity but mindful of what Taylor has called "multiple modernities" across differing social imaginaries in the North Atlantic, Europe and across the globe (21-22). In this respect, I am also responding to what Slavoj Žižek has said in *Absolute Recoil* (2014) about "modernist breakthrough," calling it "the only true artistic event of the twentieth century" (*Recoil* 157). I agree with Žižek that, aesthetically speaking, modernist artistic productions represent a revolutionary, paradigmatic shift; unfortunately, Žižek reads Irish and Celtic modernist literature poorly.[12] His teleological interpretation of these formal changes/literary events

[12] Žižek better succeeds with Beckett for both psychoanalytic readings and figurations of the subject by emphasizing a Kantian categorical imperative in Beckett's trilogy and several of his plays. The Kantian reading of psychological tension that Žižek attempts for Beckett's "Not I," for instance, is animated through the subject's struggle with national/communal experiences. I have addressed (and offered

is also problematic. The following quotation from his discussion of *Finnegans Wake* in *Disparities* (2016) can serve as an exemplary cause of my misgivings:

> If one looks for a homologous subtle subjective shift in contemporary literature, it is a waste of time to peruse the work of James Joyce. One can understand Joyce with all the obscenities that permeate his writings, as the ultimate Catholic author, 'the greatest visionary of the dark underground of Catholicism, an underground embodying a pure transgression, but one which is nevertheless a profoundly Catholic transgression' […] the travesty of the Black Mass (or, in Joyce's case, the elevation of Here Comes Everybody into Christ who has to die in order to be reborn as the eternal Life-Goddess, from Molly Bloom to Anna Livia Plurabelle), is the supreme Catholic act.
>
> The achievement of Joyce simultaneously signals his limit, the limit that pushed Samuel Beckett to break with him. (*Disparities* 218)

This influential reading of Joyce by Žižek is troublesome for many reasons: his lack of explanation of "obscenities" in Joyce's work, his lack of citations from the source text, his lack in providing the attentive reading that Joyce's writing demands, and his lack of respect for Joyce studies generally, which is implied by Žižek's use of the verb "peruse" rather than "study."

One can limit a critique of Žižek's figuration of Joyce and modernist breakthrough to three central problems. (1) Žižek quotes Thomas J. J. Altizer but obscures the comparison Altizer makes in his study, *The Contemporary Jesus* (1997),

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correction of) Žižek's various readings and figurations of Irish identity in "'a dash of the Dubliner…in Žižek': Philosophy through the Medium of Irish Literature," which I co-authored with Christopher Genovesi and presented as part of the Irish Literature and Aesthetics panel of the "Philosophical Perspectives on Contemporary Ireland" at University College Dublin in March 2018.

between Dante and Joyce. Altizer claims that Dante writes of a "fully historical Catholicism" whereas Joyce has "a dark underground," which is productive for writing that is highly allusive, synthetic, and for Altizer transgressive (101). (This problem of history in the *Wake* is resolved when one understands that Joyce synthesizes, via allusion, both recorded history and protohistory.) (2) Žižek misreads Here Comes Everybody in the text—HCE does not represent Christ—he is, as his name implies, "Everybody," all men. (3) Joyce's central transgression, recounted by Stephen Deadalus in *Ulysses*, is a rejection of Catholic practices, for aesthetic reasons, epitomized by his [Stephen's or James'?] refusal to receive the sacraments of his faith even though his mother implored him to do so from her deathbed. Altizer also develops his claim, arguing that "nothing could be realer than Joyce's epic writing, a writing which is not only prose and poetry at once, but voice and writing or scripture at once [… which] culminates in a universal voice" (102). Žižek's gesture towards a "limit" in Joyce's Catholic aesthetics is apt, although his suggestion that Joyce and Beckett were "pushed […] to break" for these reasons remains fanciful at best (Žižek clearly prefers Beckett). I theorize this notion of the "limit" as an aspect of my hermeneutical approach and argue that in the work of the authors I study, as with Joyce here, Catholic forms have tension with a pre-Christian, Celtic-pagan tradition. The fusion of these forms, the expression of such tension, defines the modern Celtic aesthetic and informs the chapters that follow. However, after Joyce inaugurates this form of modernist breakthrough, it is not to Beckett that we must turn, but Brian O'Nolan writing as "Flann O'Brien."

Joyce's development as a modern Celtic writer can best be seen to begin with the final story of his *Dubliners* cycle, "The Dead," continues in *Ulysses*, and culminates in

*Finnegans Wake*. Castle has suggested that Joyce challenges the cultural assumptions of the Anglo-Irish Revival, "especially the redemptive mode of ethnography that characterised its representational strategies" (*Joyce in Context* 103-104). Where Yeats presents a cultural unity through "primitivism" in the *Celtic Twilight* (McCourt 20), Joyce implicitly criticizes this idea because it lacks Celtic authenticity. Seamus Deane has asserted convincingly that "Joyce remained faithful to the original conception of the Revival" (96); but that he nevertheless criticized rigid "cultic" nationalism of the kind Molly Ivors displays in "The Dead," or that "the Citizen" displays in the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses*. The Celtic, within Joyce's modernist conception, must be artificial, aesthetic, put on.

The primary texts examined in this dissertation are read, then, within a framework of contraries: Catholic and Celtic-pagan, modern and medieval, cosmopolitan and regional, new and continuing. Žižek's reading of Joyce as only a Catholic modernist writer, for instance, limits our understanding of his work. *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were classified broadly as "prose epics" by Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism* 313). Although Frye wrote generally about the various characteristics of the Celtic mode (55-58), he neglected to show continuity with modern literature, or a development of that Celtic mode. Jones's *In Parenthesis* is emblematic of such continuity; the text is also an epic, albeit one that combines prose and verse forms which led Dilworth to read it mainly as poetry, though it was reviewed in Ireland as fiction upon its release in 1937. Interestingly, O'Nolan's *At Swim-Two-Birds* is an anti-epic,[13] but his novel *The Third*

[13] In *Flann O'Brien* (1991), Sue Asbee implies, correctly I believe, that *At Swim* is an anti-novel for defying the generic conventions of the traditional novel. I will extend this argument to show specifically that the epic tradition is O'Nolan's satiric target.

*Policeman* exhibits an epic strain, as do Jones's *Anathémata*, Brown's *Magnus*, and McGahern's *The Pornographer*. It is likely that these authors have not been discussed together heretofore because they worked in disguised/displaced[?] epic forms; yet they similarly advanced explicit theories of what the Celtic was in its modern iteration. This partly explains why the present study contains no chapter devoted to Joyce – upon whom an entire study in terms of Celtic modernism could be written (because many entire studies have been written on Joyce) – as he advanced no sustained theory of Celtic modernism.

There is continuity and exchange between the authors in this thesis. For instance, McGahern read O'Nolan's fiction closely, and Brown responded to Jones' modern depiction of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The modernist Celtic aesthetic emerges most comprehensibly from my reading of their texts and interactions, with violence, fragmentation, and metamorphosis providing my main coordinates.

**Female Writers and the Celtic**

Although I discuss this subject in the conclusion of the thesis, it is necessary here to speak to important gender questions underpinning how the Celtic aesthetic is defined in my study. The absence of primary texts by women implies a masculinist critical outlook, one that may be inherent in the modern period of Irish literature being examined. What then is the best way to respond critically to the limitations of the theoretical paradigm and analyses outlined above? One must resist reproducing the same problems and thus contribute to the necessary work of unpacking complex processes of evaluation that suppressed women and gender-queer writers in the field. A polyglot study of the modern

Celtic aesthetic could be expanded to include important work in Irish by Máire Mhac an tSaoi (1922-2021) and in Welsh by Kate Roberts (1891-1985).[14]

The task at hand is but to suggest new areas of inquiry where women have inscribed the Celtic in its modern context. One example is Radclyffe Hall's modern novel about homosexual inversion, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Margot Gayle Backus has read Hall's portrayal of Celtic motherhood in the novel as a disturbing representation of race and Irish nationality.[15] Responding to Backus's work, Trevor Hope has noted, for instance, how a sentimentalized and racialized discussion of the Celtic in the novel is focalized in opposition to Englishness. Hope argues that as *The Well* unfolds, it becomes clear that "Celticness can figure as the quintessence (the melancholic core) of Englishness":

> the precise rendition of this "race mother" ('he came of a race of devoted mothers') is, however, fraught with ambivalence. We are immediately informed, at the beginning of the novel, that Anna, as well as being 'the archetype of the very perfect woman' is also 'lovely as only an Irish woman can be.' Both mother and daughter are said to have 'warm Celtic blood' flowing in their veins […] The name "Collins" is further overdetermined by the evocation of Michael Collins,

[14] It would seem to me negligent or gestural to include in this study only one chapter on fiction in English by women, especially when so much that is exciting in contemporary Irish fiction is written by women. I would single out the work of Anna Burns (b. 1962) and Eimear McBride (b. 1976), who both feature in the concluding chapter of this study along with Roberts; Sally Rooney's recent *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) also addresses this masculine bias in Irish modernism and seeks to respond to Joyce's "The Dead."

[15] For insight into the significance of Celticism to Hall's portrayal of race and nation, I am indebted to Margot Gayle Backus's essay "Sexual Orientation in the (Post)Imperial Nation: Celticism and Inversion Theory in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*," which provides an insightful cultural-historical contribution to Hall scholarship and productive close reading of the novel. Trevor Hope essentially echoes Backus's insights in his own reading.

> leader of Sinn Féin and signatory of the treaty founding the Irish Free State in 1921. (Hope 270 n. 11)

Both these critical discussions of this sentimental Celtic element in Hall's novel focus on Irishness. However, *The Well* is "Celtic" in the transnational sense we have been discussing. Mary Llewellyn (Stephen Gordon's lover) is Welsh and said to have "celtic pluck" (Hall 332); Llewellyn is depicted with the same archetypal womanhood Hall associates with the Celtic aesthetic that both Hope and Backus have noted in connection to Anna Gordon. This figuration of the Celtic also aligns with the Catholic aesthetics discussed above. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen is born on Christmas Eve and named for the first martyr of Christianity. Hall's portrayal of Stephen Gordon's sexual inversion resonates with Bloom's gender-switching in the Nighttown episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and O'Nolan's slippery gendering of inanimate objects in *The Third Policeman* discussed in the next chapter.[16] Hall writes in a straightforward, but still allusive/symbolic prose (although her style is strikingly less allusive when compared to Joyce's and O'Nolan's). They share a moral framework and a similar aesthetic field: Hall, who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1912, sketches an outline of a female Celtic Soul.[17]

Stephen Gordon's wealth, British identity, and social position (which overwrite her Irishness and maternal heritage) conflict with her sexual preferences. Stephen's relationship with Mary Llewellyn animates this tension. An exceptional final chapter written in a stream-of-consciousness style does redeem with better prose the earlier

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[16] The importance of *The Well of Loneliness* to O'Nolan and his contemporaries is unclear. O'Nolan titled his letter to John Rosselli, dated 10 May 1964, "THE WELL OF ONLINESS" (*CL* 407). In her note, Maebh Long fails to mention that this is a pun on the title of Hall's novel, which was infamous for its censorship trial.

[17] Hall's novel is too long and formally untidy, but it is an early significant portrayal of the modern Celtic aesthetic. Her images are also unique in that aspects of Christology (how Stephen admires ivory crucifixes, Marian chapels, churches, sacramental marriage) seem out of context in a Lesbian novel.

sections of the novel. Here, Stephen artfully narrates an out-of-body experience. In this final chapter, Stephen ends her relationship with Mary by convincing her that she has had an affair with another woman. The aim is to send Mary into Martin Hallam's arms in the hopes that she will find fulfillment in a heterosexual union. The act is sacrificial and confirms Hall's Catholic aesthetics.

Hall can thus be seen to share in the transcendent and anamnetic practices of the other writers discussed in this thesis. However, my principle of selection was to limit focused discussion to authors who professed a Celtic literary theory. All four case studies are devoted therefore to works by male writers; that principle may indicate an unavoidable patriarchal bias, but I did want to acknowledge here, as again in the conclusion, that there is a growing body of work written by women that can be productively read within a modern Celtic imaginative.

**Chapter Summaries:**

**Chapter 1**

Writing in the early 1940s as "Myles na gCopaleen," the multi-pseudonymed Brian O'Nolan similarly connected the "Celtic" to an aesthetic practice of hybridizing English. O'Nolan claimed the Irish were merely "[p]laying up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act" (*Best of Myles* 234). Louis de Paor has suggested that O'Nolan had previously developed a kind of "Celtic Realism" in his Irish language MA thesis and other critical writings.[18] O'Nolan's poetics derive from his reading of early Irish

[18] I have addressed O'Nolan's interest in hybridizing language in my article "'the words I taught to him': Interfusional Language Play and Brian O'Nolan's 'Revenge on the English,'" which was published in the *Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* in 2016.

literature, de Paor argues, and a linguistic self-consciousness of the inadequacies of an incomplete bilingualism (de Paor 203). O'Nolan's critical view remains understudied but his perception of a Celtic imagination drawing on Irish as well as Welsh and Scots-Gaelic poetics offers a way of uniting Celtic aesthetics generally.

Consequently, the first chapter of this thesis investigates whether O'Nolan's realistic mode opposes the sort of artificial, internal Celtic mode Joyce and others favoured. I argue that *The Third Policeman* reconciles the Catholic animus discussed above with the pre-Christian Celtic perception that there is no personal Creator, no transcendental afterlife, and that the natural world is itself eternal. These claims, O'Nolan argues fictionally and elsewhere, are grounded firmly in the Celtic imaginative. O'Nolan retrieves modes of thought and literary effects from medieval Irish sources and scholarly texts, but styles them for a wider audience. The second half of the chapter examines O'Nolan's writing within a collaborative framework. He and his peers were concerned with making an Irish-Celtic contribution to modern literature.

**Chapter 2**

David Jones develops a visual aesthetic in an Anglo-Welsh context, arguing that the Celtic enhances the potential for metamorphosis through a combination of contraries. The second chapter argues that Jones employs Celtic myth in *In Parenthesis* to transform his modern subject matter, the events of the First World War, as a way of representing the despoliation inflicted on contemporary victims of military violence. Art for art's sake, which was hugely important for Jones, is threatened in a contest between gratuity and utility (technological civilization and culture), which has its epiphany in the modern

mechanized war and informs a tension in the motifs of *In Parenthesis*. The war threatens Celtic art, knowledge of Welsh language, and an essential link to an ancient historical past. The examination of this theme shows how several effects are interwoven in the narrative subtext of *In Parenthesis*: dominant aesthetic flattening, a knocking down of high art and low art distinctions, interplay between allusions to romance and realism, as well as widespread fragmentation. The modern Celtic imaginative assists a reading of Jones' text in all its complexity.

**Chapter 3**

The principle idea of the Celtic in relation to the Scottish writer George Mackay Brown's *Magnus* is metamorphosis through Eucharistic anamnesis, which enables Brown to unite time (the twelfth with the twentieth centuries) and resolves what would otherwise be a jarring break in the narrative timeline. Brown's work shares this anamnetic feature with Jones's *Anathémata.* Brown read and admired Jones, and Jones's writing on metamorphosis and the Eucharist may have exerted influence over Brown's novel about war and martyrdom. Sabine Schmid, for instance, has noted how such thinking informs Brown's approach to modernizing medieval Celtic poetry. Chapter three argues that this novel establishes Brown's affinity with Jones more directly than does any of his poetry: Brown interweaves medieval and modern histories throughout *Magnus* powerfully to tell the story of the twelfth-century martyr St. Magnus Erlendson, Earl of Orkney. The style and tone of the prose recall the Celtic Scandinavian/runic influences in Brown's poetry. Both Lindin Bicket and Griffiths have argued that *Magnus* is a work of Catholic imagination occupying a liminal space in contemporary British fiction. The descriptions

of Magnus's pacifism, for instance, "are wholly modern, post-world war, post-Holocaust and post-Vietnam constructions that recreate a medieval saint to suit the modern age" (Bicket 116). Simply put, there is no other Scottish novel like it. *Magnus* falls outside the norms of the post-war Catholic novel and recall earlier values (Griffiths 229), but I argue that *Magnus* is best read as a late-modern Celtic novel that celebrates Catholic metaphysics by employing a Celtic decorative strategy.

The second half of the chapter examines Brown's theology and his wider modernist poetics in connection with Jorge Luis Borges. While he was working on *Magnus*, Brown compared his writing to Borges's *Labyrinths*. Jay Parini's *Borges and Me* is the only text to document these discussions. Parini's memoir is significant both for how it reframes and reveals Brown's attempts to situate his Celtic-Christian project within a wider literary modernism.

**Chapter 4**

The fourth chapter examines John McGahern's novella *The Country Funeral* through the lens of his and Brian O'Nolan's shared admiration of Irish language aesthetics. They share a view of a hybrid English style that retains Gaelic usage and meanings. Their discussions inform several affinities between *The Country Funeral* and *The Third Policeman* which here are brought to bear on McGahern's oeuvre for the first time. Though McGahern does not state a literary theory directly, the chapter argues that these coordinates inform a Celtic aesthetic that helps address a dichotomy between city and country present in all of McGahern's later novels, most notably in *The Pornographer* and his last, *That They May Face The Rising Sun*.

This second part of the chapter builds on McGahern scholarship respecting the city-country tension in his work.[19] Wakes, removals, funeral mass celebrations, burials, and the local customs surrounding these rites, frequently recur in McGahern's fiction. For McGahern the concept of the country funeral is both an act of remembering and also a kind of Celtic inversion.

[19] See Gerald Lynch's "A 'Fragile Interdependence': John McGahern's 'That They May Face the Rising Sun.'" *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, pp.160-175.

## Chapter 1

Writing as "Myles na gCopaleen" in his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column for *The Irish Times* on 28 August 1942, the multi-pseudonymous Irish author, Brian O'Nolan (1911-1966) connected the "Celtic" to an aesthetic practice of hybridizing English and Irish that he traces back to J. M. Synge. O'Nolan claimed that Irish people after Synge were merely "[p]laying up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act" (*Best of Myles* 234). Mocking the English accent, O'Nolan joked that the English had discovered that (as Celts) the Irish were

> rather interesting peepul ek'tully, that we were nice, witty, brave, fearfully seltic and fiery, loveable, strong, lazy, boozy, impulsive, hospitable, decent, and so on til you weaken. (*Best of Myles* 234)

One can make several inferences about O'Nolan's conception of a Celtic aesthetic based on this article. O'Nolan refers to the "celtic act" as "exhibitionism" in the same article. The Celtic is a performative aesthetic, and thus in keeping with the definition given in the introduction of this dissertation; but this Celtic display is also tied to national identity through the difference it emphasizes. Louis de Paor has suggested that O'Nolan had previously developed a theory of Celtic realism in his Irish language MA thesis and earlier critical writings.[20] O'Nolan's poetics derive from his reading of early Irish literature, de Paor argues, and a linguistic self-consciousness of the inadequacies of an incomplete bilingualism ("A scholar manqué" 203):

> Ó Nualláin's [O'Nolan's] thesis argues that early Irish literature is the primary

[20] Louis de Paor calls attention to O'Nolan's MA thesis as a central document in which he puts forward his Celtic theory. See Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Nádúir-fhilíocht na Gaedhilge: Tráchtas maraon le Duanaire'. Unpublished MA thesis, University College Dublin, 1935.

> source for a particular attitude to the natural world which is characteristic of the Celtic imagination at its height. He draws comparisons with Welsh and Scots-Gaelic poetry but points to the greater antiquity of the Irish material to support his argument that the Celtic attitude to the natural world originated in Ireland. (de Paor, "A scholar manqué" 197)

O'Nolan puts forward this idea of Celtic realism in a regional argument (that is, citing similar literary modes in Wales and Scotland) using "'*géarchomaoine leis an nádúr*' [intense communion with nature]" and "'*fírinne-tuairisce*' [truth-telling]" (de Paor 198). For example, de Paor claims that O'Nolan's "nostalgia for a less alienated sensibility that would integrate the carnal and the spiritual aspects of human existence is crucial to the treatment of Finn and Sweeny in *At Swim-Two-Birds*" (de Paor 199). However, as Paul Fagan has argued, O'Nolan complicates the poetics of truth-telling in his later writing in ways that question authority and justification for belief. In an article on misreading and the paranoia of expertise in *The Third Policeman*, Fagan notes how, through the relationship between the novel's form and content, O'Nolan "exposes the ideological abuses of a trust […] in the constitution of a body of knowledge […] which is, perforce, 'reposed in morally bound truth-tellers and promise keepers'" (Fagan, "Expert diagnosis" 15). Joseph Brooker has echoed Hugh Kenner's observation that when reading *The Third Policeman*, one feels as though one is "reading an unorthodox translation" from Irish into English (*Flann O'Brien* 59). For such reasons, Brooker suggests that O'Nolan's MA thesis and his interest in Old Irish poetry is one source for this Celtic aestheticization of language.

Certainly as a university-educated native Irish speaker, O'Nolan's perception of a Celtic imagination draws on Irish as well as Welsh and Scots-Gaelic poetics, and this combination offers a way of uniting Celtic aesthetics generally. Regarding Celtic aesthetics in *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Nolan's source for the translations from *Buile Shuibhne*, for instance, has generated a wide discourse among scholars. Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin has claimed that while J. G. O'Keeffe's 1913 edition seems the obvious candidate, there are some stark differences when you compare O'Keeffe's version with Sweeny's staves in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Ó Brolcháin 14-15). Cathal Ó Hainle has done extensive work on reconstructing O'Nolan's course reading while enrolled at University College, Dublin (Ó Hainle 17-36). Judging from this extract from his MA thesis on nature poetry, O'Nolan's formal sense of Sweeny's frenzy and his modernist understanding of the relationship between form and content would have impacted any translation of the poem he might have attempted himself:

> Is nuair atá Suibhne ag moladh áite nó ag trácht go carthannach uirthi abhíonn an ghnath-fhiliocht nadurtha da chanadh aige, agus is breagh an fhilíocht í. Ach nuair a bhíonn gearán da dhéanamh aige agus ag casoid ar an fhuacht nó chruadhas agus maslacht a bheathadh mar dhuine mire amuigh faoi dhoininn aimsire gan mullach ós a chionn agus gan cara le'na thaobh, bíonn cuma mearaidhem cuma briste sáruighthe neamh-choitchianta ar an fhilíocht, ag cur na luighe ar an léightheóir, eadar aisteacht meadarachta agus ciotacht ráidthe, an stád ina bhfuil inteann Shuibhne. Is iongantach an obair í nuair a chuimhnithear comh luath an tráth a cumadh an fhilíocht.[21]

[21] Ó Brolcháin translates this passage similarly to mine, but some of O'Nolan's Ulster forms need to be clarified. He uses "maslacht" which in one sense is literally "insults," but in Ulster usage could mean the

> [When Sweeny is praising a place or giving an amiable account of it,
> he recites normal poetry (... and fine poetry it is) but when he is complaining and lamenting the cold or the hardships and insults of his life as a madman abroad in foul weather without covering over him and without a friend by his side, there is a crazed effect, broken, exhausted, unusual, on the poetry, which impresses on the reader both the queer metre and the awkward expression reflecting Sweeny's state of mind. It is wonderful work, considering how early the poetry was composed.] (O'Nolan, MA Thesis 35-36)

Following from his sense of the unity between form and content, O'Nolan proposes a "crazed" aesthetic by arguing that Sweeny's frenzy exerts influence over the appearance and shape of the poem.[22] O'Nolan sees something "wonderful" in medieval Celtic poetry and his fiction attempts a retrieval of these effects.

The first part of the present chapter, following, deals with O'Nolan's second novel, *The Third Policeman*, arguing that this text reconciles the Catholic animus discussed in the introduction with the pre-Christian Celtic perception that there is no personal Creator, no transcendental afterlife, and that the natural world is itself eternal. Here I seek to address a lacuna in O'Nolan scholarship, as previous critics have not

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"strenuousness" of life. Ó Brolcháin proposes the expression "crazed effect" for "bíonn cuma mearaidhem cuma briste sáruighthe neamh-choitchianta ar an fhilíocht," which more literally expresses the crazed, broken, exhausted appearance of Sweeny's poetry, that is, O'Nolan's literary aesthetics. I have made several corrections above to Ó Brolcháin's translation of this passage from O'Nolan's MA Thesis:

> When Sweeny is praising places or giving an amiable account of them, he uses normal poetry (... and fine poetry it is) but when he is complaining and lamenting the cold or the hardships and insults of his life, as one in a frenzy, abroad in foul weather without covering over him and without a friend by his side, there is a crazed effect, broken, exhausted, unusual, on the poetry, which weighs on the reader between the queer metre and the awkward expression reflecting Sweeny's state of mind. It is a wonderful work when it is remembered at how early a period it was composed. (Ó Brolcháin 14)

[22] Modern interpretations of *Buile Shuibhne* clearly interested O'Nolan and his circle. In 1959 his friend Niall Montgomery (1915-1987) published "King, Saint, Holy Madman," a short English translation of the poem.

firmly connected the novel to the author's Celtic aesthetic. Similarly, in the second half of the chapter, the critical discussion of *At Swim-Two-Birds,* which has been widely interpreted within O'Nolan's Celtic aesthetic by de Paor, Eva Wappling, and Julieta Abella, and others, is reframed within the context of O'Nolan's immediate circle (his collaborative practice) and the autobiographical mode he establishes in the text. This reframing directs us to read O'Nolan's novel within the context of the collaborative projects he undertook in the mid-1930s and acknowledges the influence of his social milieu within a broader modernist project. For example, his friends' discussion of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) helped O'Nolan and his collaborators explore the modern God-author problem which has a counterpart in the Celtic perception of no personal Creator. This extends the idea of Celtic realism that O'Nolan put forward in his MA thesis where he argued that "among the principal characteristics of early Irish poetry, a form of truth-telling […] integrated precision and economy of language with sharp observation of the natural world, the autonomy of which the poets acknowledged, thus avoiding the pathetic fallacy […] associated with English poetry" (de Paor, "Lethal in Two Languages" 197). One can also locate a form of inverse surrealism when this theory of Celtic realism is applied to *The Third Policeman*.

O'Nolan's formation of a Celtic aesthetic in his fiction thus emphasizes difference in two essential ways: the first is the juxtaposition of Irish and English, which forms a dialectic, revealing a Celticized English that establishes its modernity through its "un-Englishness" (Frazier 114). This drive for difference proceeds alongside "foreign," that is American and European, literary aesthetics which, rather than reject as un-Irish or non-

Celtic, O'Nolan embraces and incorporates. Secondly, such inclusions, as we will see, substantiate O'Nolan's Celtic project within a wider literary modernism.

**"A record of this belief will be found in the literature of all ancient peoples": Niall Montgomery on ancient Celt quoi in *The Third Policeman***

In 1971, John Lincoln "Jack" Sweeney (1906-1986), director of the Poetry Room in the Lamont Library at Harvard University, commissioned Niall Montgomery (1915–1987) to record readings of *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds.*[23] Montgomery had previously recorded his poetry for the Poetry Room at Sweeney's request. He visited Peter Hunt Studios in Dublin on 13 March 1972 and recorded "Readings from two novels by Flann O'Brien" on two analog tape reels which are held in the Houghton Library at Harvard.[24] Montgomery's recordings – interpreted below using both the sound archives and the letters discussing their production – provide scholars with a new understanding of audial and aesthetic dimensions of O'Nolan's fictional project. (These recordings have not been widely listened to by O'Nolan scholars; Mary W. Graham, librarian at the Woodberry Poetry Room, only recently digitized the tapes upon my request.[25])

[23] The Poetry Room opened in Lamont in 1949. The library emphasized recorded performances. The Alvar Aalto-designed rooms were created specifically as "a place for poetry" and poetry listening with turntables and earphones. The downside of this move was that it excluded women from the Poetry Room: Radcliffe students had previously had access to its Widener venue; Lamont Library did not admit women until 1967.
[24] Sweeney commissioned recordings of material from O'Nolan's novels but had previously commissioned recordings of Montgomery reading his own poetry. Montgomery sent two reels of 1.5mm Mylar audiotape to the Poetry Room with handwritten notes on the back of the boxes referencing the script he used and (posthumously) signed "Myles Na Gopaleen." This commission of O'Nolan's work extended Sweeney's efforts during his curatorship to record modernist poetry. The Poetry Room had previously collaborated with the British Council on a program called, "The Poet Speaks," jointly funding recordings of David Jones, Philip Larkin, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Ted Hughes, among others. See "THE POETRY ROOM & LAMONT LIBRARY: 1949-2000" on the Woodberry Poetry Room webpage, https://library.harvard.edu/libraries/poetryroom.
[25] I am grateful to Mary W. Graham for having Montgomery's tapes digitized and making the digital files available to me in May 2022. I also owe a major debt of gratitude to James Montgomery and Niall Montgomery's other children for granting me permission to quote from their father's letters and recordings

Montgomery exercised creative control over selecting extracts from O'Nolan's novels. He spent several months preparing the material for these recording sessions, and his letters to Sweeney during this preparation period reveal his preoccupation with O'Nolan's Celtic aesthetic. This section of chapter one seeks to revive Montgomery's way of reading O'Nolan. But it will also revise, complicate, and transform Montgomery's terms of reference. Apart from being O'Nolan's close friend and collaborator, Montgomery, with his knowledge of the Irish language and commitment to the avant-garde, set important coordinates for his interpretation of *The Third Policeman*. Two unpublished letters to Sweeney about the production substantiate the terms of reference Montgomery lays out in his introduction to the recordings. I will discuss Montgomery's headings alongside the sections of the novel he chose to record; but first, before embarking on this task, a brief discussion of the events and structure of *The Third Policeman* will prove useful.

A concise summary of such a complex novel is near impossible: an unnamed narrator has withdrawn from life and exists only to write about the savant and philosopher de Selby (whom he cites throughout the novel). With a co-conspirator named John Divney, he murders a man named Phillip Mathers. (The narrator reluctantly agrees to steal Mathers' money so he can afford to publish his academic index on de Selby.) Divney refuses to give the narrator his share of the cash until they are free from suspicion. They remain at odds for three years until Divney (literally) blows up the

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at length. Hard copies of his tapes are currently stored at the poetry room. See Niall Montgomery, "Readings from two novels by Flann O'Brien," 13 March 1972, Woodberry Poetry Room, PR6029.N56 T52x 1972, Houghton Library, Harvard University, HOLLIS 990018022920203941.

narrator who then forgets his identity in the afterlife. His mythical journey in Hell begins, which comprises the remaining chapters of the text, two through to twelve. O'Nolan initially ironizes the narrator's forgetting of his own name as an extension of his conspiracy with Divney, who issues the following warning to the narrator:

> 'But remember this. If you meet anybody, you don't know what you're looking for, you don't know in whose house you are, you don't know anything.'
>
> 'I don't even know my own name,' I answered.
>
> This was a very remarkable thing for me to say because the next time I was asked my name I could not answer. I did not know. (*TTP* 20)

The narrator alludes to prescriptive forgetting, but his identity loss constitutes the formation of a new non-identity.[26] This concept of forgetting structures the novel, and O'Nolan uses it to explore the narrator's selfhood: he lives, then dies, but continues to exist in the parish of the three policemen who torment him by questioning his namelessness and therefore his existence and confounding him with impossible scientific theories. He flees the parish, forgetting the policemen, only to unknowingly return without any memory of his previous journey and suffering. And this punishment goes on forever because he is in Hell.

The following two letters, which Montgomery wrote to Sweeney in 1971, recontextualize our understanding of O'Nolan's novels. Montgomery had been associated with O'Nolan since the mid-1930s, so these letters inform his late reception of O'Nolan's early fictional output in English and reveal what he thought of the work published after

[26] Some critics have read the narrator as anti-Everyman figure. Keith Hopper refers to him as "Noman" throughout the second edition of his study, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (2009). Brooker deviates from this approach only slightly by calling him "Anon" (*Flann O'Brien* 49).

the author's death in 1966. In her essay "Plagiarism and the Politics of Friendship," Maebh Long notes Montgomery's earlier involvement with O'Nolan's "Cruiskeen Lawn" column in *The Irish Times* and has argued that Montgomery was most instrumental in O'Nolan's writing for the newspaper ("Politics of Friendship" 20-35). As a co-author, editor, and correspondent on such later novels as *The Dalkey Archive*, Montgomery proves to be "vital in O'Nolan's *oeuvre*" (Long, "Politics of Friendship" 20). Similarly, we will see how Montgomery proves vital to interpreting the modern Celtic strain in *The Third Policeman*.

In his 21 January 1971 letter to Sweeney, Montgomery makes several remarks about Thomas Kinsella's translation of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the oldest vernacular epic in Western literature, which sets up an implicit comparison between Kinsella's modern presentation of Old Irish poetry and O'Nolan as a modern writer in the Celtic continuum. Montgomery writes:

> TKinsella sent me a paperback of the Táin for Christmas. I hadn't read the big coffeetable [sic] edition at home. Now I've read much of the paperback. I think it's terrible. You know it's the new sound, the new light, the Celtic strobe light beamed on all media. […] Actually what Tom has done isn't just a translation, it's a presentation in another medium of a rare old Indoor-European conundhrum [sic]. Why can't fellows leave other fellows' things alone?[27]

Montgomery evidently believed modern writers needed to faithfully integrate elements of medieval and ancient Celtic texts into contemporary writing rather than prepare texts

[27] Niall Montgomery Papers, Personal Correspondence, MS 50, 118/26/10, National Library of Ireland. The date on the letter is unclear. "21 JAN 1971" appears to be stamped in the bottom left-hand corner of the page, but the day of the month is almost illegible.

from antiquity for a modern audience. In the Translator's note included with the paperback edition, Kinsella calls his *Táin* an "actual translation" and claims the text is "a living version of the story […] not intended as a scholarly work" (vii). Montgomery apparently disagreed. Interestingly, O'Nolan's circle of writer-friends were involved in helping Kinsella obtain a scholarship, and they provided textual help as he translated the poem. Kinsella thanked "the late Donagh Mac Donagh," a close friend to both O'Nolan and Montgomery (and the model for the character "Donaghy" in *At Swim-Two-Birds* discussed below) for help with the translation (vii). Montgomery also wrote Kinsella a letter of recommendation for the scholarship that enabled him to start his translation.[28]

Despite their association, Montgomery construes Kinsella's project as a vulgar modernization of old poetry into a novelistic/book format—hence his Celtic strobe light metaphor—and yet, he understood O'Nolan's writing as "ancient," allusive, academic, and occurring in a modern moment. He outlines this sense of O'Nolan's Celtic aesthetic, or "Celt quoi," in his 15 April 1971 letter to Sweeney:

> I'm working on the Brian Nolan thing – I've mapped out extracts in the Policeman book and I'm now having a look at At Swim. When I finished the policeman book I turned to the red and the black [by Stendhal] to remind myself of Julien Sorel's famous exit. Nolan, clearly, is not a European novelist, but rather a writer of wonder sagas, an ancient Celt quoi. (I think there is a kind of resemblance between Nolan and Joyce, the difference being that Nolan is

[28] Kinsella and Montgomery's correspondence began in the late 1950s. Kinsella wrote to Montgomery on 9 September 1959 to inform him that he had used him as a reference, "for an exchange scholarship to America." Montgomery responded the same day "flattered" to be nominated and happy to help. Kinsella was recommended for the scholarship and wrote again on 12 November 1959, asking Montgomery to complete the necessary forms and supply a reference letter. See Niall Montgomery Papers, *Terminal* Working File, MS. 50, 118/19/2, National Library of Ireland.

completely devoid of human sympathy, like swift (quoi)) […] À propos de Mánus: I think it's in Mánus Ó Domhnaill that the by me much loved quatrain (starring ROSC) occurs: pl[ease] ask Máire to construe

atáid dias i-stigh so a-nochd
ar nach ceilid rosc a rún
gion go bhfuilid béal re béal
is géar géar silleadh a súl
["There are two in here tonight,
whose look does not conceal their secret,
as though they are mouth by mouth,
their eyes water bitterly, bitterly"]

(like the Crane bit, from memory – so maybe a ghost, too)?[29]

Only a small portion of this letter quoted by Christine O'Neill in *Dublinman* has been previously published. O'Neill omits Montgomery's references to Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), Crane (presumably the American poet Stephen Crane, who admired ghost stories), as well as leaving out the lines in Irish that Montgomery wrongly attributes to Mánus Ó Domhnaill (d. 1563) and quotes incorrectly (O'Neill 101); these references have been restored using Montgomery's original letter to Sweeney included in the "Niall Montgomery Papers" held by the National Library of Ireland.[30] The Gaelic quatrain,

[29] For a full version of the letter, see Niall Montgomery Papers, Personal Correspondence, MS 50, 118/26/10, National Library of Ireland. The date is unclear. What I interpret as "April" is based partly on the handwriting and partly on the sequence of letters. A note stamped "30 April 1971" in the same folder follows the letter cited above.

[30] Montgomery quotes the lines "from memory" and makes several typographical errors in his transcription:

Atáid dias is tigh-se a-nocht
ar nách ceileann rosg a rún;
gion go bhfuilid béal re béal,
is géar géar sileadh a súl. (O'Rahilly 51)

which Montgomery deftly associates with *The Third Policeman*, actually originates in "Soraidh slán don oidhche aréir" (c. 1620) by the Scottish poet, Niall Mór MacMuireadhaigh (Riordan 83).[31]

Reading *The Third Policeman* first prompted Montgomery to think of Stendhal. By mentioning Stendhal's *The Red and The Black* in connection to O'Nolan's novel, Montgomery implies that Latin scholar Julien Sorel, with his moral hypocrisy and fascination with the exploits of Napoleon, is a possible model for O'Nolan's narrator, the scholar-turned-murderer who obsesses over de Selby. After Julien Sorel is guillotined, his former lover Madame de Rênal, whom Julien tried to murder, dies grief-stricken in the arms of her children only three days later.[32] This "famous exit" echoes the death of John Divney in *The Third Policeman* who dies in the arms of his wife and son after being frightened by the ghost of the narrator at the climax of the novel. The narrator thinks he has been gone from the house for only three days, when he has in fact been "dead for sixteen years" (*TTP* 203). This French connection partly explains Montgomery's elliptical use of the word "quoi" in rendering the ineffable "Celt quoi," evoking a Celtic Je-ne-sais-quoi: in his letter to Sweeney, Montgomery seeks to show the contrast between O'Nolan and Stendhal. The former is "not a European novelist" in the sense that he does

[31] Montgomery likely confused the attribution ("I think it's in Mánus Ó Domhnaill") because he had previously published a translation of Ó Domhnaill's "Cridhe lán do Smuainthighthibh" in 1957; both poems appear in the same anthology, *Dánta Grádha: An anthology of Irish love poetry (A.D. 1350-1750)*, edited by Thomas F. O'Rahilly. Montgomery used *Dánta Grádha* as his source text for Ó Domhnaill's "Cridhe lán do Smuainthighthibh" (O'Rahilly 73). He also references the collection on his recording of the translation for the Poetry Room. For the published version of the translation, see Niall Montgomery, "Private Parting." *The Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1957, p. 6.

[32] The deaths at the end of *The Red and The Black* are prefigured in Julien and Madame de Rênal's first parting at the end of chapter twenty-three in Book One: "In the end, Julien was deeply impressed by the embraces, in which there was no warmth, of this living corpse; he could think of nothing else for some leagues. His spirit was crushed, and before crossing the pass, so long as he was able to see the steeple of Verrières church, he turned round often" (Stendhal 206). This scene anticipates themes found in *The Third Policeman*, the living corpse for example, and the concept of turning round and round.

not share Stendhal's realism; O'Nolan is a modernist who avoids naturalism as does James Joyce, and a satirist like the supposedly misanthropic Jonathan Swift.

The remaining unpublished parts of the letter set up vital referents for O'Nolan's poetics and convey Montgomery's understanding of how European modernism and Celtic aesthetics relate. For instance, "ROSC" alludes by name to a series of international modern art exhibitions held in Dublin, beginning in 1967, where international modern painting juxtaposed pre-twelfth century Celtic art.[33] In one sense, the ROSC art exhibition indirectly analogizes the modern and Celtic effects of the novel. The lines Montgomery quotes from Niall Mór MacMuireadhaigh are haunting and evocative of *The Third Policeman*: "There are two in here tonight, whose look does not conceal their secret, as though they are mouth by mouth, their eyes water bitterly, bitterly."[34] MacMuireadhaigh's quatrain emphasizes a ghostly meeting – to borrow Montgomery's turn of phrase – in a house between two people, and this is precisely what happens in the second chapter of O'Nolan's novel, which Montgomery chose to extract for his

[33] I extend thanks to Ian Ó Caoimh who, in a personal communication with me, noted that *ROSC* was a series of international modern art exhibitions occurring every four years in Dublin from 1967-1988. These shows were organized by the Irish architect Michael Scott. Montgomery may have the format for ROSC's first exhibition in mind, "ROSC '67: the poetry of vision, an international exhibition of modern painting and ancient celtic art," which juxtaposed modern art "with 60 objects of pre-twelfth century Irish art" ("Ambitious Art Exhibition 1967"). The first ROSC exhibition translated "Rosc" as "the poetry of vision" from old Irish, which it used as its subtitle. The Royal Dublin Society held the second ROSC exhibition from 24 October to 29 December 1971. "Rosc" translates as both "eye" and "chant" in Irish and evokes the proverb, Ní cheileann rosc rún ("a look tells everything"), which may predate Niall Mór MacMuireadhaigh's poem. (Montgomery refers elsewhere to his own poetry as sing-chant poetry.) In contemporary medical terminology (almost certainly unknown to Montgomery,) ROSC means Return of Spontaneous Circulation (ROSC), the resumption of a sustained heart rhythm after cardiac arrest, which resonates ironically with *The Third Policeman* because it is narrated by someone who is dead.

[34] Ian Ó Caoimh also provided invaluable help as I translated MacMuireadhaigh's quatrain from "Soraidh slán don oidhche aréir." Any errors or failings to convey the sense of the original are my own. Ciarán MacMurchaidh republished the poem along with an English translation ("The Vanished Night") in *Filíocht ghrá na Gaeilge / Love poems in Irish*. MacMurchaidh employs significant poetic license with the English version whereas I have attempted to provide a straight transliteration of the lines referenced by Niall Montgomery.

recording: the moment in the text when the narrator first encounters dead Mathers in the afterlife.

Montgomery titled this extract "A Ghost's View of Life," the first out of a total of six headings he attributed to the passages he selected from both novels.[35] These titles help structure his interpretation of O'Nolan's project. In the chapter Montgomery draws from, O'Nolan uses a representational strategy that is both "Celtic" for its resonance with medieval Irish poetics and "modern" in the sense that it ironizes the relatively "new" concept of the posthumous narrator. Discussing the novel in 1940, O'Nolan remarked about this to his friend William Saroyan, "I think the idea of a man being dead all the time is pretty new" (*CL* 69).

During the narrator's first meeting with Mathers, dead Mathers (or his ghost in Montgomery's reading) puts forward a theory about wind colour ironically aimed at ascertaining the length of one's life. Hopper has noted that even before the narrator meets the policemen, he is told by Mathers that they "have the gift of 'wind watching', i.e. reading the colours of the winds" (*Post-Modernist* 111). Mathers asks the narrator, "What

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[35] Montgomery introduces his own titles for each excerpt at the beginning of the tape:

> Here are readings from two novels by Flann O'Brien. The readings being made in Dublin in March 1972 for the Poetry Room, Lamont Library, Harvard University. The readings are from two novels, *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*. […] For identification, titles which do not of course appear in the novel, are suggested for the extracts. Thus, in the case of *The Third Policeman*, it is suggested that the first extract be called "A Ghost's View of Life," and the second, "The Suspense of Hanging." In *At Swim-Two-Birds* there are four extracts with the titles, 'A Variety of Overtures,' 'The Birthday Guests' Journey,' 'The Characters in Pursuit of Their Author' and then there's the novel's ending."

The above transcript is based on digital recordings provided to me by the librarians at the Woodberry Poetry Room. Montgomery also produced a script which contains the extracts, which is at Harvard. See Niall Montgomery, "Readings from two novels by Flann O'Brien," 13 March 1972, Woodberry Poetry Room, PR6029.N56 T52x 1972, Houghton Library, Harvard University, HOLLIS 990018022920203941.

is your colour?" (*TTP* 33). He then proceeds to explain his theory to the unknowing narrator:

> 'No doubt you are aware that the winds have colours,' he said. […]
>
> 'I never noticed it.'
>
> 'A record of this belief will be found in the literature of all ancient peoples. There are four winds and eight sub-winds, each with its own colour. The wind from the east is a deep purple, from the south a fine shining silver. The north wind is a hard black and the west is amber. People in the old days had the power of perceiving these colours and could spend a day sitting quietly on a hillside watching the beauty of the winds, their fall and rise and changing hues, the magic of neighbouring winds when they are inter-weaved like ribbons at a wedding. […]
>
> 'You were asking me what my colour was. How do people get their colours?'
>
> 'A person's colour […] is the colour of the wind prevailing at his birth […] you can tell the length of your life from it. Yellow means a long life and the lighter the better.' (*TTP* 33-34)

Montgomery's title puns on the word "view" in "View of Life." One can know the length of one's life only by viewing/seeing the colours of the wind. Mathers's statement that a "record of this belief will be found in the literature of all ancient peoples" can also be construed differently: a record of this belief in the colours of the wind can be found in the literature of ancient Celtic peoples.

Brendan McWilliams was the first to note the connection between this sequence in the novel and the medieval Irish poem, *Saltair na Rann*, "Psalter of the Quatrains," in an article entitled "Winds of a Different Hue" published in *The Irish Times* on 11

December 1992. Building on this idea, Hopper has argued that in evoking *Saltair na Rann*, O'Nolan ascribes "folkloric beliefs of the ancient Celtic druids" to the policemen, who "are the resultant interface of several intertextual worlds" (*Post-Modernist* 111-112). In his "Irishman's Diary about wind colour" published in *The Irish Times* on 5 February 2014, Frank McNally posited that the "real-life version of Flann O'Brien probably studied [*Saltair na Rann*] at university, before wildly embellishing the idea in his writings." There are several popular modern sources for the poem. P. W. Joyce, in *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* (1906), discusses *Saltair na Rann* in the first volume (1: 464); and, in a section entitled "The Wind" in volume two, Joyce writes in a way that anticipates Mathers's conversation with the narrator by noting that "[descriptions of wind in *Saltair na Rann*] deserve to be noticed on account of the curious belief they record of the ancient Irish people that the wind blowing from each quarter has a special colour" (2: 521). Joyce created the following diagram based on the descriptions of the winds in *Saltair na Rann*:

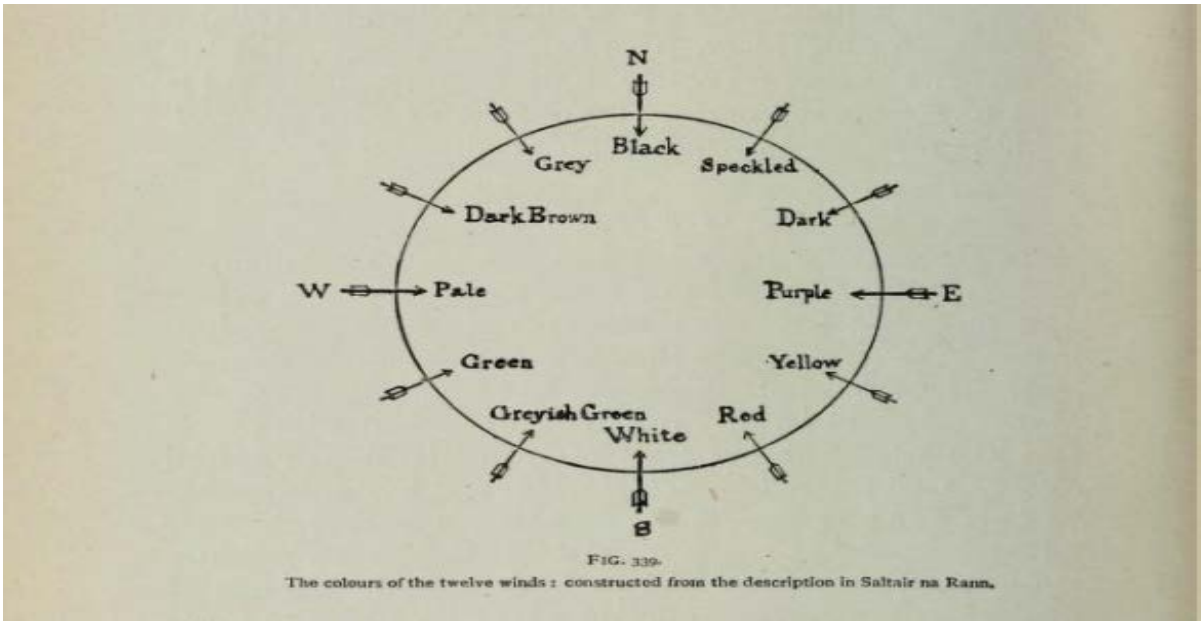


FIG. 339.
The colours of the twelve winds: constructed from the description in Saltair na Rann.

Fig. 1 "The colours of the twelve winds" (P. W. Joyce, 1906).

Whether or not O'Nolan read P. W. Joyce's essay on "The Wind" (2: 521-523)—a copy of the text was not included in his personal library at the time of his death—it is very likely, as McNally observes, that he encountered the poem as he completed his degree in Irish at University College Dublin.[36] One popular translation of the poem is reproduced in Eleanor Hull's anthology, *The Poem-Book of the Gael: Translations from Irish Gaelic Poetry into English Prose and Verse*, published by Chatto and Windus in 1913. In addition to containing an English version of *Saltair na Rann*, this book also contains several translations by Douglas Hyde, the first President of Ireland and O'Nolan's Irish professor while he was a student at University College, Dublin. Hull's *Poem-Book of the Gaels* also collects two poems by Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916), Donagh MacDonagh's late father and one of the leaders executed by the British for his participation in the Easter Rising. O'Nolan could have known about the book, as well as the poems "Is truagh gan mise I Sasana" and "The Yellow Bittern" through his friendship with MacDonagh (Hull 270-272). According to Anthony Cronin, MacDonagh read *The Third Policeman* in manuscript in 1940 and offered advice to O'Nolan about the project: "Only to Donagh MacDonagh did [O'Nolan] confess what had actually happened [his failure to secure publication] and he asked him to look again at the typescript with a view to letting the author know 'what was wrong with it'. MacDonagh's answer was, 'nothing'" (*NLM* 113). The version of *Saltair na Rann* collected in *The Poem-Book of the Gael* contains a section called "Creation of the winds with their colours," which notes the origin and emotional connotation of the winds in anthropomorphizing them (Hull 5).

[36] Cathal Ó Hainle has done extensive work on O'Nolan's reading for his university courses by looking at the University College, Dublin *Calendar* for the following years: "1929-30, pp.171-172; 1930-31, pp. 187-190; pp. 1931-32, pp. 191-194" (*Conjuring Complexities* 169, n. 8). However, Ó Hainle does not mention *Saltair na Rann*.

They begin in "the East, the smiling purple, / from the South, the pure white, wondrous, /from the North, the black blustering moaning wind, / from the West, the babbling dun breeze" (Hull 5-6). The description of additional eight winds relayed by Mathers matches the list of colours given in the poem: "sub-winds had colours of indescribable delicacy, a reddish-yellow half-way between silver and purple, a greyish-green which was related equally to black and brown. What could be more exquisite than a countryside swept lightly by cool rain reddened by the south-west breeze!'" (*TTP* 34).

O'Nolan conveys a sound understanding of the aesthetics in *Saltair na Rann*; his originality is borne out in the association he makes between colours and fate, and the prediction of one's death day, which is enforced by the policeman in the parish-setting of his novel. Finally, Mathers's theory that the colour of the winds can be used to predict the length of one's life could also be a reworking of the superstition noted by P. W. Joyce that "the fate of the year depends on the wind that happens to blow on the 1st of January" (2: 522). These aesthetics and the wind motif deployed throughout *The Third Policeman* inform O'Nolan's startling central irony: that after the second chapter, readers are in the presence of a dead narrator.

**"Strange enlightenments are vouchsafed" by poets in Hell!**

Montgomery selected material from chapter ten for his final extract, which he titled "The Suspense of Hanging." In this sequence O'Nolan implies the Celtic perception that there is no transcendental afterlife, and that the natural world is itself eternal. However, this view must be read within O'Nolan's presumably orthodox Catholic viewpoint that inscribes the moral-allegorical framework in which we encounter heretical Celtic pagan

conceptions. For instance, Carlos Villar Flor has argued that O'Nolan shows a "Thomistic penchant" when he attempts to portray "preposterous allegories […] mortal sin and eternal punishment" (68). Carol Taaffe has noted that O'Nolan's Pooka and Good Fairy characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* fit more neatly into "a Christian universe of good and evil rather than […] a strange corner of folk Irishry" (55). However, Taaffe implies a false dichotomy. Our encounter with these ideas in the hellish setting of *The Third Policeman* extends the theory of Celtic Realism O'Nolan put forward in his MA thesis. Celtic symbolism animates the novel and yet is simultaneously subordinated to Hell at a conceptual level. Hugh Kenner has argued incorrectly that the novel's Hell is a "black joke" and "not […] an allegory" (69). It is an incomplete, a partial, allegory. O'Nolan chooses not to portray purgatory and heaven, so the reader is left without a clear impression of how the author might have excluded or engaged Christian symbolism of a higher order; but the moral argument of the novel is straightforward. The narrator is a murderer and the world he finds himself in is his eternal hellish punishment.

On the recording, before reading the text, Montgomery notes how this section of the novel portrays the narrator's illusory escape from an illusory execution. His escape is "illusory" because his journey in the novel is circular; he eventually arrives back at the policemen's barracks. His execution is "illusory" for two reasons: first, the reader learns from the novel's epigraph that according to de Selby, human existence is a hallucination and "it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death." The second reason concerns the novel's ontological shifts between various life and death premises. The narrator is already dead which makes his execution impossible and therefore only illusory. The threat of dying in

the afterlife – which he perceives as a threat to his life because the narrator is unaware he is dead – is the novel's supreme joke about existence.[37]

Wind gains further ironic associations with death in this context. Standing upon "the scaffold of raw timber rearing itself high into the heavens […] perfect and ready for its dark destiny" (*TTP* 157), the narrator describes the blowing breeze in a poetic register reminiscent of Mathers's theory, which again recalls the aesthetics of *Saltair na Rann*:

> I went forward to a wooden railing and rested my weighty hands on it, feeling perfectly the breeze coming chillingly at their fine hairs. An idea came to me that the breezes high above the ground are separate from those which play on the same level as men's faces: here the air was newer and more unnatural, nearer the heavens and less laden with the influences of the earth. Up here I felt that every day would be the same always, serene and chilly, a band of wind isolating the earth of men from the far-from-understandable enormities of the girdling universe. Here on the stormiest autumn Monday there would be no wild leaves to brush on any face, no bees in the gusty wind. I sighed sadly. (*TTP* 163)

This scene builds towards the novel's faux climax: a momentary glimpse of an eternal void—where every day will be the same—just before the narrator is about to be hanged. His reflection stresses what he elsewhere calls "the same unchanging sameness" (*TTP* 163). The expression, "play on the same level as men's faces," alludes to "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" by Gerard Manley Hopkins. O'Nolan ironically inverts Hopkins's idea that man "Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is / Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features

[37] O'Nolan's joke about dying after death still has purchase for modern comedies about the afterlife and is taken up by Goran Dukić in his 2006 film, *Wristcutters*.

of men's faces" (Hopkins 129). We must recall that O'Nolan's narrator is fairly ignorant of Jesus Christ, who has been supplanted by de Selby in his esteem, and he also has little knowledge of priests and Roman Catholic ritual. In chapter one, he remembers that after his parents died, a "man in the black suit […] stayed in the house for two nights and was continually washing his hands in the bedroom and reading books" (*TTP* 8). His reversal of Hopkins's idea of glimpsing God in men's faces allows O'Nolan to unfold an unorthodox conception of the world as the narrator awaits his death: the eternal entity playing on men's faces in his configuration is not a symbolically positive Holy Spirit, but rather something ineffable and ambivalent.

O'Nolan's other allusions to poems reinforce the pervading sense of hellishness the narrator has encountered and will continue to encounter. Joe placates the narrator by saying "*A man who takes into consideration the feelings of others even when arranging the manner of his own death shows a nobility of character which compels the admiration of all classes. To quote a well-known poet, 'even the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer'*" (*TTP* 166). Joe refers to stanza sixty of "Horatius" from Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842). The line of utmost importance is the previous one that Joe omits from the same stanza and which completes the rhyme scheme: "They saw his crest appear" (Macauly 75).[38] This crest evokes the constabulary crest on the police barracks, which prefigures and encapsulates the ending of O'Nolan's novel:

[38] O'Nolan's inclusion of Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous poem is significant both for the lines mentioned above as well as Horatius's adage in stanza twenty-seven, "To every man upon this earth / Death cometh soon or late. /And how can man die better / Than facing fearful odds."

> About a hundred yards away was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and, indeed, very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child. That was not in itself sufficient to surprise me because I had seen pictures and notices by the roadside before. What bewildered me was the sure knowledge, deeply rooted in my mind, that this was the house I was searching for and that there were people inside it. I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions were missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder. The appearance of the house was the greatest surprise I had encountered ever, and I felt afraid of it. […] A constabulary crest above the door told me that it was a police station. I have never seen a police station like it. (*TTP* 204-205)

This passage repeats the narrator's description of arriving at the barracks in chapter four nearly verbatim (*TTP* 55-56). At the end of the novel, however, John Divney appears as a new addition to the afterlife "hurrying after" the narrator and enters the barracks with him (*TTP* 205).

In the lead up to the scaffold scene, Sergeant Pluck has condemned the narrator to die, not for the crime of murder, but for his namelessness. The narrator has little sense of the meaning of his impending execution and where he is because in a profound sense he is not there. Apart from murder and namelessness, in an ontological-existential sense his punishment is for never having existed and for his failure to exert agency in his life. In

chapter seven, Pluck provided the narrator with an extensive list of proper names to determine his identity and to ascribe guilt for the murder of "a man called Mathers" (*TTP* 99). O'Nolan lists many surnames along with two significant inclusions, Merriman and Quigley. O'Nolan's reference to "Merrimen" (*TTP* 104) evokes Brian Merriman (c.1749–1805), the author of the comic long poem, *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche / The Midnight Court*. O'Nolan's allusion to this Gaelic text is justified by its context in the novel: like Merriman, who will be flogged in the poem for remaining unmarried and not fathering children, the narrator finds himself in the middle of legal proceedings in which he feels he should have no part. He will be hanged without trial. Merriman, too, is threatened with a "noose" (albeit a metaphorical, matrimonial one) and is singled out for being an unmarried bachelor: "There's some dark mystery unknown / That's made this blackguard live alone" (Merriman 41). The allusion to Merriman is significant because, like *The Third Policeman*, it substantiates a Celtic nightmare world with an inverted moral order. The policeman's parish, with its queer laws, resembles the domain of Aoibheal, Queen of all the Fairies in *The Midnight Court* where celibacy is punishable by public flogging. Similarly, as an unmarried bachelor, the narrator's relationship to John Divney, whether homosexual or not, plays a central part in his fate. At a profound level, Divney can be understood as the novel's real protagonist and symbolically negative, a kind of John the Divine of anti-revelations. As we saw above, Divney's call for concealing the truth and his command that the narrator act as if he does not know anything, instantiates (at least in part) the narrator's experiences of nothingness, namelessness, and his encounters with the unknowable in the afterlife.

The narrator's reflection about what will happen to him after he is hanged is counterpointed by Pluck's story about Quigley in the sky. The earlier appearance of the name "Quigley" (*TTP* 104) develops O'Nolan's theme of tormenting the narrator with insoluble conundrums and anticipates Sergeant Pluck's anecdote about this "Fermanagh man" who disappeared into the clouds (*TTP* 163-166). Quigley shares affinity with the narrator as "a man of great personal charm but a divil for reading books" who, as we learn from Pluck, travelled to a place in the clouds using a hot-air balloon "and stayed up" (*TTP* 165).

Montgomery notes that "the narrator, the Sergeant, and that soul whom the narrator names but does not address as Joe" are three audible voices in this scene. The narrator and Joe share foils as body and soul, but also for being of the same mind: they hold a similar view of universal nature and share a philosophy of reincarnation which cannot be reconciled with Roman Catholic doctrine. The narrator reflects:

> Down into the earth where dead men go I would go soon and maybe come out of it again in some healthy way, free and innocent of all human perplexity. I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river or be personally concerned in the ageless perfection of some rank mountain bearing down upon the mind by occupying forever a position in the blue easy distance. Or perhaps a smaller thing like movement in the grass on an unbearable breathless yellow day […] Or even those unaccountable distinctions that make an evening recognisable from its own morning, the smells and sounds and sights of the perfected and matured essences of the day, these might not be innocent of my meddling and my abiding presence. […] Or perhaps I would be an influence that

> prevails in water, something sea-borne and far away, some certain arrangement of sun, light and water unknown and unbeheld, something far-from-usual. (*TTP* 164-165)

Remarking on the separation of body and soul about to take place on the scaffold, Joe echoes the narrator's reflection which concretizes their metaphysical relationship:

> *I do not know, or do not remember, what happens to the like of me in these circumstances. Sometimes I think that perhaps I might become part of . . . the world* […] *I mean—the wind, you know. Part of that. Or the spirit of the scenery in some beautiful place like the Lakes of Killarney, the inside meaning of it if you understand me.* […] *Or perhaps something to do with the sea. […] A big wave in mid-ocean, for instance, it is a very lonely and spiritual thing. Part of that.*

Joe understands his reincarnation as a soul, "the inside meaning" of something. If the narrator were to become a mountain, a ray of sun, the wind, or water, Joe would become "Part of that" as well. Montgomery aptly extracts this chapter as a portion of the text at the very core of O'Nolan's aesthetics. The ending of the novel concretizes the narrator's conception that one can die but "come out of it again in some healthy way, free and innocent of all human perplexity" (*TTP* 164). This description fits his eternal punishment in death and his perpetual disbelief and unknowingness.

**Hell and Tír na nÓg**

The depiction of Hell in *The Third Policeman* is founded on the violation of natural laws that only a mythical setting can engender. O'Nolan describes his concept for the novel in a letter to Saroyan on 14 February 1940:

> When you get to the end […] you realise that my hero or main character (he's a heel and a killer) has been dead throughout the book and that all the queer ghastly things which have been happening to him are happening in a sort of hell which he has earned for the killing. Towards the end of the book (before you know he's dead) he manages to get back to his own house where he used to live with another man who helped in the original murder. Although he's been away 3 days, this other fellow is 20 years older and dies of fright when he sees the other lad standing in the door. Then the two of them walk back along the road to the hell place and start going thro' all the same terrible adventures again, the first fellow being surprised and frightened at everything just as he was the first time and as if he'd never been through it before. It is made clear that this sort of thing goes on forever – and there you are. It's supposed to be very funny […] When you are writing about the world of the dead – and the damned – where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks. (*CL* 69)

The novel instantiates this mythical setting through its unconventional and compressed portrayal of time. Brooker has argued that the narrative "runs along 'time's cycle' rather than 'time's arrow', and in this respect matches [circular form in] *Finnegans Wake*," echoing Roy Hunt's earlier claim that the narrator's recurring oblivion "makes the narration of the novel impossible" (*Flann O'Brien* 51-52). In its representations of eternity, the novel is unfathomably structured, and this form is "in keeping with the unfathomability of much that we encounter within it" (Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* 52). The

murder the narrator commits, as de Paor has noted, renders him "incapable of agency, in a hell of his own making" ("Lethal in Two Languages" 198).

The depiction of unfathomability, then, is in keeping with (and significantly develops) O'Nolan's form and content theory from his MA thesis. Even de Selby's theories and the narrator's commentaries on de Selby's writings footnoted throughout the novel animate his personal Hell. His experiences in the parish and the story he narrates have replaced and overwritten his de Selby index. *The Third Policeman* is the only book he can write. As Tess Hurson has noted, the end of the novel is a kind of recycling, and the narrator must "retrace the nightmare circle of his own damnation" (*Conjuring Complexities* ix). And just prior to this ending, Policeman Fox's explanation of "omnium" (*TTP* 192-198), the substance that animates eternity, finds an analog in how the novel is brought to life through eternity. The imagination shares an analog with omnium.

This imagined realm—akin to Tír na nÓg, the land of youth or Celtic Otherworld, which allows the narrator to remain young indefinitely while Divney ages in the real world—forms a paratextual frame around an archetypal meta-eternity located at the bottom of a forest and controlled by the policemen. This second eternity, which the narrator visits with Sergeant Pluck and MacCruiskeen in chapter eight, is accessible only by elevator or "lift" (*TTP* 128-147); O'Nolan's use of furnace imagery, fire, charcoal, and the second eternity's location (in the bowels of the earth) all evoke common hellish tropes: this eternity evokes an afterlife in which evil persons are subjected to punitive suffering, often torture, as everlasting punishment after death; and perhaps secondarily, as

an abode of evil and condemned spirits, just as the policemen evoke demonic or supernatural entities.

Sergeant Pluck and MacCruiskeen explain the replicating feature of the second eternity. Each room is identical and goes on forever. Time is abolished ("you don't grow old here"); a "pipe will smoke all day and will still be full" and "we have no conception of its unchanging coequality" (*TTP* 137-138). The narrator relates how "MacCruiskeen lit a match for […] cigarettes and then threw it carelessly on the plate floor where it lay looking very much important and alone" (*TTP* 138). What happens next informs the central paradox of the novel. Pluck tells the narrator:

> 'If you want to take another walk ahead to reach the same place here without coming back you can walk on till you reach the next doorway and you are welcome. But it will do you no good and even if we stay here behind you it is probable that you will find us there to meet you.' Here I gave a cry as my eye caught a spent match lying clearly on the floor. (*TTP* 139)

This match is significant and terrifying for the narrator because it defies the ontology of an unchanging eternity. O'Nolan suggests the replicating feature of eternity which abolishes space and time limitations. The spent match is also symbolic of the narrator's fear and uncertainty: he is about to be hanged (even though the reader knows he is already dead), and if he dies again he may cease to exist. The spent match is also analogous with a change of state in eternity. This change of state, or flux, is paradoxical but fits with the internal logic of the novel. The narrator's journey through Hell truly begins in the policemen's barracks and begins again in the exact same way at the end of the narrative, but this time with Divney. The image of walking ahead "to reach the same

place" and finding the policemen "there" prefigures – en abyme – the narrator's circular journey, and the novel's metafictional structure. Eternity, even eternity within eternity, is always eternity, an everlasting unquantifiable endlessness. Divney's reappearance in this Hell at the end of the narrative serves to justify the novel's moral-allegorical structure: that the parish afterlife is an eternal punishment for murderers and scoundrels. MacCruiskeen calls the narrator a "sempiternal man" at their first meeting which achieves full significance at the revelation of his death (*TTP* 68).

The narrator has an anti-Christian outlook. He idolizes the savant and turns to de Selby's writing for comfort when he is confused or in trouble. His devotion to de Selby is almost religious. If his harrowing story evokes Christ's Harrowing of Hell, there is no triumph at the end of *The Third Policeman*. The novel obliterates itself as an ontic possibility, and this obliteration corresponds to the self-obliteration of the narration. The narrator ceases to be human when he becomes a de Selby scholar, so well before he murders Mathers. To know everything is to become mechanical. O'Nolan uses a metaphor of mechanization to reinforce the narrator's dehumanization.[39] The narrator, through the dehumanizing effect of his actions in life, has placed himself inside eternity, and while inside it he enters another, mechanized eternity. The narrative ends when Divney and the narrator are reunited in the afterlife; but the narrator's dehumanization and self-obliteration continue eternally and are absolute.

Additionally, the novel resonates with the mythical story of Oisín's journey to Tír na nÓg, which provides an alternative lens on the moral interpretation offered above. *The Third Policeman* is clearly in dialogue with the tale of Oisín (a human hero) and Niamh

[39] The premise of becoming a mechanical human is reinforced by O'Nolan's use of the word "mechanical" or "mechanically," which appears ten times in the novel in chapters 1, 2, 5, 7 and 10-12.

(a woman from the Land of Youth) in the *Fiannaíocht*, which also contains the Fionn Mac Cumhaill material O'Nolan used while composing *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

In Oisín's story, he and Niamh fall in love. Niamh brings Oisín to Tír na nÓg on a magical horse that can travel over water. In *The Third Policeman*, the stand-in for this horse is the bicycle, gearrán iarainn in O'Nolan's native Ulster dialect, the "iron garron" or "iron horse." At the end of *The Third Policeman*, the narrator returns on a magical bicycle to the home he shares with Divney. Divney stands in for Niamh because he literally sends the narrator to Tír na nÓg by blowing him up. In the mythic tale, after spending what seems to be three years in the land of the young, Oisín becomes homesick and wants to return to Ireland. Niamh reluctantly lets him return on the magical horse but warns him never to touch the ground. When he returns, he finds that 300 years have passed. Oisín falls from the horse, ages instantly as the years rapidly catch up with him, and dies of old age. In other retellings, such as those published by Lady Gregory, Oisín relates his entire story in a dialogue with Saint Patrick. Eglantina Remport has noted the many references in "Cruiskeen Lawn" to Lady Gregory's works, arguing that Gregory is the "author missing from the list of influences on O'Nolan's work" (230). Remport claims Grgeory's books were "material," particularly *Gods and Fighting Men* and *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (231); though she maintains that Gregory intended for her books to be "used by the emerging dramatic movement in Ireland" (233). In his 16 Aug. 1943 "Cruiskeen Lawn" for instance, Myles na gCopaleen notes that Gregory "invented a language of her own […] for the ideas she tried to present or rehash." However, this statement about invented language appears to echo Montgomery's Celtic strobe light

metaphor in the letter discussed above. O'Nolan emphasizes the retrieval of the material and calling up Celtic myths in a modern context.

As in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Nolan's portrayal of elements originating in Celtic myth underwrites the moral dilemma of his work. Cathal Ó Hainle has argued that O'Nolan "would have known at least the outline […] of Oisín's visit to Tír na nÓg" (18). He claims O'Nolan would have read "*Laoi Oisín ar Thír na nÓg* (The Lay of Oisín on the Land of the Young)" for his undergraduate courses in Modern Irish at University College, Dublin, and "as a special topic in 1930" (Ó Hainle 19). *Laoi Oisín ar Thír na nÓg* suggests a natural progression in his fictional project. O'Nolan had already developed Fionn (Finn) and Suibhne (Sweeny) material for his first novel. Oisín was Fionn Mac Cumhaill's son and therefore suggests a natural progression from one novel to the next.

The concept of Celtic eternity is one of the earliest strains of O'Nolan's fictional project. He published a story in Irish titled "Glór an tSíoraíocht" ("The Voice of Eternity") in 1932 in the UCD student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne*.[40] Noting the

[40] The story has never been republished. See Ó Nualláin, Brian. "Glór an tSíoraíocht." *Comhthrom Féinne*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1933, p. 51. Two extracts from the story resonate with the interfusional language O'Nolan uses in "Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!":

> 'Tá beagán agam,' arsa mise, 'acht tá an beagán sin math. 'Creidim' ar seisean, 'go bhfuil aicme mioadhmhar éigin ag iarraidh an Ghaedhilg a thabhairt arais [...] Hó-Hó-Hó!' 'Ní thuigim cúis do chuid sgige,' ar mise, ag éirighe rid beag feargach. 'Dá mbéadh do bheatha agat féin i dtrathaibh na h-uaire seo, (rud nach bhfuil), ní bhfuighfea post mar Teachtaire Telegram gan Ghaedhilg agus ni thiocfaidh leat céim a bhaint amach ar an Ollscoil [...]' 'Bí suaimhneach agus éist le glór an fhír,' arsa ag teacht cugat do bharr do chuid Erse?' […] agus d'éirig liomsa éalu as an bhearna-bhaoghail ar an bealach céadna. Bhíthear ag iarraidh an Bhearla a cur fá réim an uair sin. An Bhéarla an dtuigeann tú, sean-teanga na nGaedheal; baineadh díbh í agus cuireadh canamhain coinhightheach - an Ghaedhilg - 'na luighe ortha; acht le imtheacht an ama, fuarathas a dteanga duthchais arais dóibh. Agus tá amadain ag iarraidh an Ghaedhilg coimhightheach a cur ar aid i n-usaid. Hó-Hó-Hó!'

For further commentary, see Joseph LaBine's "'the words I taught to him': Interfusional Language Play and Brian O'Nolan's 'Revenge on the English.'" *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies*, vol. 3 no. 2, 2016, pp. 35-52, https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3209.

appearance of Fionn Mac Cumhaill as a character in the story, Caoimhghín Ó Brolcháin has interpreted "Glór an tSíoraíocht" as an early precursor to *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Ó Brolcháin 9-11). But Ó Brolcháin overlooks the significance of the narrator "being caught riding a bicycle without lights one night by a huge Garda [policeman]" as generative for O'Nolan's second novel (Ó Brolcháin 10). The joke is likely the kernel of MacCruiskeen's comment about historical "cases of no lights" in *The Third Policeman* (*TTP* 62). When stopped by Fox, the narrator also falsely claims his lamp was "stolen" (*TTP* 190). In "Glór an tSíoraíocht," Fionn remarks about an encounter with a mythical policeman: "Long ago in Green Ireland, a kind of policeman met me one day while I was out hunting and asked me why I wasn't praying in the [monk's] cell."[41] Judging from this early publication, one can see that bicycles and policemen have consistently been inseparable from O'Nolan's mythical-Celtic imagination.

O'Nolan achieves an incredible originality by bringing this material into a modern context in the world of *The Third Policeman*. For example, by taking "left turns as much as possible" (*TTP* 63), and making a circular journey, the narrator counteracts the traditional direction and journey towards sanctity made by Irish Saints. One aspect of such journeying, as Eilís Uí Dháiligh has noted, is "travelling *deiseal* (clockwise)," which of course is ironized as the constant journey leftward in the novel (Uí Dháiligh 6). The narrator's friendship with his own soul, "Joe," is a transliteration of the Irish expression "anamchara" for confessor, or spiritual adviser, which, literally rendered, translates to "soul friend."

[41] The original Irish sentence is, ""fad ó shin i n-Éirinn iath-ghlas, casadh cineal Garda ormsa lá amháin agus mé amuigh as sealg agus d'fhifruigh domh cad chuige nach raibh mé ag paidireóireacht sa chill" (*Conjuring Complexities* 166, n. 5).

Recourse to the beliefs of the ancient Celts finds expression in the de Selby portions of the text as well. For instance, the narrator notes in chapter three that de Selby "mentions in passing a trick the Celts had in ancient times" (*TTP* 40). These Celts could read the road and determine "the dimension of a host which had passed by in the night by looking at their tracks with a certain eye and judging them […] they could tell the number of men who had passed, whether they were with horse or heavy with shields and iron weapons, and how many chariots; thus they could say the number of men who should be sent after them to kill them" (*TTP* 40). The policemen share this gift of road watching, and the allusion informs Policeman Fox's (the third policeman's) first interpolation in the text. Fox reports in chapter ten, "'ONE-LEGGED MEN ON THEIR WAY TO RESCUE PRISONER. MADE A CALCULATION ON TRACKS AND ESTIMATE NUMBER IS SEVEN. SUBMITTED PLEASE. – FOX'" (*TTP* 162). Of course, Fox miscalculates the number as seven; he has actually seen the tracks of fourteen men (absurdly) "tied together in pairs so that there were two men for every two legs […] a masterpiece of military technocratics" (*TTP* 170). Just as de Selby's theories inscribe the narrator's Hell, the policeman take on the same attributes as guardians of the novel's fantastic world and as repositories of Celtic myth.

Intrinsically, O'Nolan uses Celtic myth as a way of mediating his narrator's experiences in his life after death. In selecting sections from the second and tenth chapters for his recording, Montgomery chose to emphasize the novel's fidelity to its Irish language sources and its own internal Celtic theory: the narrator is in Hell, but his experiences in the afterlife are uniquely Celtic and (aesthetically speaking) this helps account for some of the setting's strangeness.

**Bicycle Interlude**

One of O'Nolan's most famous effects in *The Third Policeman* is his anthropomorphic bicycles.[42] According to Sergeant Pluck's "Atomic Theory" cyclists impart human characteristics to their bicycles and vice versa (*TTP* 85-94). Particles moving about in this atomic exchange are, according to Pluck, as "lively as twenty leprechauns doing a jig on top of a tombstone" (*TTP* 86). O'Nolan's half-human bicycles are biomechanical, they steal food, warm themselves by kitchen fires, stay inside on rainy days. Pluck explains his theory:

> The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles. (*TTP* 88)

The operative word here is "spent." Pluck deals with the dead who have *spent* their natural lives and are in an afterlife where such a fantastic theory is possible. Furthermore, he informs the narrator that these half-bicycle humans take on mechanical qualities, and this enhances our sense of the narrator's dehumanization; he has ironically become a

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[42] For example, Maebh Long has argued that the bicycle is inseparable from how we think about the *The Third Policeman*. Niall Sheridan's 1939 story "Matter of Life and Death," published in *Esquire*, places the bicycle at the centre of O'Nolan's collaborative project:

> So central is the concept of 'being about a bicycle' within academic and popular work on O'Nolan that to find this scene [about someone stealing a bicycle] quietly inserted into a 1939 story by O'Nolan's close friend is extremely unsettling. In an uncanny doubling of O'Nolan's *The Third Policeman*, in Sheridan's 'Matter of Life and Death' we are presented with a strange, isolated barracks in the Irish countryside, a barracks associated with indefinite punishment. We are faced with an unnamed murderer. We have a friendship between lonely men, specifically an intimate friendship that ends in death, and a victim whose name is strongly reminiscent of a number of academic commentators of de Selby. We have a murder scene involving a blow to the head, we have a rotund sergeant, we have notions of exile and strange justice. And of course, we have bicycles. (Long, "Politics of Friendship" 25).

mechanical human himself. Pluck's description of half-human bicycles forms part of an extended metaphor of dehumanization within the novel's allegorical structure. The question remains of how O'Nolan became focused on human-bicycles and bicycle-humans.

As we have seen above, O'Nolan's position as a native Irish speaker and his university education informs his exhibition of Celtic ideas and various Celtic effects throughout the novel. However, the image of the bicycle offers us a concept through which we can explore O'Nolan's juxtaposition of Irish and English language, which forms a dialectic, revealing a Celticized English. O'Nolan played up the bicycle's politicization when he reuses the "Atomic Theory" material in his inferior 1964 novel, *The Dalkey Archive*. After hearing of the theory from Sergeant Fottrell, Mick notes that "Human metamorphosis vis-à-vis an iron bicycle" has nationalist implications, arguing that "there is more to it than the monstrous exchange of tissue for metal. [...] All decent Irishmen should have a proper national outlook. Practically any bike you have in Ireland was made in either Birmingham or Coventry" (*CN* 684). This revision to Sergeant Pluck's theory reveals O'Nolan's longstanding engagement with the inextricability of Irish and English identity. O'Nolan suggests in this later satirical configuration that the modern Irish cyclist is mixed up with the English at an atomic level adding political resonances to the bicycle's sexualization. In the realistic context of *The Dalkey Archive*, one cannot easily set aside the effects of British industrialization and nationalist sentiment in postcolonial Ireland. The Irish benefit from British material production but their self-identity and "proper national outlook" is also diminished by it. However, in the Hell of the *The Third Policeman* these historical economical resonances matter less

because the novel is set outside historical time. Pluck's bicycle is initially gendered as female and referred to as "her" and "she" (*TTP* 178-179). O'Nolan's knowledge of the Irish language indicates the opposite gendering of Pluck's bicycle: the Irish word "rothar" is masculine, as is the Ulster usage for bicycle, "gearrán iarainn," "iron garron" or iron pony or horse.[43] In this masculine context, the positions of the bicycle's "pump" is like a penis; the bicycle is obviously sexualized and male-presenting to anyone familiar with the Irish language. Andrea Bobotis has addressed the sexualization of O'Nolan's bicycles, arguing that critics "have habitually misread gender and sexuality in the novel's notorious bicycle sex scene. They have both taken for granted that the bicycle with which the male narrator has an intimate sexual tryst is female and ignored evidence in the novel that the bicycle is in fact male" (Bobotis 242).

O'Nolan plays with the confusion arising from translation and the relationship between Irish and English linguistic context. He renders Pluck's bicycle with human characteristics which the narrator wrongly assumes are female:

> The saddle…inexplicably reminded me of a human face…I knew I liked this bicycle more than I had ever liked any other bicycle, better than I had liked some people with two legs…her two handlebars…beckoned to me to lend my mastery for free and joyful journeyings…How desirable her seat was, how charming the invitation of her slim encircling handle-arms, how unaccountably competent and reassuring her pump resting warmly against her rear thigh! (*TTP* 170-171)

[43] Domhnall Ó Braonáin has also noted use of the phonetic sounding "badhsacal" for bicycle instead of "rothar." See Ó Braonáin, Domhnall. "'DÉANAIM IARRACHT 'ROTHAR' A RÁ IN ÁIT 'BADHSACAL' – TUAIRIM CONSPÓIDEACH DO CHOIS FHAIRRGEACH…'" *Nós*, 1 March 2021, https://nos.ie/saol/deanaim-iarracht-rothar-a-ra-in-ait-badhsacal-tuairim-conspoideach-do-chois-fhairrgeach/.

Richard Kearney's recent study on *Touch* (2021) helps us understand the narrator's encounter with Pluck's bicycle. Kearney has discussed sensation in *The Third Policeman*, which he incorrectly cites as *The Poor Mouth* (*Touch* 148), noting MacCruiskeen's contention in the novel's inner eternity that "A smell is the most complicated phenomenon in the world […] it cannot be unraveled by the human snout or understood properly although dogs have a better way with smells than we have […] But dogs are very poor riders of bicycles" (*TTP* 143). O'Nolan's eternity emphasizes sense beneath primordial sense, the phenomenologically ineffable and inexpressible. The police maintain machines that can decipher the essence of "tastes […] And feels" (*TTP* 143-144). Kearney has characterized touch via Edmund Husserl as the most primordial mode of relationship. Kearney theorizes the phenomenological implications of "double sensation" when touching a living body, as one experiences the double sense of "both receiving and imparting touch" (*Touch* 46). This exchange informs a carnal semiotics which, Kearney argues, "is at the core of our existence" (*Touch* 51). The narrator's tryst with the bicycle, to borrow Bobotis's expression, is incorrectly coded as male/female, but nevertheless can be read within Kearney's carnal semiotics. The bicycle has human male qualities because it is Pluck's bicycle and, following his own theory, an atomic exchange between his (presumably) human particles and the iron particles of his bicycle have intermingled. Despite this anthropomorphosis, the phenomenological implications of the narrator touching the bicycle are only animated by the narrator's imagination and Pluck's menacing theory:

> An unpleasant suspicion was dawning on me that the bicycle was gone. […] Then as I stood, something quite astonishing happened to me again. Something slipped

> gently into my right hand. It was the grip of a handlebar—her handlebar. It seemed to come to me out of the dark like a child stretching out its hand for guidance. I was astonished yet could not be certain afterwards whether the thing actually had entered my hand or whether the hand had been searching about mechanically while I was deep in thought and found the handlebar without the help or interference of anything unusual. […] I now repressed all thought of it, passed my hands about the rest of the bicycle and found her leaning awkwardly against the wall with the string hanging loosely from her crossbar. She was not leaning against the gate where I had tied her. (*TTP* 199)

The narrator, uncertain whether the bicycle moved of its own accord, represses all thought of its moving and being, which may only be in his mind, in a kind of voluntary dehumanization. He searches mechanically.

The play with the bicycle's sexuality is both allusive of Pluck's "Atomic Theory" and part of the narrator's delusion. As a companion the bicycle replaces Joe. This groping in the dark and (ironically) masturbatory touch may, in the context of the novel's absurd universe, be the more significant double sensation the narrator imagines is possible. A being of tissue, dehumanized and mechanical, reaches out for a metal being that seems coy, emotive, and human.

Kearney has previously placed O'Nolan in a group of Dublin demythologizers of the revivalist posture. Accordingly, Kearney admires the scientific effects in *The Third Policeman* but fails to see the novel's subtle development of Catholic and Celtic themes (*Postnationalist* 138). He has argued that O'Nolan and his contemporaries "developed an adversarial stance" against the nostalgia "for an impossible synthesis of Celtic lore,

Catholic mystery and pagan sensuality […] they were committed to modernist forms and practised a mode of comic satire which reflected disillusionment with the reactionary ideology of the 1950s" (*Postnationalist Ireland* 101). Strictly speaking, in a historical sense, Kearney is right. MacGibbon and Kee did not publish *The Third Policeman* until 1967, a year after O'Nolan's death; and, setting *At Swim-Two-Birds* aside, one associates O'Nolan's newspaper writing as Myles na gCopaleen with the "cultivated wit, iconoclasm and a deliberate estrangement from accredited wisdoms" Kearney notices (*Postnationalist* 101). But with his strange bicycles in *The Third Policeman*, O'Nolan nonetheless attempts an impossible synthesis of the scientific, the sensual, and the Celtic.

Kearney claims that the Dublin set's demythologizing stance in the 1950s influenced Kinsella's reprise of Celtic myth. He interprets Kinsella's poetry as critical and considered:

> Kinsella […] was influenced not only by [Patrick] Kavanagh's unsanctimonious attitude to Celtic myths, but also, during the 1950s and 1960s, by the modernist aesthetic of American poets such as [Ezra] Pound and William Carlos Williams. The international culture of modernism provided him with a way to break out of the 'smug peripherality of Irish experience and face up to the violent heritage of the post-war world.' (*Postnationalist* 102)

In this respect, Kearney helps us to nuance Montgomery's Celtic Strobe Light reading of Kinsella's translations in *The Tain*. His reading of Kinsella is also applicable to O'Nolan, who similarly turned to international modernism for new representational strategies that would engage a broader audience.

**O'Nolan's Celtic Project Within Wider Posthumous Modernism**

As we have seen, O'Nolan's project exploits the comic potential of the Celtic by retrieving its earlier aesthetic theories, by favouring the possibilities of a mythical setting, and by exploiting the interplay between Irish and English linguistic contexts. We can understand *The Third Policeman* as "new" for the broader modernity and literary collaboration from which it emerges. The novel shares a philosophy of comedy with similar work by William Saroyan (1908–1981) and P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975), and incorporates Joycean elements into its comic structure as well.

O'Nolan corresponded with the American-Armenian playwright and short story writer William Saroyan from July 1939 to September 1940. Saroyan encouraged O'Nolan to write plays. This encouragement is evident in their correspondence. On 4 September 1939 Saroyan writes, "How about a play? Write a play […]. You could do a hell of a play" (*CL* 59). He presses the point again on 31 December 1939: "If you find time, or if you can make time, please write a play. I'm serious. […] I know you can do a fine kind of Irish and comic and sombre play. I hope you will give it a try" (*CL* 63). O'Nolan first mentioned composing *The Third Policeman* to Saroyan in his letter on 14 February 1940 about "queer ghastly things" quoted above (*CL* 68–69). An abridged version of this letter is included as an appendix to all prominent editions of the novel.[44] Regarding the unpublished manuscript of *The Third Policeman,* Saroyan wrote on 9 June 1940, "Please make a play of it […] and send it out" (*CL* 77). O'Nolan did not "make a play of it," and

[44] See, for instance, the *Collected Novels of Flann O'Brien* and the MacGibbon & Kee and Harper Perennial Modern Classics editions of *The Third Policeman*. However, this edited "Publishers Note" removes without acknowledgement the word "bum" before "book" and the name "Saroyan" before the word "play": "I've just finished another book. […] and I've been wondering whether I could make a crazy play out of it" (*CN* 405).

he only adapted the aspects of *The Third Policeman* reused in *The Dalkey Archive* for his 1965 play, *The Saints Go Cycling In*, which he co-authored with Hugh Leonard. Saroyan and O'Nolan's correspondence was generative and significant for the ideas they shared about composing fiction.[45]

The comic potential of the afterlife explored in *The Third Policeman* sets up an implicit dialogue with the genre aesthetics that underpin Saroyan's 1939 story, "Comedy is Where You Die and They Don't Bury You Because You Can Still Walk," published in *Peace, It's Wonderful* (1939). In the story, an unnamed narrator, who is likely dead and journeying to Hell, is on a train, which he thinks is headed to San Francisco. *Hell Goes Round and Round* (O'Nolan's working title for *The Third Policeman* manuscript in 1940) and the story share the idea that a main character is dead throughout the work. Saroyan also employs a concept we see in O'Nolan's novel of a narrator having an internal dialogue with his own soul. Like the narrator's conversations with his soul "Joe," Saroyan's narrator speaks to his "heart" as a friend inside his body: "His heart talked on, and he sat like a small child, listening, and while his heart talked, he argued with it" ("Comedy is Where You Die" 125–126). In Saroyan's story, the narrator's heart delights in enigmatic parables, much as Joe does throughout *The Third Policeman*. The heart says to the narrator, "Seven times the sheep have wakened and seven times it is the same afternoon. There is still light upon the earth" ("Comedy is Where You Die" 125). Proving direct influence is difficult and perhaps not as productive, nor as vital, as showing that O'Nolan and Saroyan shared ideas about comedy, posthumous writing, and death. But

[45] For a fuller discussion of O'Nolan and Saroyan's correspondence in its critical context, see LaBine, Joseph. "'Comedy Is Where You Die and They Don't Bury You Because You Can Still Walk': William Saroyan and Brian O'Nolan's playful correspondence." *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, edited by Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs, Cork UP, 2022, pp. 77-92.

O'Nolan may not have read Saroyan's story or seen its title while writing *The Third Policeman*. If he did, then his comment to Saroyan that "the idea of a man being dead all the time is pretty new" (*CL* 69) could be understood as a concession to Saroyan's doing it first in "Comedy is Where You Die."

Questions of mortality in art underpin Saroyan's aesthetics. For example, Edward Foster places *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* among "the most forceful and frightening expressions of what it meant to be alive in America in the 1930s" (E. Foster 5). In the collection's preface, Saroyan explicitly connects writing and death:

> A writer can have one of two styles: he can write in a manner that implies that death is inevitable, or he can write in a manner that implies that death is 'not' inevitable. […] If you write as if you believe that ultimately you and everyone else alive will be dead, there is a chance that you will write in a pretty earnest style. Otherwise you are apt to be either pompous or soft. On the other hand, in order not to be a fool, you must believe that as much as death is inevitable life is inevitable. That is, the earth is inevitable, and people and other living things on it are inevitable, but no man can remain on earth very long. You do not have to be melodramatically tragic about this. As a matter of fact, you can be as amusing as you like about it. It is really one of the basically humorous things, and it has all sorts of possibilities for laughter. (*Daring Young Man* 12)

Compare the end of this quotation, and notably Saroyan's phrase "all sorts of possibilities for laughter," with O'Nolan's 14 February letter to Saroyan, in which he writes that "When you are writing about the world of the dead […] there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks" (*CL* 69). Both O'Nolan and Saroyan share the comic spirit

of a fiction where the characters are essentially dead (and, interestingly, if the characters are already dead, then O'Nolan avoids Saroyan's only two options). We can read their conversation in the context of modernist texts that similarly explore the comic potential of a survived death or afterlife. The main example apparent to both authors would have been Paddy Dignam's appearance as a "ghouleaten" corpse in "brown mortuary habit" at Bloom's trial in the Circe episode of *Ulysses* (*U* 597-598). Saroyan and O'Nolan discussed Joyce during Saroyan's visit to Dublin, and Saroyan telephoned Joyce and attempted to meet him in Paris.

Saroyan connected Joyce with O'Nolan in a 1941 essay included in *Three Plays* (1943) in which he discusses his 1939 trip to Dublin. He writes, "From Dublin I returned to London […]. From London I took an airplane to Paris. I went to a publishing house near Notre-Dame and the next thing I knew I was on the telephone talking to James Joyce […]. I didn't want to meet James Joyce or anybody else by appointment. That is like asking somebody to breathe next Tuesday at two-thirty. I had met him in Dublin – in Flann O'Brien anyhow" (*Plays* 58–59).

The significance of Joyce "in" Flann O'Brien extends beyond the perceived Irishness of both authors. Joyce admired Flann O'Brien as a contemporary. According to Joyce's biographer, Richard Ellmann, "*At Swim-Two-Birds* was one of the few works by Irish contemporaries that pleased Joyce" (3: 475 n.2). Joyce's letters reveal he leant out his copy of the novel which had been presented to him by Niall Sheridan: "A propos de rien en particulier est-ce que je vous ai jamais prêté un livre *At Swim Two Birds* par F. O'Brien?" (3: 475).

Joyce's "The Dead," the closing story in *Dubliners*, has clear resonances with *The Third Policeman*. O'Nolan alludes to Joyce's story using the image of dripping trees. In the final pages of "The Dead," Gabriel and Gretta Conroy are in a hotel room, and though Gabriel is moved with sexual passion for his wife, Gretta does not reciprocate his feelings. She is upset by the sudden memory of Michael Furey, a boy from her youth who Gretta confesses "died for me" after waiting out in the rain in her back garden under "a tree" on a winter night (*D* 220-221). Similarly, Divney and the narrator wait in the rain by "dripping […] trees" to murder old Mathers on a winter night (*TTP* 16). After his own death, the narrator romantically recalls this image of "John Divney, my life with him and how we came to wait under the dripping trees on the winter's evening" (*TTP* 41). Gabriel also imagines "the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree" (*D* 223). O'Nolan implies that Divney, like Furey, is the narrator's true love in a falsely homosexual sense; but O'Nolan inverts narrative point of view, his narrator is dead and the novel is his confession. He opens his narrative as a confession: "Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers, […] but first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney" (*TTP* 7). "The Dead" finishes with Gabriel staring out a window at the snow, thinking about death. Gabriel's perspective moves from watching the falling snow in Dublin from a height, "falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills," to imagining "the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried," envisioning "the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns" (*D* 223-224). O'Nolan echoes Gabriel's reverie when the narrator lies in bed in chapter eight, "weariness ebbing from [him] slowly, like a tide retiring over limitless sands":

> Lying quietly and dead-eyed, I reflected on how new the night was, how distinctive and unaccustomed its individuality. Robbing me of the reassurance of my eyesight, it was disintegrating my bodily personality into a flux of colour, smell, recollection, desire—all the strange uncounted essences of terrestrial and spiritual existence. I was deprived of definition, position and magnitude and my significance was considerably diminished. (*TTP* 121)

This scene is reminiscent of Gabriel's thoughts passing over Ireland covered by a blanket of snow. O'Nolan's passage echoes Gabriel's sense when moments before sleep he imagines other mystical forms as his mind approaches "that region where dwell vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world" (*D* 223). By alluding to Joyce's story in his novel, O'Nolan also ironizes Joyce's title by making his novel literally about "The Dead" and narrated by a dead person whose self-identity has faded into nothingness. O'Nolan's sustained use of a posthumous narrator informs his strategy for writing after Joyce as he simultaneously admires and alludes to Joyce's poetics.

Saroyan and O'Nolan's texts embody the modernist treatment of the posthumous narrator. Other examples of similar narrative modes are Luigi Pirandello's *The Late Mattia Pascal*, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and in an American and non-comic context, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. A key recent publication on this topic in O'Nolan studies is Ruben Borg's "Reading Flann with Paul: Modernism and the trope of conversion," where Borg has applied the thesis of Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Ghosts of Modernity* (that modernism attempts to capture a haunted modernity by assuming the

position of the posthumous writer) to O'Nolan's oeuvre.[46] Borg argues that the narrative paradigm of living death, or death-in-life, "recurs throughout O'Nolan's body of work" (Borg, *Problems With Authority* 220-221). The coordinates and contexts of this critical conversation on the role of a comic portrayal of surviving death or the afterlife in literary modernism provide a productive base of knowledge for further consideration of O'Nolan's and Saroyan's aesthetics and shared philosophy of humour. Saroyan writes that writers must "try as much as possible to be wholly alive" and "laugh like hell" (*Daring Young Man* 12-13). Ironically, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* must die before he can begin taking pleasure in life. Once dead, he breathes "keen, clear abundant and intoxicating" air and notices the sky "forever arranging and re-arranging the clouds and breathing life into the world" (*TTP* 40).

**Gaelic P. G. Wodehouse and "the blasted machine"**

One of O'Nolan's aims in *The Third Policeman* is the Celticization of English comedic writing (re-making British humour with Gaelic). In a letter to *The Irish Times* published 17 October 1940, Cóilin Ó Cuanaigh hailed Myles na gCopaleen (O'Nolan) as "a Gaelic Stephen Leacock."[47] But O'Nolan can also be thought of as a Gaelic P. G. Wodehouse in that he incorporates comic elements of Wodehouse's writing about bicycles into his

[46] Borg reads the Sir Myles columns in Cruiskeen Lawn, 'Two in One' and *The Dalkey Archive* as well as *The Third Policeman* as examples of these paradigms.

[47] The name "Cóilin Ó Cuanaigh" could possibly be a pseudonym and the letter could have been written by O'Nolan himself or another friend involved in writing "Letters to the Editor" under a false name praising "Cruiskeen Lawn" in *The Irish Times.* Pádraic Ó Conaire had published a children's book entitled *Cóilin Ó Cuanaigh* in 1923. See Cóilin Ó Cuanaigh, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' letter, *The Irish Times*, 17 October 1940, p. 3.

Celtic folkloric/mythical aesthetic discussed above.[48] There are important similarities between Wodehouse's *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934) and *The Third Policeman*;[49] Wodehouse's novel informs O'Nolan's descriptions of bicycles, blasted bodies, and hell.

Cycling evokes a comically hellish violence for Wodehouse which deeply resonates with O'Nolan's representational strategy throughout *The Third Policeman*. In *Right Ho, Jeeves* Bertie Wooster associates Hell with cycling through the rural countryside in the dark: "If you want to know what hell can really do in the way of furies, look for the chap who has been hornswoggled into taking a long and unnecessary bicycle ride in the dark without a lamp" (Wodehouse 300). Near the end of *Right Ho,* Bertie is coerced by Jeeves to cycle nine miles into the village of Kingham to retrieve the key for Brinkley Court. Before his departure, Bertie frets about crashing his bicycle into something "without a lamp," and Jeeves smiles inexplicably before relating the following anecdote:

> I beg your pardon, sir. I was thinking of a tale my Uncle Cyril used to tell me as a child. An absurd little story, sir, though I confess that I have always found it droll. According to my Uncle Cyril, two men named Nicholls and Jackson set out to ride to Brighton on a tandem bicycle, and were so unfortunate as to come into collision with a brewer's van. And when the rescue party arrived on the scene of the accident, it was discovered that they had been hurled together with such force that it was impossible to sort them out at all adequately. The keenest eye could not

[48] O'Nolan's Irish language writing synthesizes a variety of allusions to English and French humourists. He shares intertextuality with Alphonse Allais for instance; and he has affinity with Edward Lear, and Stephen Leacock (LaBine "The works I taught to him" 44-48).

[49] For example, O'Nolan cribs the surname from Wodehouse's character "Madeline Bassett" and uses it in his footnotes for one of de Selby's commentators. *The Code of the Woosters* (1938), Wodehouse's sequel, features Sir Watkyn Bassett and a fat policeman on a bicycle named Oates. "Watkins" is the name of the man who first printed de Selby's *Layman's Atlas* (*TTP* 96).

> discern which portion of the fragments was Nicholls and which Jackson. So they collected as much as they could, and called it Nixon. I remember laughing very much at that story when I was a child, sir. (Wodehouse 293)

The fragmentation of bodies in this passage depicts a violation resulting in the loss of individual identity. This loss anticipates Pluck's dehumanizing "Atomic Theory" in which humans exchange their individuality with bicycles and horses, who then take on human characteristics; the collision also anticipates the "ineffable" blast that kills the narrator (*TTP* 24). In this regard, Wodehouse and O'Nolan also share an interest in atomic experiments. Wodehouse mentions a similar explosive context to the one O'Nolan develops:

> I was reading in the paper the other day about those birds who are trying to split the atom, the nub being that they haven't the foggiest as to what will happen if they do. It may be all right. On the other hand, it may not be all right. And pretty silly a chap would feel, no doubt, if, having split the atom, he suddenly found the house going up in smoke and himself torn limb from limb. (Wodehouse 215)

Wodehouse does not use the expression "blown to smithereens," but he certainly evokes it.[50] Given O'Nolan and Wodehouse's shared belief in the comic potential of bicycles and atoms, their inhuman intertexualities surround violations of the body in a postwar context.[51] Bertie also demonstrates a thorough understanding of bicycles, "nuts firm, the brakes in order, the sprockets running true with the differential gear? […] Right ho,

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[50] This concept of fragmentation into little pieces (in Irish "smiodar") recalls the Irish word for smithereens, smidiríní, which means "little shattered bits."

[51] The First World War is never far from these kinds of portrayals. For example, in "Technologies of Death: Fragmented Bodies and World War I," Andrew Smith's August 2013 presentation to the International Gothic Association at the University of Surrey, Smith argued Wodehouse's inspiration for Jeeves's emotionless bicycle anecdote in *Right Ho* was the real death of British cricketer, Percy Jeeves, at the Battle of the Somme.

Jeeves" (Wodehouse 294). He describes himself ironically like a bicycle, noting that when he had last ridden one at Oxford, he "had invariably been well oiled" (Wodehouse 294).

Unlike Jeeves, Bertie does not think the Nixon story is funny. Instead, he regards it as, "one of the most poignant tragedies":

> As I started now to pedal out into the great world, I was icily sober, and the old skill, in consequence, had deserted me entirely. I found myself wobbling badly, and all the stories I had ever heard of nasty bicycle accidents came back to me with a rush, headed by Jeeves's Uncle Cyril's cheery little anecdote about Nicholls and Jackson. Pounding wearily through the darkness, I found myself at a loss to fathom the mentality of men like Jeeves's Uncle Cyril. What on earth he could see funny in a disaster which had apparently involved the complete extinction of a human creature—or, at any rate, of half a human creature and half another human creature—was more than I could understand. (Wodehouse 294)

Bertie refuses to acknowledge the inhuman Nixon synthesis, remembering the dead by their individual names. Wodehouse uses this compassionate/comic tension to emphasize a crash that draws on elements of the nonhuman for its humour. Bertie nearly collides with a pig in the fairway: "it looked like being real Nicholls-and-Jackson stuff, […] a quick zig on my part, coinciding with an adroit zag on the part of the pig, enabled me to win through, and I continued my ride safe" (295). The indiscernible, dehumanized pieces of Nicholls and Jackson, and the threatened intermingling of bits of the pig with Bertie, can be viewed similarly to O'Nolan's confused character identities after atomic exchange. Such similarities show Wodehouse and O'Nolan's shared interest in exploiting

the comic (and possibly generic) potential of intermingling bits of things at an atomic level. This concern finds its fullest expression in O'Nolan's Celtic Otherworld where such absurdities become possible in a literal sense.

As we examined above, O'Nolan's aesthetic practice of hybridizing English comedy and using a similar set of jokes in an Irish context forms part of his complex representational strategy. His postnational approach – to use Kearney's term to describe O'Nolan's self-reflexive, post-revivalist stance – traces back to his idea of "[p]laying up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act" (*Best of Myles* 234). The Celtic is a performative aesthetic for O'Nolan, tied to national identity through the differences it emphasizes; but O'Nolan's writing is also clearly in dialogue with international modernism. American modernist forms of writing and English comedy exert influence in his work. As Tobias W. Harris has shown, O'Nolan's sustained engagement with the European Avant-Garde and Irish Cultural Production reveals his aims to bring a Gaelicized avant-garde humour to a wider audience.[52]

In this respect, O'Nolan's project anticipates the theory of Irish Indigenization and the call to globalize the Irish language (and in O'Nolan's case, globalize its aesthetics) that Michael Cronin has put forward in *An Ghaeilge agus an Éiceolaíocht / Irish and Ecology* (2019). Cronin calls for a tonal shift in "narratives around Irish [which] have understandably focused on political history and power dynamics of the Anglo-Irish relationship" (14). Cronin notes that straight political interpretation and transnational

[52] In his PhD dissertation, "Dublin's Dadaist: Brian O'Nolan, the European Avant-Garde and Irish Cultural Production," Harris considers O'Nolan's experimentation in relationship to European avant-garde forms. For example, he discusses O'Nolan and montage in chapter two, building on my earlier use of Thomas King's term "interfusional" to describe O'Nolan's blending of oral and written syntax across Irish and English.

alliance belies a misapprehension about indigenous cultures and argues that it is crucial to use the Irish language to understand national thinking about ecology within a global context rather than a strictly nationalist one to ensure a "more fruitful concept of what is necessary and what is possible in terms of relating indigenous language rights to environmental progress" (14-15). O'Nolan's recourse to the Celtic follows a similar trend. His interest in the conflation of modernist texts that similarly explore the comic potential of a survived death or afterlife and his interest in shared philosophies of humour and Trans-Atlantic discourse are not meant to merely set up and nuance an Irish-English dichotomy, even if the instability of the Irish language revival itself during the early decades of the twentieth century is the key satirical territory of O'Nolan's Irish writings. His fictional project seeks to ensure the success of a hybridized Irish literary form within a wider international context through a practice that is dialogic and focused on an aesthetic of inclusivity rather than the ghettoizing practice of cordoning off Irish language and art, which successive Irish governments bore out politically during his lifetime.

As we have seen, O'Nolan's aesthetic theory informs his retrieval of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh "Celtic" authenticity across his fictional project. This does not mean O'Nolan is writing only for himself and a coterie, but rather that he is responding to the concerns of a wider international literary modernism. In *The Third Policeman*, by setting the novel in hell, O'Nolan escapes the constraints of placing the text strictly within an Irish nationalist framework; and similarly, the mythical Celtic content also prevents readers from interpreting its allegory about punishment for murder on purely religious grounds. In his earlier work in English, these constraints are counterbalanced by his wide reading of other modernist texts, and his aim of being conversant with those

texts in an international context; latterly those parochial constraints are avoided by his collaborative practice. *At Swim-Two-Birds* (for its recasting of the *Buile Shuibhne* story) has frequently been read within O'Nolan's scholarly interests in Celtic studies as outlined above, yet critics have generally neglected to read the novel as a product of collaboration. Recent scholarly work – by Maebh Long, Paul Fagan, Tobias W. Harris, and Carol Taaffe – substantiates a critical turn in O'Nolan studies towards reading the novel within the context of his social milieu and as a product of shared theories of modern writing. The examination of *At Swim* that follows shows that O'Nolan's representational strategy unites his Celtic aesthetic with his shared concerns about international modern literature in an Irish context and beyond it.

### *At Swim*-Two Nialls: Sheridan and Montgomery Live in Fiction

Like Niall Montgomery, Niall Sheridan (1912–1998) was one of O'Nolan's closest friends and enjoyed a special paratextual relationship with *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). Both Montgomery and Sheridan promoted O'Nolan's first novel. Letters included in the *Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* (2018), which Maebh Long edited, detail their efforts.[53] This section of the present chapter examines the collaborative aspect of O'Nolan's aesthetic by focusing on how Montgomery and Sheridan use, or are used by, *At Swim-Two-Birds* to co-create with O'Nolan. I am primarily concerned with the interpretation of the novel in the context of the literary history of O'Nolan's collaboration with Sheridan and Montgomery. By pursuing a more historically informed understanding

[53] In some instances, Maebh Long has reproduced only extracts of Sheridan and Montgomery's correspondence in *The Collected Letters*. I have opted instead to quote directly from the manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland archives. See Manuscript folder MS 50.1181 Lot "Correspondence of Niall Sheridan, 1935-1939, NLI.

of O'Nolan in relation to Sheridan and Montgomery as collaborators, I share Joseph Brooker's conviction "that O'Nolan can be illuminated by […] juxtaposition with his peers" ("Ploughmen without Land" 93). Maebh Long has previously discussed Montgomery and Sheridan's collaboration with O'Nolan in "Plagiarism and the Politics of Friendship," where she notes Sheridan's editorial involvement in the first novel and instances of (possible) co-writing with O'Nolan ("Politics of Friendship" 22-28); as we saw above, Long also argued that Montgomery's involvement was "vital in O'Nolan's oeuvre" ("Politics of Friendship" 20), but she has neglected his paratextual involvement in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and his unique position as an early promoter of the novel in his letters.

O'Nolan poses a complex question about whether the authorial self has any authority within the palimpsest. Declan Kiberd has argued that in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* O'Nolan was "less anxious to say something new than to find a self that is capable of saying anything at all" (*Irish Classics* 510–11). However, Kiberd misconstrues one of the novel's central characterizations of the self in relation to modernity, namely what I term the "God-author problem" located in the ontology between narrative and omniscience, which raises aesthetic questions about whether unlimited omniscience is possible and not an outmoded representational strategy. Roy Hunt has argued that the organization of the novel "interrelated only in the prescience of the author" is something "realized only in God" (62). He claims that O'Nolan, "for all his apparent self-effacement, saw something God-like in the author's omniscient role" and discusses these "God-like qualities" (R. Hunt 62-65). Carlos Villar Flor has argued that in creating characters for his novel-within-a-novel within the novel, *At Swim*'s fictional author, Dermot Trellis, cannot

escape religious interpretation. He resembles God in his creation and naming of Adam; but his didactic purpose (Trellis's novel is meant to be morally instructive) is invalidated by the increasing independence gained by the characters he creates or cordons off to use in his story (Flor 68-69). This liberation of characters animates *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Trellis as an author is not God, and his act of creation liberates these characters, which presents the reader of the outer novel with difficult moral questions about the meaning of authorship.

Between the 1970s and early 1980s, Anthony Cronin, O'Nolan's most frequently cited biographer, revised his impression of O'Nolan's fiction along formal aesthetic lines. From the time he published "Flann O'Brien, The Flawed Achievement," in *Heritage Now: Irish Literature in the English Language* (1982), to the time he began preparing material for the biography, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (1989), Cronin failed to see the moral-aesthetic questions connecting *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and consequently misconstrued O'Nolan's overall project as aesthetically flawed, or simply as a failure. In his *Heritage Now* essay Cronin calls the main protagonist of *At Swim-Two Birds* "a Catholic student would be writer with an interest in the fundamentals of literary aesthetics" (*Heritage* 205). He connects the novel project to modern European literature, claiming, "a humanisation and a reduction of myth is attempted and brilliantly achieved" in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (*Heritage* 207). This reading accords with the interpretation put forward by Anthony Burgess in *99 Novels* (1984):

> The book is a book about writing a book about writing a book. This is very modern (compare the Argentine Borges) in that it does not pretend that literature

> is reality. The student-narrator is interested not merely in literature but in Irish mythology, which enables him to bring Finn MacCool (Joyce's Finnegan) and indulge in comic-heroic language […] Flann O'Brien discovered a way of counterpointing myth, fiction and actuality through the device of a sort of writer's commonplace-book. There is no sense of recession, of one order of reality—myth or novel or narration—lying behind another: all are on the same level of importance, and this is what gives the contrapuntal effect. The scope of fiction is both extended and limited—limited as to action (not much happens, though plenty is heard about) but extended as to technique. (Burgess 27)

Cronin has theorized that the narrator is a Joycean "artificer" and possibly "godlike," yet he calls *At Swim-Two-Birds* a "pointless" anti-novel wherein the author is "at the mercy of his own creations" (*Heritage* 208-210). Cronin's error both in this early essay and the biography is his failure to see how this parodic theme (of being at the mercy of one's own creations) is applicable to O'Nolan's entire oeuvre and animates moral and aesthetic questions in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. One recalls that the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, who sought to know everything about de Selby during his life, enters a Hell filled with the unknowable and is tormented by the brain-staggering imponderables of the policemen. That knowledge and omniscience should be limited or restrained is a theme that unites both texts. As we shall see, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a parody but certainly not "pointless" in the sense Cronin implies; that is, devoid of moral and aesthetic meaning.

Examining the autobiographical level of the novel through the influence exerted on it by O'Nolan's circle adds to our understanding of the multi-faceted dimensions of

the authorial "self," which is of course a recurrent aspect of O'Nolan's fiction. Charles Taylor has emphasized the hermeneutic importance of uniting aesthetic and social coordinates. He argues that art located within a fragmented modernity is defined by the reader's or interpreter's reaction to it (*Modern Social Imaginaries* 105). A parody, according to Linda Hutcheon, has two primary but oppositional drives operating in tandem: a "conservative" mechanism (through which the generic category is formulated) and a "revolutionary" critical component that can reinscribe the former and make radical change possible (Hutcheon 97). Using the letters and newspaper articles from the *Meath Chronicle*, *Irish Press*, and *Irish Independent*, this section of the present chapter also shows the various ways O'Nolan documents events in his life in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and thus places some of the writing more firmly in the biographical mode with the aim of ascertaining precisely how O'Nolan's aesthetic and social categories relate. O'Nolan's circle exerted influence on the composition of his novel, while conversely, or complementarily, *At Swim-Two-Birds* had a profound impact on the author's social milieu.

To these purposes, three sub-sections follow below. The first deals with Niall Sheridan as the character "Brinsley." As Brinsley, Sheridan is part of the composition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*; O'Nolan copied Sheridan's translation of "Catullus 7" into the text of the novel. Sheridan also helped shape O'Nolan's writing and editing. In a radio documentary for RTÉ produced after O'Nolan's death, Sheridan claimed to have cut out 20-30% of the eight hundred pages of original typescript.[54] Sheridan discusses the

[54] Clips of this documentary were retrieved from the RTÉ archive and included in the 2011 *Bowman* review of Flann O'Brien. Sheridan discusses the creation of the novel and the editing process at length in his chapter on O'Nolan ("Brian, Flann, Myles" 32-53).

creation of the novel at length in his chapter on O'Nolan in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, a collection edited by O'Nolan's publisher, Timothy O'Keeffe, and published several years after O'Nolan's death. The second section below deals with Sheridan's letters to Montgomery prior to the publication of *At Swim*. It analyzes how Sheridan and Montgomery's discussions of modern writing, and specifically *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880; translated into English in 1912), inform the aesthetics of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and O'Nolan's wider project. The third section focuses on Niall Montgomery as the character "Kerrigan" as well as the four extracts he recorded for the Harvard Poetry Room in 1971. Montgomery was an enthusiastic supporter of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the early days of its publication and assumed the character "Michael Byrne" in real life, while creating a "Byrne invoice" as a kind of hoax. Archival materials in the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University suggest that Montgomery was behind the hoaxing invoice sent to O'Nolan from "Michael Byrne INC";[55] additional letters by Montgomery written after the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in March 1939 resemble this invoice.[56]

Additionally, in showing *At Swim*'s indebtedness to Dostoevsky, this chapter enters new critical territory. As we shall see, the student-narrator alludes to *The Brothers*

[55] Maebh Long and David Cohen have both discussed this fictitious "invoice" from Michael Byrne which is held with O'Nolan's Papers at the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale IL. I am the first to attribute it to Niall Montgomery and grateful to Niall Montgomery's estate, and to James Montgomery, for granting me access to Montgomery's Underwood Portable typewriter with the 12-inch carriage (dating to the 1930s). The typewriter is no longer in working condition, so it is difficult to establish that Montgomery typed the letter on his machine because it is not possible to create a test sheet for comparison; but the Byrne invoice was likely typed on an Underwood typewriter. The bolded headers and red insignia as footer would have been made using a stamp. These headings resemble Montgomery's other letters to O'Nolan, especially the one in which he created fictitious companies with imaginary letterhead. The paper used for the Byrne invoice is almost translucent and not as thick as modern typing paper; mechanized type bars from later electric typewriters would have torn through it. The Byrne invoice is certainly a hoax but one that has not previously been connected to O'Nolan's closest friends. The content of the invoice is discussed in greater detail below.

[56] Thank you to the Niall Montgomery estate for granting permission to quote and publish images of Montgomery's letters included below.

*Karamazov* when he hails Trellis's creation of John Furriskey as the "birth of a son," an act of "aestho-autogamy" that "has long been a commonplace […] For fully five centuries in all parts of the world epileptic slavies have been pleading it in extenuation of uncalled-for fecundity. It is a very familiar phenomenon in literature" (*AS* 40). *The Brothers Karamazov* focuses on three (or four) sons and their profligate father (who is murdered by his epileptic servant, hence O'Nolan's allusion to epileptic slavies). Dostoevsky explores doubt and faith, positing that "if there's no immortality of the soul, then there's no virtue, and everything is lawful" (*TBK* 96). This theory illuminates the inevitable ways in which Trellis's characters (some of whom are his sons) revolt against his control of the narrative: if there is no God-author, then aesthetic possibilities are endless, and everything is permissible. As he did with the limitless potential of omnium and eternity in *The Third Policeman*, O'Nolan counterpoints moral and aesthetic freedom in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Sheridan's discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* with Montgomery, given their collaboration with O'Nolan on *At Swim-Two-Birds* as part of O'Nolan's wider Celtic project, justify making such aesthetic theories part of the novel's palimpsest.

**(1)**

In a radio interview given after O'Nolan's death, Niall Sheridan discussed becoming a character in *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

> I discovered to my astonishment that I was one of the main characters under the name of 'Brinsley.'[...] It was the most peculiar feeling, living . . . existing . . .

> within another mode as it were, within a work that is still actually being created and in fact changed by the very fact of coming in and talking to me.[57]

These comments are even more striking when one considers that *At Swim-Two-Birds* was edited by one of its own characters. "Brinsley" – the name given to Sheridan's character – evokes the surname Sheridan through allusion to the Dublin playwright, Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), author of *The Rivals*. Sheridan knew the association; in an undated letter to Niall Montgomery, Sheridan refers to "my ancestor, the dramatist."[58] Long has noted that the name Brinsley refers to Sheridan the playwright (*Acting Out* 353, n.8), but the allusion also seems to have been readily apparent to O'Nolan's circle. In a 17 February 1939 letter about the forthcoming publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Robert Herbert, a librarian in Limerick, asked, "How is that misbegotten descendent of Richard Brinsley behaving these days – still living on other people, his betting transactions and extract [sic] of sheep's liver, I suppose."[59] Sheridan *was* Brinsley inside and outside of the novel.

O'Nolan describes Brinsley as "an intellectual Meath-man" who, like Niall Sheridan, attended college on a county council scholarship "for the purpose of enabling necessitous boys of promising intellect to enjoy the benefits of university learning" (*AS* 23, 45). Early in the novel, Brinsley, the narrator, and the poet Donaghy (who is almost

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[57] These comments are from a transcript generated from archival recordings of Niall Sheridan for an episode entitled "Flann O'Brien" on *Bowman*, an RTÉ radio programme presented on 9 Oct. 2011 for the Brian O'Nolan centenary. Sheridan also makes very similar claims in his memorial essay about O'Nolan ("Brian, Flann and Myles" 42).

[58] Maebh Long has published an extract of this undated letter mentioning Donagh MacDonagh's marriage (Sheridan *CL* 4). The year can be readily assumed: MacDonagh married his first wife Maura Smyth in 1934. Maura MacDonagh drowned in the bath at home during an epileptic seizure on 18 February 1939 at the age of 23. For the full text of the letter, see Manuscript folder MS 50.1181 Lot "Correspondence of Niall Sheridan, 1935-1939, National Library of Ireland.

[59] See Robert Herbert's 17 February 1939 letter in the fonds of correspondence to and about O'Nolan in the Flann O'Brien collection, Morris Library at Southern Illinois University.

certainly Donagh MacDonagh) go out drinking on Brinsley's scholarship money; they ride the tram and go to the movies; Meath County Council are the "ultimate emptors" (*AS* 47). In real life, Sheridan almost lost his scholarship. On Monday, 29 August 1932, the Meath County Council met in Navan and "on the report of the university authorities […] refused the application of Niall Sheridan for renewal of [his] University Scholarship" ("About a Scholarship" 11).[60] Liam Sheridan, Niall Sheridan's father, attended the council meeting. He informed the Chairman, his son had "sat for a House examination which was not necessary":

> He did subjects which were not in his course at all, just to test himself. On the report of that he went down. He was in very bad health and examined by a doctor […] Very few boys do this examination at all. He passed with first honours in last year's examination. ("About a Scholarship" 11)

O'Nolan documents Sheridan's illness in *At Swim-Two-Birds* when he writes, "As a matter of fact, said Brinsley in a crafty way, I have only just recovered from a cold myself" (*AS* 27). Catching a cold is a favourite topic of the narrator's uncle (*AS* 27–29). The Meath Council eventually allowed the finance committee to reconsider Sheridan's eligibility due to his poor health. He had been a brilliant scholar at an early age. The *Meath Chronicle* reported on 14 June 1930, that Sheridan "won the Gold Medal at the Debating Society attached to St. Mary's College, Dundalk" ("A Talented Meath Boy" 1).[61] By October 1933, he had passed his B.A. Honours examinations.[62]

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[60] The author left the article about Sheridan's scholarship unsigned. See "About a Scholarship." *Drogheda Independent*, 29 Aug. 1932, p. 11.
[61] The presentation of the medal, it is interesting to note, was made by "Mr. A. N. Sheridan, Solicitor, Dundalk, a relative." See "A Talented Meath Boy." *Meath Chronicle*, 14 June 1930, p. 1.
[62] Niall Sheridan of Drumlerry, Oldcastle, also passed with Honours the Intermediate Certificate Examination according to the list given in "Snap Shots." *Meath Chronicle*, 15 Sept. 1928, p. 5.

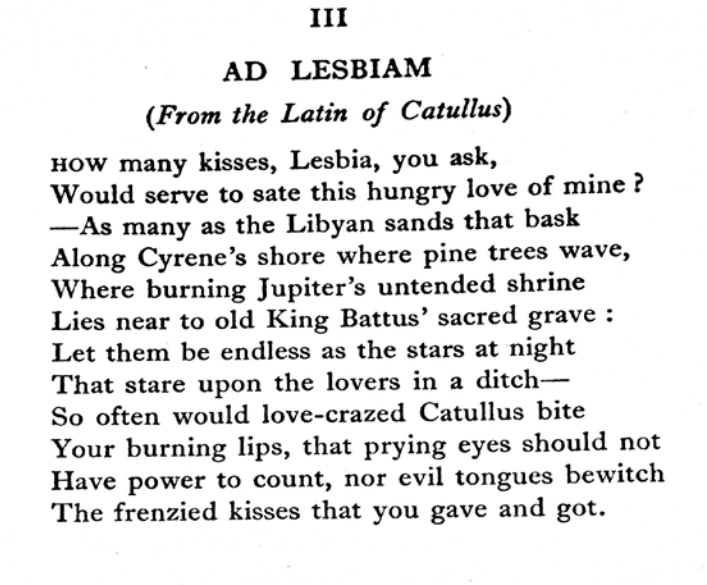
Brinsley becomes a more significant figure for the reader in *At Swim-Two-Birds* when events from Sheridan's life can be seen to inform his character. Real-life Sheridan and fictional Brinsley are not one and the same but reading Brinsley independent of Sheridan neglects Sheridan's role as O'Nolan's collaborator. This tendency to avoid studying Sheridan persists. For example, in 2016 Keith Hopper published a letter to the editor of the *Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* to clarify whether Brinsley's recitation of "Ad Lesbiam" (*AS* 38-39), a translation of "Catullus 7," was "O'Nolan's own translation, or," Hopper asked, "if it is cogged, who was the translator?" (Hopper, "Query" 64). Sheridan claimed the translation was his on a televised retrospective on Flann O'Brien for RTÉ in 1970 and again writing in 1973:

> As the book progressed, Brian gleefully borrowed any material that came to hand. I had done some translations of Catullus and he asked me for a copy of one of these. Later, it came out […] in *At Swim*. ("Brian, Flann and Myles" 45)

The poem first appeared in *Twenty Poems*, a small, co-authored collection that Sheridan published privately with Donagh MacDonagh in 1934.[63] O'Nolan's fictionalized ten-part "autobiographical reminiscence" in the novel is likely set before the 1934 publication of Sheridan and MacDonagh's poems. There is critical distance of several years between the university years the novel depicts and Sheridan's real life. Sheridan graduated after 1933, but Brinsley tells the narrator's uncle, "it will be some time before I am qualified and get my parchment" *(AS* 29). The narrator records how "One afternoon I saw the form of Brinsley bent in converse with a small fair-haired man who was fast acquiring a

[63] MacDonagh's father Thomas MacDonagh also translated Catullus's poems: "Let us live and let us love, Lesbia" (Catullus: 5), "what is gone is gone" (Catullus 8), and "If there be joy" (Catullus 76). Donagh MacDonagh may have inspired Sheridan to choose Catullus. Sheridan and MacDonagh's *Twenty Poems* has been digitized at http://flatsinglespress.blogspot.ca/2015/01/247-is-reproduced-and-digitized-here.html

reputation […] on account of the beauty of his poems […] his name was Donaghy" (*AS* 45). Brinsley recites "Lesbia" to the narrator and Kelly in Grogan's. Both Sheridan's original text and the quotation from the novel are included here:



III

AD LESBIAM

(*From the Latin of Catullus*)

HOW many kisses, Lesbia, you ask,
Would serve to sate this hungry love of mine?
—As many as the Libyan sands that bask
Along Cyrene's shore where pine trees wave,
Where burning Jupiter's untended shrine
Lies near to old King Battus' sacred grave:
Let them be endless as the stars at night
That stare upon the lovers in a ditch—
So often would love-crazed Catullus bite
Your burning lips, that prying eyes should not
Have power to count, nor evil tongues bewitch
The frenzied kisses that you gave and got.

Fig. 2 "Ad Lesbiam" (Niall Sheridan, *Twenty Poems*, 1934).

Ah, Lesbia, said Brinsley. The finest thing I ever wrote. How many kisses, Lesbia, you ask, would serve to sate this hungry love of mine? –As many as the Libyan sands that bask along Cyrene's shore where pine-trees wave, where burning Jupiter's untended shrine lies near to old King Battus' sacred grave:

Three stouts, called Kelly.

Let them be endless as the stars at night, that stare upon the lovers in a ditch—so often would love-crazed Catullus bite your burning lips, that prying eyes should not have power to count, nor evil tongues bewitch, the frenzied kisses that you gave and got.

Before we die of thirst, called Kelly, will you bring us three more stouts. God, he said to me, it's in the desert you'd think we were.

> That's good stuff, you know, I said to Brinsley.
>
> A picture came before my mind of the lovers at their hedge-pleasure in the pale starlight, no sound from them, his fierce mouth burying into hers.
>
> Bloody good stuff, I said.
>
> Kelly, invisible to my left, made a slapping noise.
>
> The best I ever drank, he said [...] I exchanged an eye message with Brinsley. (*AS* 38-39)

O'Nolan re-writes the poem by absorbing Sheridan's line breaks and removing capitalization, which allow the verse to scan better in prose. Yet he retains Sheridan's punctuation and dashes. In the atmosphere of the pub, Kelly's comments give the verse lines necessary pause.

O'Nolan's attribution of the poem to Sheridan's character, which is followed by Brinsley's recitation, masks the interpolation of the actual published text of "Ad Lesbiam" in the novel. O'Nolan juxtaposes Kelly's call for "Three stouts" with Brinsley's "Let them be endless as the stars at night" (*AS* 38). David Cohen, Carol Taaffe, and Maebh Long have all noted the inclusion of Sheridan's translation in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.[64] David Cohen argues that "the exchange of an 'eye-message' with Brinsley, at Kelly's expense, betrays the narrator's allegiance to the educated class" (Cohen 215). However, it seems more plausible that the wink represents O'Nolan's appreciation for the real-life translation of "Ad Lesbiam" that Sheridan made available to him (interestingly, "Let them be endless as the stars at night" also evokes O'Nolan's first

[64] Carol Taffee observes that the translation of Catullus, which Niall Sheridan published in 1934, makes "a brief appearance" in the novel, and coincides with O'Nolan's composition of *At Swim* beginning "shortly after graduating from UCD in 1935" (Taaffe, "Do You Ever Open a Book at All?" 247-260). Sheridan, however, has claimed that O'Nolan began the novel as early as 1934.

published poem “Ad Astra”). No critic has yet suggested that by putting the image of two lovers in a secret tryst into the narrator’s mind, Brinsley’s “Lesbia” directly influences the narrative by inspiring the love plot between Mr and Mrs Furriskey in the meta-novel the narrator is writing about Dermot Trellis. Brinsley’s lovers help to originate their counterparts in the lower narrative action. The inclusion of Sheridan’s translation in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, while ironic, uniquely influences romantic developments that occur later in the novel by the simple fact of preceding them.

The Catullus translation also finds expression in Brinsley and the narrator’s discussions “on the subject of Literature” and aesthetics (*AS* 24, 45, 51, 99), and informs the classical motif in the novel. Catullus, who has been placed among the Latin Neoterics (poetae novi) writing in the 1st century BC, rejected traditional epic forms and genre conventions; his extant work includes shorter poems and fragments. A continuation of this Classical Greek/Latin/Roman motif occurs when Furriskey, Shanahan, and Lamont rebel and brutalize Trellis while writing their own manuscript, and during this episode the pooka calls Trellis “Caesar” (*AS* 181). The allusion is fitting – Trellis’s own characters betray him, figuratively stabbing him in the back. It is difficult to establish what O’Nolan and Sheridan knew about the Neoterics, if anything. Virgil and even Horace were more popular Latin poets by modern standards. But the choice of Catullus, perhaps for his obscurity alone, can itself be read as a significant rejection of epic, and that rejection characterizes O’Nolan and Sheridan’s shared literary outlook.

Such poetic interjections and disruptions to the narrative occur frequently in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. These interpolations, as a form, anticipate later interruptions by the plain people of Ireland in O’Nolan’s “Cruiskeen Lawn” columns for the *Irish Times*. But

Sheridan's interruptions as Brinsley are more significant as examples of his collaboration on the novel project. Take, for instance, "*Tour de force by Brinsley, vocally interjected, being a comparable description in the Finn canon*," where Brinsley contributes a paragraph-long description about the hero from Irish mythology, Fionn mac Cumhaill (*AS* 26). Brinsley's interjections are one example of how O'Nolan scaffolds the Finn and Sweeny sections of the narrative drawing from *Buile Suibhne* and the *Fiannaíocht* onto the biographical mode. Rather than stacking different narrative levels, O'Nolan mingles these descriptions without recession, achieving an interwoven effect, a weaving that is essential to Celtic aesthetics. Elsewhere O'Nolan describes Brinsley's comments for the reader: "*Interjection on the part of Brinsley*: He commented at some length on the similarity between the ridge which circumscribed the image of the red swan in the fanlight" (*AS* 32). These inclusions document the narrator and Brinsley's co-creation, and thus reflect the historical instance of O'Nolan and Sheridan's collaboration.

Sheridan believed art (fiction) and life (autobiography) should mingle in this way: in a review of Barbara Mullen's *Life is My Adventure* (1937), he inveighed, "Miss Mullen does not seem to have realised that it is not sufficient merely to write down what happened. All good autobiography employs the method of fiction" (Sheridan "review" 84-85). In a reversal of Sheridan's dictum, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is good fiction that employs the method of autobiography.

O'Nolan and Sheridan's collaboration extends well beyond the text of the novel. Further study of Sheridan's role as editor of the UCD student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne*; genetic analysis of any contributions made to *Blather*, the magazine O'Nolan edited with his brother Ciarán Ó Nualláin and Sheridan from 1934-1935; examination of

Sheridan's numerous book reviews,[65] radio appearances and RTÉ documentaries; and an archival retrieval of his literary papers; study of all these would make a worthwhile (and long overdue) contribution to O'Nolan scholarship. Tobias Harris's recent essay "'sprakin sea Djoytsch?' Brian Ó Nualláin's *Bhark i bPrágrais*" has argued persuasively that the short-lived Dublin magazine *Ireland To-day* was "an important publication for Ó Nualláin's circle" (*Gallows Humour* 218). O'Nolan, Sheridan, Montgomery and many of their friends published in the venue.[66] Harris claims, building on earlier work by Breandán Ó Conaire, that O'Nolan published accounts of drinking sessions with his friends – masked as Medieval Irish pastiche – in *The National Student* as early as 1933 and that these pieces anticipate the structure and format of his fictional project (*Gallows Humour* 219). For example, Harris argues that the characters Barnabas, Fanny and Pangur Bán in the short story "Pisa Bec oc Parnabus" are precursors to Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (*Gallows Humour* 231).

Sheridan's theories about novelistic and short story conventions in his *Ireland To-day* book reviews also anticipate the various ways O'Nolan engages modernist aesthetics in his fictional project. In a review essay entitled "Realism and Beyond," for instance, Sheridan commends psychological intensity in Francis Stuart's writing for being "worthy of Dostoievski" ("Realism and Beyond" 85-86). He places Kafka at the centre of his argument about the future of the novel, claiming that "the novel-form has been subjected to stresses and strains which have led to distortion of the *genre* […] filmic technique […]

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[65] See multiple book reviews by Niall Sheridan in *Ireland To-day*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1937, pp. 84-85.
[66] Throughout 1937 and 1938, Niall Montgomery and Denis Devlin published Irish translations and new poems in *Ireland To-day*. Devlin also contributed reviews, as did Cecil French Salkeld and Sheridan. O'Nolan made only one known contribution, republishing "Pisa Bec" in 1938. See "PISA BEC OC PARNABUS: Extractum O Bhark i bPragrais le Briain O Nuallain," *Ireland To-day*, vol. 3, no. 2, Feb. 1938, pp. 138, 165.

propagandist tendency, an outcome of the attempt to reflect modern social conditions in fiction. In these circumstances, Kafka seems to me to be doing a great service to the novel" ("Realism and Beyond" 86). Sheridan also claims that Kafka corrects distortions caused by Joyce's *Ulysses* ("Realism and Beyond" 86). In an earlier review of Kafka and Saroyan, Sheridan favours Kafka as the preeminent modern novelist:

> *The Castle* is one of the finest achievements in modern fiction; by it alone Kafka may be said to have added […] another dimension to the novel. His unique blending of actuality and phantasy, his subtle and pervasive irony, and his perception of spiritual and emotional vistas neglected by the realists, make him one of the most significant writers in modern fiction. (Sheridan "Reviews" 89-90)

Sheridan's observation about the spiritual and emotional vistas neglected by the realists is an interesting gloss on *At Swim-Two-Birds* with respect to its dialogue with *The Brothers Karamazov* touched on above and discussed in more detail below. Blending actuality and phantasy (at least in Sheridan's estimation) yields an O'Nolanesque Celtic realism. Remarking on modernist engagement during the Celtic revival in Ireland, both Terry Eagleton and Gregory Castle have argued that the liminality and "in-betweenness" of Irish writers during this period was "a version of the hybrid spirit of the European modernist, caught between diverse cultural code[s]" and that recourse to "the celebrated formalism and aestheticism of the modernists" was an effective and defiant "rationalization of their own rootless condition" (*Modernism and the Celtic revival* 3). Philip O'Leary and Louis de Paor have argued, in 1994 and 2014 respectively, that in this respect nineteenth-century Russian writers exert influence over twentieth-century Irish literary production. However, how such influence constituted a shared aesthetic

relationship in which twentieth-century Irish writers read Russian literature programmatically remains to be determined. As de Paor has argued, "nineteenth-century Russian literature with its preoccupation with darker aspects of human psychology and behaviour" served "as a model for prose writers in Irish" ("Irish Language Modernisms" 164).[67] With this in mind, *The Brothers Karamazov* offers a worthy case study of the influence of international modernism in Irish modern literature, as it informs the ways in which O'Nolan, Sheridan, and Montgomery perceived the aesthetics of literary modernism and the Russian influence of its Irish practitioners.

**(2)**

The important reception Sheridan accorded modern literature in his review essays has frequent parallels in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. During his first conversation with Brinsley, the narrator records how "the dim room rang with the iron of fine words and the names of great Russian masters were articulated with fastidious intonation" (*AS* 24). In an unpublished letter postmarked 1935, Sheridan wrote to Niall Montgomery about re-reading *The Brothers Karamazov*:

> I am re-reading "The Brothers Karamazov." For God's sake read it. It's the shield. Very few modern authors must have read it with understanding. They couldn't

[67] Louis de Paor has suggested that some Irish language writers reject the English canon. He claims Seán Ó Ríordáin embodies a rejection of "Shelley, Keats, and Shakespeare" in his later poetry as a way of embracing Irish tradition and community; and he discusses Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's depiction of Milton's involvement in the English civil war In *Lá Fhéile Mhichíl* (1963) to establish a kind of sympathy for the devil (de Paor, "Irish Language Modernisms" 169-171).

> have the cheek to write after it. Read the bloody thing, anyhow. And write me. One has to keep in touch with culture [...][68]

Sheridan's comment about a shield is another possible Latin allusion, in this instance to the "Shield of Aeneas" featured in Book VIII of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a text O'Nolan references during Trellis's trial in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Harris and LaBine 7-8).[69] For O'Nolan's circle, Dostoyevsky was one of the most notable of Russian writers. At the end of his life, O'Nolan still owned a copy of Dostoyevsky's *An Honest Thief and Other Stories*.[70] Given his abiding admiration of Dostoyevsky's fiction, it is almost a certainty that he would have read and discussed *The Brothers Karamazov* with his literary friend Sheridan. With respect to Sheridan's letter to Montgomery, and the former's involvement in the composition and editing of O'Nolan's fiction, it is therefore justifiable to consider *The Brothers Karamazov* as a model for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, or at the least as significantly influential.

There are obvious parallels between O'Nolan and Dostoevsky's works. Trellis rapes the character Sheila Lamont, which produces his son Orllick Trellis. John Furriskey is another son. These characters, with accomplices Anthony Lamont and Paul Shanahan,

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[68] This letter has a "31 XII 1935" postmark, which would seem to indicate 31 December 1935, and yet Sheridan ends the letter, "Best wishes to all for a happy Easter." See the original manuscripts in MS 50.1181 Lot "Correspondence of Niall Sheridan, 1935-1939, National Library of Ireland.

[69] The shield of Aeaneas from the *Aeineid of Virgil* depicts important historical events and symbols from the founding of Rome onward. O'Nolan elsewhere alludes to Book II, in the Latin *Aeneid of Virgil*; the names of two lawyers, "Timothy Danaos" and "Dona Ferentes," given to Trellis by the Pooka during the courtroom scene in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, puns on "timeō Danaōs et dōna ferentīs," from the *Aeneid*, translated in English as "I fear the Danaans [Greeks] – especially when gifts they bear," or "even when they bear gifts" (Harris and LaBine 7).

[70] The collection of books from O'Nolan's personal library, now held at the John J. Burns library at Boston College, includes *An Honest Thief and Other Stories, The Novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, vol. XI. Translated by Constance Garnett. London: William Heinemann, 1919. This book was the penultimate volume of Dostoevsky's works translated by Garnett between 1912 and 1921, which includes "Uncle's Dream," "A Novel in Nine Letters," "An Unpleasant Predicament," "Another Man's Wife," "The Heavenly Christmas Tree," "The Peasant Marey," "The Crocodile," "Bobok," and "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man."

attempt to murder their literary progenitor/father, culminating in a court trial. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Pavlovitch Karamazov's eldest son Dmitri is put on trial for patricide. Pavel Fyodorovitch Smerdyakov, the adopted foundling and real murderer of Fyodor Pavlovitch, is a child of rape and has Fyodor as his father-in-name patronymically and probably biologically as well.

The question of whether an allusion to Dostoevsky's novel justifies the rape of a literary character in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is ethically and aesthetically significant. Michael McAteer agrees with Maebh Long that *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s aestho-autogamy is essentially sexually coded (McAteer 197-216). McAteer rightly observes that there is a masturbation motif in the novel, but he fails to read the text closely enough to substantiate his further claim (and by extension Maebh Long's) and demonstrate that this masturbatory sex act is creative. The narrator's uncle implies that an unspecified damning behaviour occurs in the narrator's bedroom: "I know the studying you do in your bedroom […] Damn the studying you do in your bedroom" (*AS* 11). The uncle's accusation is ambiguous, but the narrator's perceived need to deny the accusation suggests a link between his "spare-time literary activities" (*AS* 9) – the creative act generating the novel which the narrator works on in his bedroom – and the possibility of an immoral act or other behaviours and thoughts prohibited in his uncle's house. Regarding the narrator's theory of aestho-autogamy, McAteer has noted that the "primary example of this process is the creation of Orlick from Trellis's sexual assault on a literary character that he has created" (*Gallows Humour* 207). While any depiction of sexual violence is challenging when encountered, potentially triggering, and morally reprehensible, we must interpret this act within the novel's aesthetic framework. By

including it, O'Nolan prompts aesthetic questions about acts of misogyny in literature. Note the irony: Trellis's acts are immoral; he "is a philosopher and a moralist [who] is appalled by the spate of sexual and other crimes recorded in recent times," yet he nevertheless adds to them with his own crimes against literary characters (*AS* 35). O'Nolan is not advocating sexual violence or treating it lightly. It is critical to recognize that Trellis's moralizing is subordinated within the student-narrator's more ambitious aesthetic project – to test the limits of what can be done in fiction.

On this level of the narrative, Dostoevsky's idea that everything is lawful without God becomes operable in *At Swim-Two-Birds.* Dostoevsky presents various formulations of this problem, such as Ivan Fyodorovitch Karamazov's theory that natural law lies in faith, which is first discussed early in the novel, in Book II chapter VI:

> if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism. That's not all. He ended by asserting that for every individual, like ourselves, who does not believe in God or immortality, the moral law of nature must immediately be changed into the exact contrary of the former religious law, and that egoism, even to crime, must become not only lawful but even recognized as the inevitable, the most rational, even honorable outcome of his position. (*TBK* 81)

O'Nolan takes up this matter of God and lawlessness in another figuration as well, as referenced above: if there is no God-author, then there are no rules governing fiction. Revolt and rational narcissism are inevitable.

Some critics have already remarked on this feature of the text without making the link to Dostoevsky. Keith Hopper has noted the problem of the "author-god," arguing that "*At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* concretise the image of the author as the god of a fictional universe by questioning the ontological status of their nameless narrators" (*Post-Modernist* 36; 96). This is especially true of O'Nolan's 1934 short story "Scenes in a novel" where "Carruthers McDaid," who becomes O'Nolan's first character to rebel against the narrator/author (Barnabas in the first version of the story and later an author called "the O'Blather" in the *Blather* republication of the story), is significantly an atheist-turned-believer. McAteer interprets the God-author problem as a commentary on the human condition and theological discourse, arguing that Trellis is "a God-like creator of fictional characters, including Sheila Lamont" (*Gallows Humour* 214). For Dostoevsky and O'Nolan, the tension between belief and unbelief reveals a kind of lawlessness that finds many forms of expression. As we have seen above, O'Nolan locates aesthetic possibilities in this kind of thinking, writing about *The Third Policeman* in his 14 February 1940 letter to Saroyan, "When […] none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks" (*CL* 69).

O'Nolan may seem ambiguous about taking a moral position, but he is not. By the end of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Trellis is saved; he is decidedly not a God-author, neither is the student-narrator, nor is everything permissible. In this respect, I hold with David Cohen's interpretation of the ending. The student-narrator's recognition of his uncle's goodness effects a change in his point of view that filters down to other narrative levels.

He believes in human goodness. Trellis is not punished; his transgressions are fantasies he has written down and which Teresa incinerates (*AS* 215).

O'Nolan uses his Celtic fictional worlds to probe the limits of authorship and pose contemporary moral questions. The characters on the Trellis-level of *At Swim-Two-Birds* nearly murder their creator; they also fail to understand Finn's stories about Sweeny's punishment and suffering as justified by a Christian moral code that extends beyond the novel.[71] The ways in which Orllick, Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan torture Trellis echo (and in some instances replicate) Sweeny's suffering, but the characters themselves are unable to make this connection. They do not see O'Nolan's implicit moral imperative that characters like humans should be good. Similarly, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* kills to publish scholarship on de Selby, even though he has the power to reason his violent act is morally wrong. In both cases, moral failures and near failures actuate aesthetic possibilities in a Celtic context.

**(3)**

As we have seen in examining O'Nolan's literary collaborations, it is possible thereby to gain a fuller understanding of modern literary theories and philosophical questions that were important to his project. His collaborations with Niall Montgomery were as productive as his interactions with Sheridan. Though most of their collaborations occurred after the writing of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the character Kerrigan, "a slim young man of moustached features usually attired in inexpensive clothing" is undoubtedly

[71] In *Buile Shuibhne*, Sweeny is cursed by God for insulting Saint Rónán. He goes insane and is cursed to a life of wandering (which earns him the nickname Suibne Geilt or "Sweeny the Madman"). He is eventually allowed to stop and dies in the refuge of Saint Moling.

modelled on Montgomery (*AS* 50). It is unclear how early Montgomery became aware that he served as a prototype for a character in the novel, but Montgomery was actively involved in promoting *At Swim-Two-Birds* after its publication.

Letters written to Montgomery reveal that in the weeks after *At Swim-Two-Birds* appeared, he had made attempts to attract readers. On 15 April 1939, Jack Sweeny wrote Montgomery, admitting:

> I haven't read *At Swim* but I hope to soon. MacDonagh said it is funnier than [Samuel Beckett's] *Murphy*. I don't think I have laughed since *Murphy*. [...] A play by Saroyan opened last week, *My Heart's in the Highlands*. It was very good in parts. Grand nonsense. It opened as an experiment to run for five performances. Now it has settled down for an unlimited stay.[72]

Sweeney's letter is playful in tone and reveals important literary coordinates for O'Nolan's circle. Sweeney stylized the title of the novel by drawing cartoon waves under the words "At Swim" with two birds beside them. The comparison to Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) is apt because the novel shares a Celtic resonance with *At Swim-Two-Birds*. O'Nolan's "*third opening*" includes a comic description of Finn's buttocks, which "[t]hree fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against […] which was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass" (*AS* 9).[73] Beckett opens chapter four of *Murphy* in front of the General Post Office, the site of the 1916 Easter Rising. Neary is contemplating Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cúchulainn (Ireland's other

[72] For a full version of Sweeney's 15 April 1939 letter, see Niall Montgomery Papers, Personal Correspondence, MS 50, 118/26/3, National Library of Ireland.
[73] Montgomery read this opening on his 13 March 1971 recordings of four extracts from *At Swim-Two-Birds:* "A Variety of Overtures," "The Birthday Guests' Journey," "The Characters in Pursuit of Their Author" along with the novel's ending.

famous mythical hero). Neary then begins to dash his head against Cúchulainn's buttocks (*Murphy* 28).

Montgomery knew of Saroyan well before he arrived in Dublin in June 1939. They had both published together in *transition no. 27* months earlier, and Saroyan contacted Montgomery prior to arriving in Ireland (LaBine "Comedy Is Where You Die" 83). Donagh MacDonagh would go on to adapt a radio production of Saroyan's *My Heart's in the Highlands* in 1940 (*CL* 70). Sweeney's letter at once reveals shared interests and, again, a wide collaboration among O'Nolan's friends. His initial response to Montgomery's enthusiasm about *At Swim-Two-Birds* coincides with his asking Montgomery to record extracts from the novel over thirty years later, referenced above.

Montgomery's letters about *At Swim-Two-Birds* reveal how much influence the novel exerted in O'Nolan's circle. On March 26, 1939, he wrote O'Nolan: "You've got Sheridan so well it makes me nervous." In the following extracts from the same 26 March letter, Montgomery praises the novel and suggests what he was doing to publicize it:

> Two English I know are reading it – I have lent it to them – and they are delighted with it. Anyone must be delighted with it. I'm not codding and I'm not trying to borrow any money off you but I think it's the best book that's come out of the country in the last thirty or forty years (all right all right *Ulysses* was published in Paris wasn't it).
>
> I don't know anyone I can approach. Gogarty has a hell of a lot of influence with the *Evening Standard* but the bugger might tick me off if I approached him. My Desmond MacCarthy contact that Eliot was to fix for me never came off. I rang Denis Johnston and asked him would he review it for some paper: he said he

> doesn't do any reviewing - he hadn't even heard about it […] I told him the situation quite simply in a few words you know me how it was the best book since the war and he said thanks for telling me I'll order it immediately. Christ, what can I do - I'd like to do something but I'm only a poor draughtsman (look, son, that's a thing you don't seem to realise the complete isolation and desolation a guy goes through in this kip.)
>
> I can go around the shops and say have you got this book no o you're sold out jesus christ everybody's reading it order me a dozen copies and reverse the charges. I think your verse is terrific – look, I can't praise the book to your face […] I think the book is perfect in all the shapes you have given it, and that the incredible variety of styles you command is enough to dazzle the most pleasure-loving reader. Your Pooka stuff is out by itself and there is nothing in recent literature to compare with your cultured men talking, your fenian stuff and your sweeney verses are so lovely […] your uncle is better than anything in 'DUBLINERS'. (*CL* 43-44)

This letter substantiates how well Montgomery appreciated the novel. He places O'Nolan's work beside that of Joyce, Oliver St. John Gogarty, Desmond MacCarthy, and Denis Johnston. His letter also notes the positive early English reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in London.[74]

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[74] O'Nolan worried about the English reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He contacted the writer and socialist, Ethel Mannin (1900-1984), on 10 July 1939, asking her to read the novel, and noting that Longmans would "send a copy" (*CL* 53). O'Nolan's circle knew Mannin. Long notes how, for instance, on 14 August 1932, MacDonagh wrote to Montgomery and "mentioned seeing Ethel Mannin. He notes that her new book should not be called *All Experience* but *All S-experience*" (*CL* 53, n. 129). According to his 10 July 1939 letter, O'Nolan's friend Kevin O'Connor provided him an introduction and Mannin's address (*CL* 53-55). Long has outlined how Mannin agreed to read *At Swim,* admired the copy she received, and shared enthusiasm about Graham Greene's praise (*CL* 54 n.130-131). In her 13 July reply, Mannin claims she was unable to finish the novel because it was too similar to Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Montgomery may not have recognized himself as the model for Kerrigan, but he impersonated another character named "Michael Byrne" in a letter written after the novel's publication in the hoax of the Michael Byrne Inc. invoice. David Cohen was the first critic to reproduce this letter and attribute it to "Cecil ffrench Salkeld" (Cohen 227). Long also attributed the document to Salkeld, although both she and Cohen remain uncertain about its origins (*CL* 56-57). Immediately below, I reproduce a colour-version of this Michael Byrne letter (with the permission of Niall Montgomery's estate).[75]

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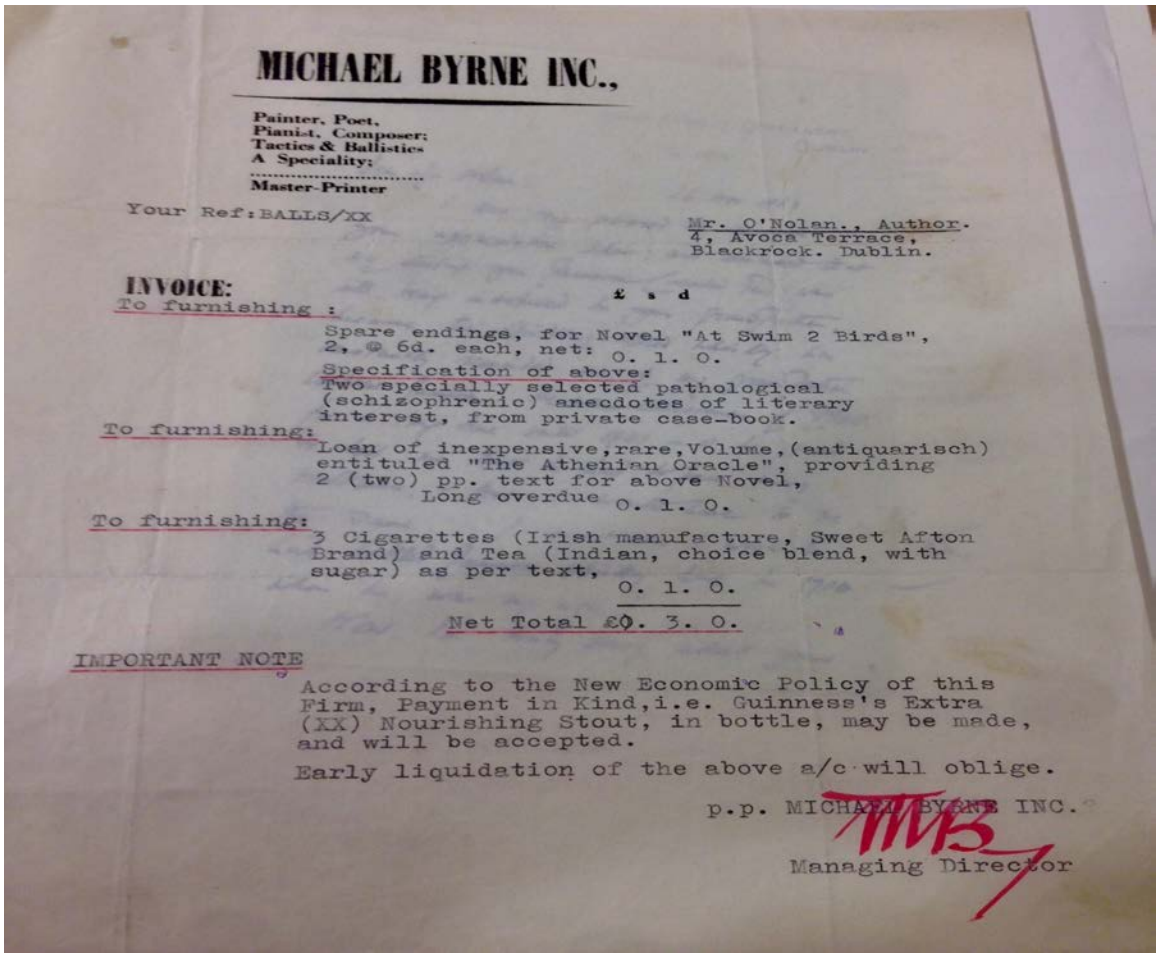
> I'm sorry, but with the best will in the world I find I cannot read those Birds (what does the title mean, please, if it means anything?) any more than I can read Ulysses. I don't understand this wilful obscurity, & am baffled by GG's enthusiasm for something so obscure. If [it's] true as you assert that most novels have been written before and written better, why not leave it that Joyce has done this sort of thing before? If one is to imitate why not something that can be understood by one's audience? (*CL* 54)

On 14 July, O'Nolan responded:

> It is a pity you did not like my beautiful book. As a genius, I do not expect to be readily understood but you may be surprised to know that my book is a definite milestone in literature, completely revolutionises the English novel and puts the shallow pedestrian English writers in their place. […] To be serious, I can't quite understand your attitude to stuff like this. It is not a pale-faced sincere attempt to hold the mirror up and has nothing in the world to do with James Joyce. […] It is also by way of being a sneer at all the slush which has been unloaded from this country on the credulous English although they, it is true, manufacture enough of their own odious slush to make the import unnecessary. (*CL* 55)

O'Nolan's correspondence with Mannin was politically charged. O'Nolan had previously written to his agents about British recognition on 12 March 1939, "Britain […] regards Irishmen, whether of north or south, as 'British subjects'. I think I should be described as 'Irish' with anything it may imply" (*CL* 43). Mannin accuses O'Nolan of deliberate obscurity, failing to recognize the novel's Irishness, seeing it as an imitation of Joyce rather than something unique and authentically Celtic. She also stresses imitating English writers such as, "Shakespeare, who was not above making his meaning clear" (*CL* 54). Long doubts O'Nolan's motives for sending Manin the novel, claiming "she was unlikely to enjoy the book's experimentalism, but perhaps he thought she could speak to Penguin on his behalf" (*CL* 53, n. 129). Long bases this claim about Mannin's taste on hindsight. O'Nolan likely wanted the opinion of a famous author. Perhaps because Mannin was a British anti-monarchist who had an affair with W. B. Yeats in the mid-1930s, he believed she would be sympathetic to Irish writing. Like Long, Cronin has characterized O'Nolan's attempt to interest Mannin as "curious" (*NLM* 94). He focuses on Manin's commercial possibilities as "a best-selling popular novelist of the day" but cannot explain how O'Nolan "hoped to gain […] critical approval or sales by soliciting [her] approval" (*NLM* 94-95). Like Long, Cronin implies that because Mannin was "an expert sentimental and popular author" she would not have appreciated the novel (*NLM* 94).

[75] Niall Montgomery's son, James P. Montgomery, and daughter, Rosemary, were in the audience when I presented part of this chapter at the Flann O'Brien conference in Dublin in 2019. They graciously confirmed the similarity of the Montgomery's signature with the signature on the Michael Byrne invoice as well as the various idiosyncrasies of his writing style that appear on the invoice and Montgomery's other letters. I am grateful to them for allowing me to reproduce images of his letters.



MICHAEL BYRNE INC.,

Painter, Poet,
Pianist, Composer;
Tactics & Ballistics
A Speciality;
.....
Master-Printer

Your Ref: BALLS/XX

Mr. O'Nolan., Author.
4, Avoca Terrace,
Blackrock. Dublin.

INVOICE: £ s d

To furnishing :
Spare endings, for Novel "At Swim 2 Birds",
2, @ 6d. each, net: 0. 1. 0.
Specification of above:
Two specially selected pathological
(schizophrenic) anecdotes of literary
interest, from private case-book.

To furnishing:
Loan of inexpensive, rare, Volume, (antiquarisch)
entituled "The Athenian Oracle", providing
2 (two) pp. text for above Novel,
Long overdue 0. 1. 0.

To furnishing:
3 Cigarettes (Irish manufacture, Sweet Afton
Brand) and Tea (Indian, choice blend, with
sugar) as per text,
0. 1. 0.

Net Total £0. 3. 0.

IMPORTANT NOTE
According to the New Economic Policy of this
Firm, Payment in Kind, i.e. Guinness's Extra
(XX) Nourishing Stout, in bottle, may be made,
and will be accepted.
Early liquidation of the above a/c will oblige.

p.p. MICHAEL BYRNE INC.
Managing Director

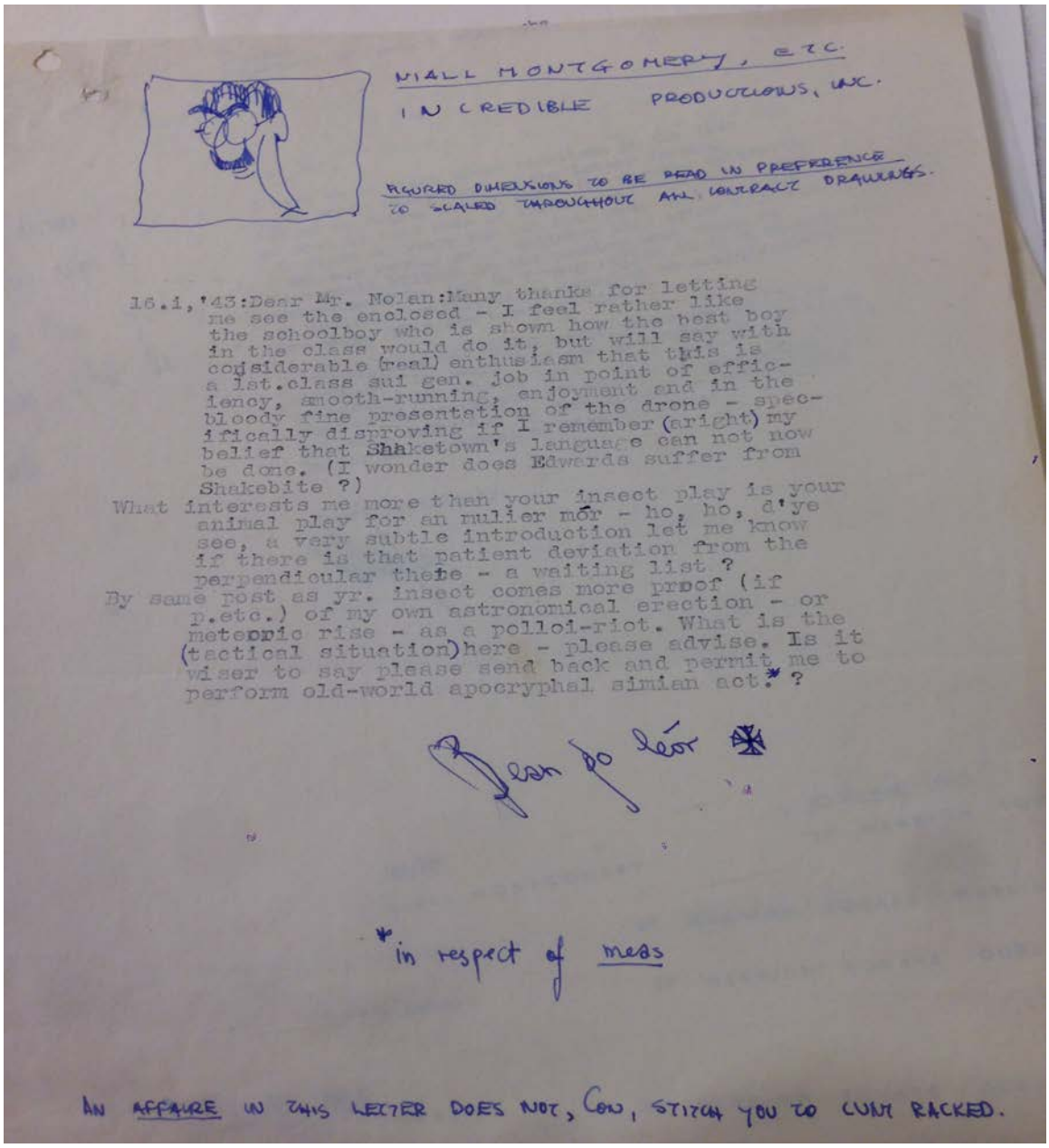
Fig. 3 "Michael Byrne INC." (undated).

The Irish painter, printmaker, and writer Cecil ffrench Salkeld (1904 –1969) was a model for Michael Byrne in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Kerrigan, Brinsley, and the narrator attend a salon at Byrne's home. Montgomery, Sheridan, and O'Nolan associated with Salkeld in Dublin and attended a salon held at his home.[76] By describing Byrne in the invoice as a "Painter, Poet, Pianist, Composer," as well as a specialist in tactics and ballistics, Montgomery seeks – at least initially before devolving fully into farce – to tie

[76] Niall Sheridan knew Blánaid Salkeld (1880 – 1959), the Irish poet and dramatist, and debated her about "The Future of Anglo-Irish Poetry" on Radio Éireann on 22 August 1935. A notice for this debate was published in the Radio Éireann bulletin. See *The Nationalist (Tipperary)*, 26 Aug. 1939, p. 10. Blánaid Salkeld hosted a famous literary salon at her home in Dublin which O'Nolan, Patrick Kavanagh, Sheridan, Montgomery and other artists and writers attended. Her son, Cecil ffrench Salkeld, became a prominent Irish artist and a member of O'Nolan's circle; her granddaughter Beatrice married Brendan Behan.

the character to Salkeld, his real-life model.[77] Montgomery is obviously the author of the invoice; he likens poetry and publishing to a "(tactical situation)" in his 16 January 1943 to O'Nolan cited below. The author of the letter purports to have furnished "Mr. O'Nolan. Author. 4 Avoca Terrace, Blackrock. Dublin. £ s d0.1.0. [with] Spare endings, for Novel 'At Swim 2 Birds', 2, @ 6d, each, net," (*CL* 56).[78] The signature on the Byrne letter, although made with felt tip pen, resembles the loops and curves of Montgomery's signature. The layout of the headings, punctuation, and the spaces in the margin between the subheadings and text resemble the placements of pen-drawings, headers, indents and fake letterhead in Montgomery's 16 January 1943 "Incredible Productions Inc" letter to O'Nolan, which is pictured immediately below and followed by a similarly stylized letterhead Montgomery produced in 1932 in his "Montgomery" letter for Eugene Jolas, then editor of *transition* magazine.[79]

[77] Michael Byrne Inc. is a fictitious company, but James Montgomery, an architect and Montgomery's son, thinks Michael Byrne could also be a reference to "Brick Byrne" a successful Dublin builder.
[78] I recognize Montgomery's humour here (I have recently had the privilege of editing of his poetry collection, *TERMINAL*, which will be published in Summer 2023).
[79] In his letter to Jolas, Montgomery compares himself to Joyce and "tsalty TSEliot." Jolas was one of the most important avant-garde publications in Europe and had published essential modernist texts like Joyce's "Work In Progress" (i.e. extracts from *Finnegans Wake*) and extracts from the Muir translations of Franz Kafka.


NIALL MONTGOMERY, ETC.
INCREDIBLE PRODUCTIONS, INC.
FIGURED DIMENSIONS TO BE READ IN PREFERENCE TO SCALED THROUGHOUT ALL CONTRACT DRAWINGS.

16.i,'43:Dear Mr. Nolan:Many thanks for letting me see the enclosed - I feel rather like the schoolboy who is shown how the best boy in the class would do it, but will say with considerable (real) enthusiasm that this is a 1st.class sui gen. job in point of efficiency, smooth-running, enjoyment and in the bloody fine presentation of the drone - specifically disproving if I remember (aright) my belief that Shaketown's language can not now be done. (I wonder does Edwards suffer from Shakebite ?)
What interests me more than your insect play is your animal play for an nulier mór - ho, ho, d'ye see, a very subtle introduction let me know if there is that patient deviation from the perpendicular there - a waiting list ?
By same post as yr. insect comes more proof (if p.etc.) of my own astronomical erection - or meteoric rise - as a polloi-riot. What is the (tactical situation)here - please advise. Is it wiser to say please send back and permit me to perform old-world apocryphal simian act* ?

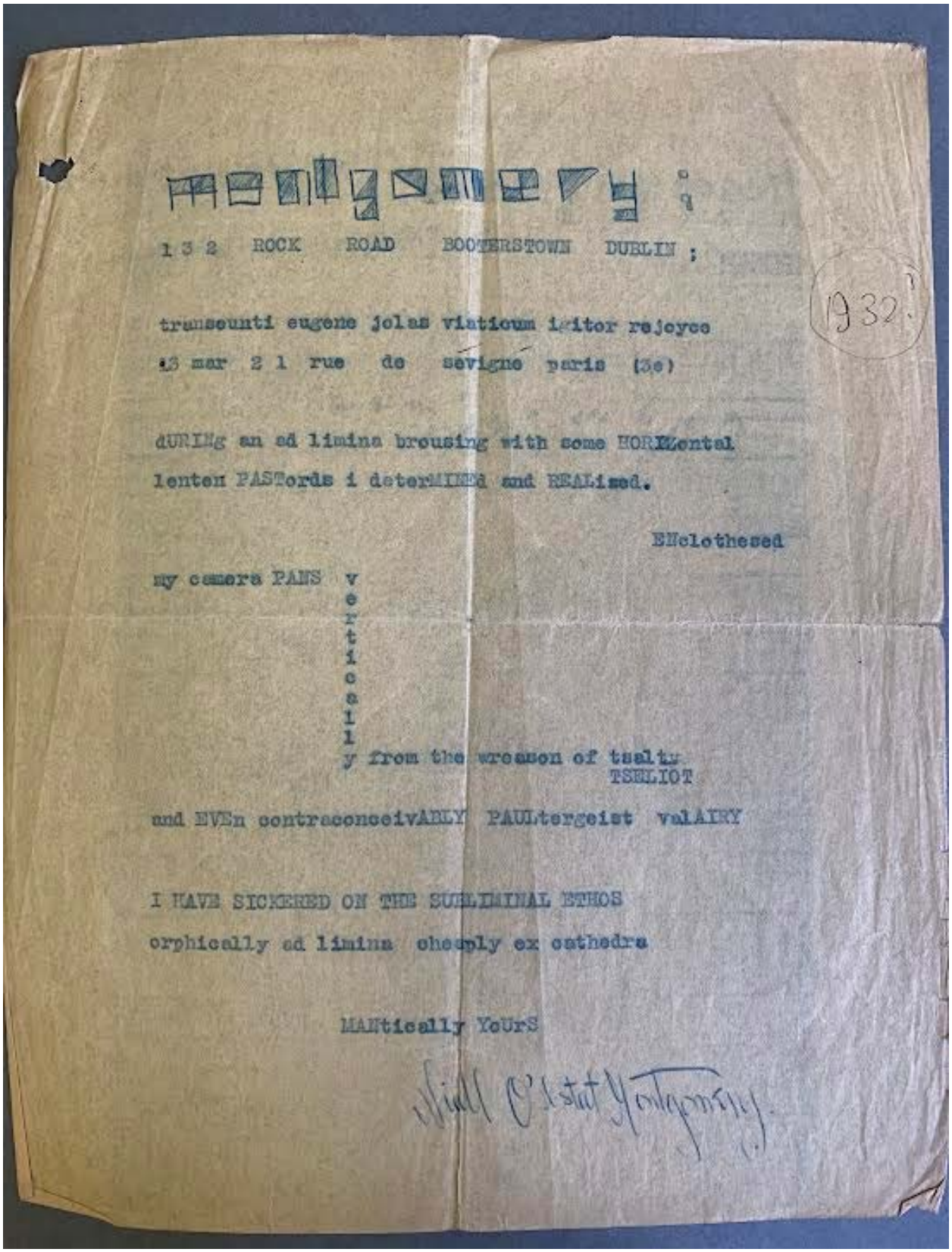
Yours to hell

* in respect of mess

AN AFFAIRE IN THIS LETTER DOES NOT, COW, STITCH YOU TO CUNT RACKED.

Fig. 4 “Niall Montgomery, Etc. Incredible Productions, INC” (1943).

The original 16 January 1943 letter is held with the Flann O’Brien Papers in the Morris Library at Southern Illinois, University. The 1932 “Montgomery” letter to Jolas is held with Niall Montgomery’s papers at the National Library of Ireland. Neither letter has been published.



MONTGOMERY ;

132 ROCK ROAD BOOTERSTOWN DUBLIN ;

1932?

transcounti eugene jolas viaticum iditor rejoyce

13 mar 21 rue de sévigné paris (3e)

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lenten PASTords i determINEd and REALised.

ENclothesed

my camera PANS vertically from the wreason of tsalty TSELIOT

and EVEn contraconceivABLY PAULtergeist valAIRY

I HAVE SICKERED ON THE SUBLIMINAL ETHOS

orphically ad limina cheaply ex cathedra

MANtically YoUrS

Niall O'Montgomery.

Fig. 5 “Montgomery” [1932].

Carol Taaffe has argued that *At Swim-Two-Birds* was a literary in-joke for O'Nolan's UCD cohort. The novel combines O'Nolan's Celtic aesthetic project with the collaborative modernist enterprise undertaken by O'Nolan and his circle. Taaffe suggests that "*At Swim*'s implied reader (or at least, the reader best placed to appreciate its parodies and in-jokes) was the UCD undergraduate of the early nineteen thirties," since the book "parodies a number of set texts which [O'Nolan] studied in university, most obviously Standish Hayes O'Grady's *Silva Gadelica* and the Middle Irish *Suibhne Gelt*, both of which were cited in the bibliography of his MA thesis" ("Do You Ever Open a Book at All?" 248), although it is Cathal Ó Hainle who offers the most authoritative study of the Irish material on O'Nolan's UCD reading list.

In the preceding section, I have argued that the novel faithfully documents several "palimpsestuous" (to borrow Anthony Burgess's term for Joyce's technique of piling on layers of connotations in *Finnegans Wake*) literary relationships (*Joysprick* 146). As shown, Sheridan and Donagh MacDonagh's poetic collaboration is depicted in the friendship between Brinsley and Donaghy. And though Kerrigan-Montgomery does not feature as prominently in the novel as Brinsley-Sheridan, Montgomery is still intrinsically part of the makeup of the text and the letters surrounding it. He frequently discusses promoting a modernist strain of literature with O'Nolan (that is, "tactics"). Sheridan and Montgomery are not merely models for O'Nolan's literary characters: their ideas in real life informed the creation and content of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, shaping the novel and being shaped by it as they were appearing in the work as characters.

The novel's moral-aesthetic similarity to *The Brothers Karamazov* with its questions about the limits of freedom is one productive insight to emerge from

understanding Montgomery and Sheridan's relationship to the text: that essential question animates O'Nolan's Celtic Hell in *The Third Policeman*. Montgomery's paratextual presence in the marginalia, notes, and pen drawings is deeply present in O'Nolan's archive—the *Collected Letters* is the first substantial work to begin to address this issue. In some letters, the two Nialls seem almost indistinguishable. Responding to William Saroyan on 7 September 1940, O'Nolan noted, "Young Niall Montgomery and his wife have had a baby […] The other Niall (Sheridan) has written what I think is a very excellent play, also about policemen" (*CL* 93).[80] Such serious fun is seen here to have informed O'Nolan's vision and writing in a number of important ways: his distinctive Celtic aesthetic, his modern collaborative practice, and especially in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. I trust the foregoing analysis convinces that what can at first appear irrelevant to scholarly study, or merely tangentially relevant, is in fact critically constitutive.

**Conclusions: "fearfully seltic"**

The sections above discuss O'Nolan's modern and Celtic representational strategy in several different contexts. If one holds with Taaffe and Ó Hainle's undergraduate reading list thesis, then it also becomes apparent that O'Nolan read programmatically off the list. O'Nolan's reading list at University College Dublin provided him with a wealth of material to send up in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. But his scholarly interest in these Irish texts intersects with his fascination with comic writing and the potential for collaboration. This does not mean O'Nolan is writing only for himself and his friends, or that his writing is necessarily inseparable from his Dublin coterie, but rather that he is responding to the

[80] Saroyan could not keep the Nialls straight. Sheridan had already responded to one of Saroyan's letters (currently lost) to say he had the "wrong Niall," a beautiful sentiment.

concerns of a wider international literary modernism within a social framework. Along with his generic and novelistic concerns, critical readers should notice that O'Nolan was preoccupied with the characteristic moral and philosophical questions important to modernity, as this chapter has examined his portrayals of moral punishment in an afterlife and problems of authorial omniscience when characters revolt.

What may sound trite, or at least unnecessary to say at this point, O'Nolan read widely, and to such an extent that mapping out his reading and scholarship in a single chapter or even a monograph remains a challenge.[81] O'Nolan developed a Celtic aesthetic theory during his university study that was understood at least by such collaborators as Niall Montgomery (and possibly shared by Sheridan). As we have seen, that theory informs O'Nolan's retrieval of "Celtic" authenticity across his fictional project. In the following chapter on David Jones, this thesis will examine how representational strategy based on this kind of authenticity can become a workable and productive theory of Celtic art.

[81] O'Nolan wrote about hundreds of books and writers. For example, with the one exception of his discussion of J. M. Synge and the "fearfully seltic" Irishman discussed above, the present chapter has largely neglected the texts O'Nolan mentions in his "Cruiskeen Lawn" columns over the course of his nearly twenty-five-year career as writer for *The Irish Times*. O'Nolan's literary criticism in *The Irish Times* informs part of the fourth chapter of this dissertation when I compare his and John McGahern's views on Tomás Ó Criomhthain's 1929 autobiography, *An tOileánach*.

## Chapter 2

The previous chapter discussed the modern Celtic as a representational strategy in several different Irish and English contexts. Brian O'Nolan's comic writing and collaborations prompt new consideration of the ways in which Celtic fiction engages modern comedy and other generic and novelistic concerns of modernity. However, examining the Celtic primarily within modern comic discourse (as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*) or as a way of animating an allegorical world (*The Third Policeman*) distorts an overall sense of the aesthetic as a modern representational strategy based in a workable and productive theory of Celtic art. The Welsh-English painter and modernist poet David Jones (1895-1974) treats the Celtic seriously within an Anglo-Welsh context, and the aesthetic has been surprisingly generative for his body of work. Jones probes Celtic metamorphosis and how these aspects of the aesthetic simultaneously impart mythical and historical effects that call for an understanding of the Celtic as something (broadly) beyond realism.

As a London-based, half-Welsh writer and visual artist, as well as a practicing Roman Catholic, Jones understood the Celtic aesthetic as something more than realism and more than the product of a single identity or language ideology. He detected Celtic influences in works of English literature that had vivid imagery, a woven texture, emerging and disappearing movement, as well as intricate forms of compactness. According to his biographer, Thomas Dilworth, Jones saw this essential British-Celtic texture in "'all of Julian of Norwich,' in Malory where Lancelot visits Chapel Perilous, in much of Shakespeare, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in the verse at the end of 'Christabel,' and in the writings of Lewis Carroll" (*DJU* 716). After its publication, Jones

would claim this tradition for *In Parenthesis* as well.[82] In this respect, Jones's understanding of the Celtic as something subtle and interwoven resonates with the English and Irish "hybrid" examples discussed above.[83]

Though autobiographical and at times documentary in its realism, *In Parenthesis* has a compact allusive structure with Celtic content at its centre and, because of this, is epic in its shape and form. When he first reviewed it in 1937, the English critic and art historian Herbert Read (1893–1968) called *In Parenthesis* "as near a great epic of the war as ever the war generation will reach" (Read qtd. in Bonnerot 546). But Jones's engagement with Celtic tradition has repeatedly prompted later critics to reflect on barriers to interpretation in his poetry and the problem of its categorization. In *Making the Past Present* (2007), Paul Robichaud has acknowledged Jones's poetry as a "mosaic of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin cultures," arguing that this variety "has been both a source of critical misunderstanding" as well as an obstacle to his acknowledgement as modernist writer of major importance (Robichaud 3-4). For example, while discussing the reception of *In Parenthesis* in the first three decades after

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[82] While researching David Jones for his biography, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet*, Thomas Dilworth found the following papers held in the Jones collection at Georgetown University: "Life for J. Ede" typescript, 5 Sept. 1935; letter to J. Ede 18 Jan. 1934; letter to J. Ede 15 April 1943. Jones also comments about the Celtic aesthetic in *Letters to a Friend* (*LF* 87). I am deeply grateful to Professor Dilworth for sharing his research on David Jones's theory of the Celtic aesthetic (and his admiration for Jones generally) at an early stage of my work on the present study.

[83] Jones discusses this interwoven hybrid sense of Celtic influence in Irish and English art in an undated essay, "Wales and Visual Form," which was published in his posthumous collection, *The Dying Gaul*:

> The motifs, the ingredients of the decoration may, in a given work, derive in part from as far away as Ravenna or Syria, and the Angle who made the given work may have learned to handle his tools in a Celtic monastery, but the Angle imprint may very well be on his angels none the less. And the Goidel who gave to some particular work a feeling which we recognise as Irish-Celtic may very well have been under the tuition of a master whose stock-in-trade of motifs was derived from the same or similar sources as the Angle craftsman–but with very different results. There were no doubt many tendencies at work and this movement or movements included in its effective influence such masterpieces as the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the great crosses of Northumbria and elsewhere in Britain and Ireland. (*DG* 73)

its publication, David Blamires held with Bernard Bergonzi that the Celtic content of the book prevents one from interpreting it as "true epic" (Blamires 81). Blamires echoes Bergonzi's argument that while allusions to "the *Gododdin* and *the Chanson de Roland* are integral" (Blamires 81), they do not speak to the public and communal values of an epic, what Blamires and Bergonzi both refer to as the shared "cosmic" apects:

> Jones […] may feel that Celtic myth is central and not peripheral to his understanding British tradition, and he may have some success in persuading a discerning reader that this is so. Nevertheless, such knowledge will not already be there to provide a ready response in the consciousness of most of his readers. (Blamires 81)

Dilworth has attempted to correct this view by arguing that the "religious values informing the ritual mythos of the poem are broadly and deeply rooted in [English] culture and certainly 'cosmic'" (*Shape of Meaning* 121). In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell claimed that the allusions to tales of romance in *In Parenthesis* (and the references to the Welsh texts, *Y Gododdin* and *The Mabinogion* which he largely neglects) glorify war by making it seem heroic. Fussell presents a different problem and a different kind of interpretation than Blamires and Bergonzi; he misreads the allusions in Jones's long poem, but essentially treats it as an epic. Fussell's interpretation will be dealt with in more detail below. Bergonzi and Blamires prompt one to reflect on the aesthetics of *In Parenthesis* and how its Celtic aspects make it epic.

Jones's coordinates within the Celtic tradition are Welsh and Christian. However, an examination of his Celtic aesthetic reveals that a thorough knowledge of Welsh language and myth is not essential to understanding *In Parenthesis* – and Jones's poetry

generally – as modern, Celtic, and epic. Jones relies on the transmutability of a Celtic Englishness, an aesthetic which arises, as Francine Brooks has argued, out of his "exploration of both the tensions and the creative possibilities of his hybrid Anglo-Welsh identity" and his "search for hybrid, Anglo-Welsh histories in the Old English and Anglo-Latin record" (27).[84] For these hybrid reasons, Brooks associates Jones with Welsh modernism (according to John Goodby's and Chris Wiggington's attempt to define it) claiming that while Jones is not a canonical figure within English institutions and wider cultural consciousness, "Welsh modernism was itself 'hybrid, and much concerned with [...] (in)authenticity', that ultimately it embodied 'the hyphenated condition of Anglo-Welshness'" (19). Gregory Baker has argued that Jones's Celtic modernism found new "hybrid" forms of modernist literary expression in the writings of James Joyce. The in-betweenness of his own English/Welsh identity informs his artistic vision. In Jones's opinion Celtic history was "too marked with 'deposits' from many languages and cultures for its 'complex heritage' to serve any ideology of demographic or linguistic purism" (G. Baker 160). Baker shows that Jones credited Joyce for being a major literary influence on his poetics and noted (sympathetically) that "the self-imposed exile Joyce endured did not drive him from Ireland but only deeper into a more intense examination of its 'vast fabric,' into the very 'lore of semantics' that evoked the country's history and hybridity. It was Joyce's development of this lore – 'this language thing'" (G. Baker 193).

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[84] In *Poet of the Medieval Modern: Reading the Early Medieval Library with David Jones* (2021), Francine Brooks focuses almost exclusively on Jones's experimentation with Old English translation in his long poem *The Anathemata* (1952). But her insights about Jones's approach to playing with language, which was inspired by James Joyce's high modernist translation and wordplay in *Finnegans Wake*, can be applied to his entire oeuvre. Brooks outlines her thesis about translation "play" as follows:

> Jones's use of Old English language as material for modern linguistic invention and innovation is evidence of an intimate, close reading of early medieval texts, which suggests we should be viewing his poetic engagement with Old English as a form of creative translation. (83)

Following other practitioners of literary modernism, Jones engaged in creative word association in his writing, juxtaposing English and Welsh (and later, Latin and Greek as well), as a way of probing Britain's hybridity and history, as a way of achieving something epic.

Celtic myth and language were central to the artistic theory Jones professed during his lifetime. A clear understanding of this Celtic aesthetic then is one key to interpreting *In Parenthesis*. In the personal manifesto written to Jim Ede in September 1935 about his visual art, Jones identified his own intentions with subtle aspects of the Celtic tradition:

> I should like to speak of a quality which I rather associate with the folk-tales of Welsh or other Celtic derivation, a quality congenial and significant to me which in some oblique way has some connection with what I want in painting. I find it impossible to define, but it has to do with a certain affection for the intimate creaturliness of things—a care for, and appreciation of, the particular genius of places, men, trees, animals, and yet withal a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability. That trees are men walking. That words 'bind and loose material things.' I think Carroll's Alice Books and the *Hunting of the Snark* inherit, through what channel I do not know, something akin to this particular quality of the Celtic tales. The Snark is always a Boojum in Celtic legend, and tragically so in much Celtic history. *The Hunting of the Snark* has for me an affinity to the Gododdin of Aneurin and the Hunting of the Boar Trwyth in the Olwen tale, and the Grail Quest also. (Jones qtd. in *DJU* 715-716)

It is no mere coincidence that Jones was revising *In Parenthesis* while formulating these thoughts. In one sense, Jones associates the pervading sense of metamorphosis he claims for the Celtic aesthetic with the Gospel of Mark. When Jesus cures a blind man at Bethsaida and asks if he can see anything, the man replies, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking" (*New Revised Standard Version,* Mark 8:24).[85] This initial vision problem is resolved by Christ laying his hands on the man's eyes again. Hugh Kenner, for instance, has used the same verse to remark on the mythic power of O'Nolan's policeman, who "resemble men as trees walking," and this depiction, Kenner argues, is part of *The Third Policeman*'s "primitive clinging power" ("The Fourth Policeman" 70). Also, Jones's statement about poesis, that "words 'bind and loose material things,'" refers to Jesus's instructions to Peter, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).[86] Jones's aesthetic theory rests on the idea that the "successful art work is one where no ingredient of creation is lost, where no item on the list in the Benedicite Omnia Opera Dominum is denied or forgotten" (Jones qtd. in *DJU* 716). As Dilworth has noted, Jones associated the Celtic motif of metamorphosis with a combination of contraries:

> If you would draw a bruiser don't neglect to remember the fragility of 'this flesh' or you will be liable to make only a vulgar tour-de-force and to obscure the essential humanity of your gross man. There should be always a bit of lion in your lamb. (Jones qtd. in *DJU* 716)

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[85] But Jones locates poetic expression in the *King James Version,* "I see men as trees, walking."

[86] Jones speaks to the spiritual power of words in context at length in his essay "Art and Sacrament" (*EA* 143-179). The binding power of words has its analogue in the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass in which words enact the transubstantiation of the Eucharist which becomes Jesus Christ's real presence in Body and Blood.

In one sense this theory of art and literature draws on the doctrine of contraries William Blake put forward in plate three of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which states that "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence." Jones shares Blake's idea about the creative power inherent in contrary things. There is something intrinsically Celtic about this idea. For example, in his collection of essays on modern Irish writers, *Celtic Contraries* (1990), the poet Robin Skelton similarly quoted Blake and adapted his theory of contraries to align Jack B. Yeats, Thomas Kinsella, Aidan Higgins, and John Montague who, Skelton argued, "contrive to bring contraries together fusing all […] themes and techniques into unity, so as to present a coherent or all-embracing 'philosophy' or attitude" (Skelton xi). Skelton's attempt to connect Irish and English writers on the basis of their philosophy of uniting contraries is obviously applicable to Jones.[87]

Art symbols and making of signs are analogically related to the full religious understanding of reality for Jones. With respect to literary form, Jack Dudley has interpreted Jones's combination of contraries as "parataxis," which he defines as "the placing side by side of disparate images, ideas, or phrases" (104). Dudley argues that Jones's writing is on the cusp of a major shift within twentieth-century modernist aesthetics, which he figures as duality. The first stream seeks to control materials and "the capacity of art to convey the reality of experience," while the other "relinquishes control" (Dudley 103). Dudley claims Jones is part of the first grouping in this dichotomy, a stream which also includes T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien (103-104). Dudley claims that *In Parenthesis* "stages the slow unraveling and exhaustion

[87] Jones's theory about the Celtic combination of contrary motifs and themes inspired the title for this doctoral dissertation.

of poetic order and unity in the scene of war" (105), arguing that Jones turns to theological symbols to resolve this breakdown. (This turn is also a feature of George Mackay Brown's *Magnus* [1973] and will be taken up in the next chapter.) Dudley argues that such unraveling of meaning in Jones's poetry is a move towards transcendent mystery; Jones resolves the problem of breakdown by revealing "the religious workings behind an ostensibly secular modernist aesthetics" (Dudley 107). In this sense, Dudley echoes Dilworth's argument that the "genius" of *In Parenthesis* is "its expression of the perennial dilemma between knowledge and desire" (*Shape of Meaning* 149), which Jones is able to achieve by aligning opposites and "combining […] antithetical forms" (Dudley 105). This combination of contraries, what Dudley argues is "parataxis to create newness, was, for Jones, religious in structure and nature" (106). As Stephen McInerney has observed, fragmentation in *In Parenthesis* is indicative of a lost wholeness, and also the means of its "recovery" (69-70). McInerney discusses Jones's tendency in *In Parenthesis* to "marry the utile and the gratuitous" (60). This pairing of opposites reveals the relationship between unity and diversity within Jones's aesthetic and helps us to understand the various forms of order Jones examines which include military, artistic, technocratic, ideological, and most importantly sacramental forms of order. In *David Jones* (1978), Samuel Rees claimed that Jones was a modernist because he used the modernist idiom; like Eliot and Ezra Pound, Jones's writing is characterized by the "use of esoteric allusions, abrupt juxtapositions, [and] relative freedom in language(s)" (Rees 136). Rees has addressed the Celtic aspect of Jones's aesthetic theory with its "pervading sense of metamorphosis" in relation to Hopkins and Joyce, noting that the "Celtic connection" Hopkins and Jones share is separate from the "notable exemplars […] of

'modernist' poetry" (Rees 135). Yet, Rees argues that as modernist poets, Jones and Joyce both achieve an effective "bardic" representational strategy that is essentially "Celtic and Catholic" (139-140).

The Celtic effects Jones discusses in relation to his painting and drawing correspond to his poetry. Moreover, Jones's manifesto for Ede above unites his literary and artistic practice by a single aesthetic theory, revealing how he understood the interrelation between visual and textual forms of art. Paul Hills has made a similar observation about Jones's painting in a lecture delivered to The David Jones Society in the spring of 2021, noting that "the spade that digs" in one of Jones's drawings, which reappears as a trench shovel in *In Parenthesis*, gains significance from "The Burial of the Dead" in *The Waste Land* as well.[88] Hills examines how visual allusions to the war (depicted in absences, partial structures, doorways and passages, trenches and visual topography) inform the themes Jones developed in his watercolours from the late 1920s onwards. Hills applies William Blissett's theory about the "syntax of violence" to the watercolours Jones painted after he had started writing *In Parenthesis*. Blissett's understanding of Jones's syntax of violence echoes an earlier claim made by Marshall McLuhan: "Cardinal Newman said of Napoleon, 'He understood the grammar of gunpowder'" (*UM* 13). McLuhan theorizes this idea as "visual syntax" (*UM* 189-190). And this interpretation extends to both Jones's visual art produced during the period he was writing *In Parenthesis* as well as visual form in the poem.[89]

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[88] The quotations from Paul Hills and William Blissett originated during Paul Hills's lecture to the David Jones Society on 14 March 2021 entitled "David Jones: Artist in the Shadow of the Great War."

[89] For example, Hill's theory about allusions and absences in Jones's paintings focuses on *Curtained Outlook* (1931). In this work, the curtain shares affinity with the winding sheet of the Blessed Virgin as the image of the curtain on the right of the work evokes Mary's robes. Shoulder and hip curves appear in this curtain. There is resurrection in the picture: Mary's absence reveals a symbolic Assumption (which was deeply important to Jones). Jones depicts a kind of holy emptiness which ties in with Hills's views on

Early reviewers also noticed the importance of visual form to *In Parenthesis*. In his 1937 review in *Études Anglaises,* Professor of English Literature at the Sorbonne, Louis Bonnerot,[90] claimed the text was like an engraving:

> *In Parenthesis* est autant une série de gravures qu'un poème en prose, poème enrichide citations et de reminiscences littéraires, tout comme *The Waste Land* et d'allusions aux vieilles legends galloises, au *Maginogion,* à la *Mort d'Arthur,* à la *Chanson de Roland*, si bien que les 35 pages de notes sont indispensables au déchiffrage du texte. (545)

Bonnerot argues that Jones treats the work of writing as a painter or engraver would, by engraving details. He also notes the poem's affinity to *The Waste Land*; and given the allusions Jones makes to *The Maginogion, Chanson de Roland,* and Mallory, Bonnerot argues the notes in the final pages of *In Parenthesis* form an essential part of the text. These features suggest for Bonnerot a new creative boldness and cause him to place Jones among the foremost practitioners of literary modernism: "avec plus d'audace, comme James Joyce, mais sans aller aux excès de *Work in Progress*, Mr. Jones crée sa langue selon les exigences de sa vision" (545). The comparison between Jones and Joyce, noting Joyce's tendency toward excessive allusion is apt.

Joyce's style exerts influence over *In Parenthesis*. Bonnerot could not have known that Jones had heard his friend Rene Hague read "Anna Livia Plurabelle" in 1930 and, shortly afterward, a recording of Joyce reading what later became chapter eight of

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windows and doorways as entry points into other spheres. Jones struggled imaginatively with Christ's Resurrection, as many Christian artists have and do—the Resurrection is a paradox and the more one thinks of it the less one is able to think of it. He approaches this paradox through absence.

[90] Jones corresponded with Bonnerot between 1959-1974, sending twenty-two letters. These letters concern Bonnerot's French translations of his poetry and correct errors in *In Parenthesis* as well as clarifying his usage of different words. See "David Jones letters to Louis Bonnerot." National Library of Wales / Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, GB 210 NLW MS 24128F.

*Finnegans Wake*, which deeply influenced Jones according to remarks he made in his letters (Dilworth *DJU* 493-494). His experiences as a private in the First World War necessitated writing about the trenches; but, as Bonnerot notes, while the First World War and past wars are themes of *In Parenthesis*, "ce n'est point un livre de guerre" (545). Bonnerot discusses how *In Parenthesis* portrays the atmosphere of the war and the effect of the fighting on the landscape, noting the achievement of such visual transformation which for Jones was part of the Celtic aesthetic: "la transfiguration d'un paysage par la pluie, l'invocation aux bois, surtout le 'boast' d'un soldat gallois de pages 79-84" (546). Dai Greatcoat's boast, which is discussed in more detail in the next section, is the imaginative centre of *In Parenthesis*. It represents the moment Jones unites modernity and Celtic aesthetics to pose a question about the universality of human experience in war. Bonnerot ended his review in agreement with Herbert Read, arguing that *In Parenthesis* was a great war epic that ends in tragedy.

John Francis Lucy (1894–1962), a British army officer who entered the army in 1914, reviewed *In Parenthesis* in the August 1937 edition of *Ireland To-day*.[91] Lucy is an example of a career soldier who fought at the front primarily as a private and non-commissioned officer but failed to apprehend the poem's view of war. Lucy's insubstantial review conveys little of the book's essence, or even that Jones intended the work as poetry (Lucy reviewed *In Parenthesis* for the magazine's "Fiction" section),

[91] The magazine regularly published work by Brian O'Nolan's circle of friends. The issue featuring *In Parenthesis* also included a review essay by Donagh MacDonagh. The review of Jones's book was published on the same page as Denis Devlin's review of Laura Riding's *A Trojan Ending*. The proximity of *In Parenthesis* to the activity of O'Nolan's circle is a neat coincidence. There were other coincidences. In 1961 for instance, when he was already in contact with Niall Montgomery, John Lincoln Sweeney visited David Jones and asked him to record extracts from his poetry for the Poetry Room at Harvard (*DJU* 125). See also Devlin, Denis. Review of *A Trojan Ending*, by Laura Riding. *Ireland To-day*, vol. 2, no. 8, Aug. 1937, p. 90.

noting that Jones's "strange style and vivid description bring back all too well the over-powering sufferings, and horrible life of the front-line fighters":

> To his mind the bewildered and innocently blasphemous civilian turned soldier is one with the ancient heroes in the legendary tales of the Celt and the Saxon, though the "stuff" of modern war makes him the patient victim of a terrible occasion, […] wherein the troops carrying war gear shoulder high across a bleak muddy horizon on the way to the line of death are likened to "Modern Christs." (Lucy 90)

However superficial his review now feels, Lucy correctly notices how Christ's passion and death are archetypes at the base of the violence the soldiers experience in *In Parenthesis*. For example, in Part 3, when the Welsh soldiers enter the frontline trenches late on Christmas Eve and pass men dislodging the body of a soldier in the muck, "patient of baptism […] Poor Johnny" (*IP* 43), Jones evokes in sequence, the nativity of Christ and Christ's forerunner John the Baptist. Johnny is a cognate form of the name John, read alongside a reference to baptism, the name evokes the forerunner who died first (by decapitation) before Christ, just as "Poor Johnny" died before the soldiers in Ball's Welsh platoon. These allusions subtly prefigure Christ's birth and thus also his death and the Resurrection, which in turn evoke the Second Coming and the end of the world; when juxtaposed with escalating violence, such images help to convey sympathy for the soldiers and the poignancy of their eventual deaths in Part 7.[92]

[92] Part 7 evokes the Passion of Christ with its subtitle "The Five Unmistakeable Marks" recalling both Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* from which the text quotes and the Five Holy Wounds to which it refers.

The following sections discuss the ways in which Jones employs Celtic myth in *In Parenthesis* to transform his modern subject matter – the events of the First World War – as a means of representing the despoliation inflicted on contemporary victims of military violence through the metamorphic power of the visuals documented in the poem. All three sections note the connections between the visual art Jones studied and that which he later produced after military service, and how his artistic practice relates to his literary writing. In this respect, *In Parenthesis* espouses a belief in art for art's sake. The war threatens Celtic art, knowledge of Welsh language, and an essential link to an ancient historical past. Jones explores a dominant aesthetic flattening or knocking down of high art and low art distinctions. Reading *In Parenthesis* within a Christian modernist mode reveals an essential tension between technological civilization and gratuitous culture, a tension which informs Jones's aesthetics and theory of inclusivity. In his Preface to *In Parenthesis*, Jones explains the essential aesthetic tension in the text as a "dilemma," one that emphasizes a contest between technology (with his example of chlorine gas and box-respirator masks) and humanity (xv). This dilemma is thematically important to the main text of *In Parenthesis*: mechanized warfare, and the alienation it instantiates, conflicts with bonds of kinship and what Jones theorizes as gratuitous goodness. Jones strives to outline the historical and artistic significance of this conflict. He sees ancient Christian ethics and Celtic art as "integral" to the British tradition (xiii). He discusses his search for human beauty as "formal goodness in a life [of war] singularly inimical, hateful…" (xiii). Jones portrays Celtic art and Anglo-Welsh identity as gratuity, a positive excess threatened and in contest with utility (figured in the motif of art given freely without

demand in opposition to portrayals of dehumanizing technology), which has its epiphany in modern mechanized war.

**The Uncovered Head**

*In Parenthesis* is a sustained representation of an Anglo-Welsh soldier revisiting his memories of the First World War. Following the dedication "to the memory" of comrades and a friend "killed in action," before beginning Part 1 of the poem, Jones quotes from a story in the second branch of *The Mabinogion* recounting a journey across Britain with the head of Bendigeidfran or "Brân the Blessed." Near the end of the second branch of *The Mabinogion*, the mortally wounded Brân asks that his head be severed from his body; he then ordains that his head will miraculously stay alive uncorrupted for four score and seven years, while his companions feast in a royal palace in Gwales in blissful forgetfulness, unaware of the passage of time, until the opening of a door facing Cornwall recalls them to their sorrow (Davies, *Magbinogion* 22-34). The opening of Jones's poem finds an analogue in the opening of this mythical door.[93] Hope Wolf has recently made a similar claim about Jones's watercolour, *Manawydan's Glass Door* (1931). Wolf notes

[93] Jones's epigraph deals with the enchantment of Brân's warriors, what Sioned Davies has called "The Assembly of the Noble Head" (*Mabinogion* 34). This sense of enchantment frames the poem. Jones quotes Guest's translation:

> Evil betide me if I do not open the door to know if that is true which is said concerning it. So he opened the door . . . and when they had looked, they were conscious of all the evils they had ever sustained, and of all the friends and companions they had lost and of all the misery that had befallen them, as if all had happened in that very spot; . . . and because of their perturbation they could not rest.

The passage refers to a time before the burial mentioned by Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Ray Howell, when Brân's warriors feel no remorse for the heavy losses they sustained during their war with Ireland. (The allusion could correspond thematically to the jingoism and excitement of British soldiers prior to experiencing the horrors of trench warfare.) After Brân's remaining men sever his head from his body, his spell allows them to entertain the head for years and not mourn the loss of their dead until they open the door. Once it is opened, however, they become deeply aggrieved and realize Brân is dead.

that while the painting depicts the door facing Cornwall in the second branch of *The Mabinogion* (which connects it to the epigraph Jones uses in *In Parenthesis*), she argues the work is essentially a "war painting" (91-92). Elizabeth Ward has observed that the material Jones draws from *The Mabinogion* for his epigraph (what Ward calls a "prologue") contributes to a sense of "composite 'antique' myth, Celtic in ambience," suggestive of both contemporary and legendary war (89-90). Jack Dudley has noted the difficulty critics face in reading Jones's war allusions coherently "as though poetic order could pattern a patternless war" (107). Dudley argues that while *In Parenthesis* "stages the slow unraveling and exhaustion of poetic order and unity in the scene of war," Jones uses "parataxis," a deliberate "placing side by side of disparate images, ideas, or phrases" (Dudley 104-105), which is a literary extension of Jones's art theory of combining contraries discussed above. His Celtic fragments speak to a lost wholeness—a coherent meaning that may be irretrievable—but as Stephen McInerney has argued, these fragments are the only means of its recovery (McInerney 70).

Jones frequently alludes to the story from *The Mabinogion* about the return of seven of Brân's warriors to the island of Britain following a battle in Ireland that shattered the Welsh-Irish alliance brought about by Branwen's marriage to the Irish King Matholwch and decimated the populations of both countries. In the ensuing war, Manawydan is one of only seven men to survive. Allusions to *The Mabinogion* in *In Parenthesis* inform dynamic tension between modern warfare and the evocation of Celtic archetypes throughout the text, a tension which anticipates Dai Greatcoat's claim in Part 4 to know "the smart on Branwen's cheek and the turbulence in Ireland" (*IP* 83). The second branch story underwrites the theme of military devastation throughout Jones's

text, reinforcing a sense of loss even in victory. The epigraph and Dai Greatcoat's famous boast strike an elegiac tone for the poem. To better understand this Celtic representational strategy, one can probe Jones's multifaceted depictions of severed heads and helmets. The motifs of covered and uncovered heads, heads severed from bodies, and head protection, form central metaphors in *In Parenthesis*, which ultimately become symbolic, revealing how Jones unites the Celtic past within a modern Christian outlook.

The poem begins with soldiers in the 55th Battalion setting out toward France. They board ships, and stare across the channel, looking east, the same direction as the head of Brân (*IP* 8). Lance-Corporal Aneirin Merddyn Lewis brings "metaphysical order to the bankruptcy" and quips to Private Ball, "there was a man in Bethesda late for the last bloody judgement" (*IP* 2). The allusion to Bethesda has a double meaning. The place name evokes the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. In the Gospel of John, Jesus heals a man in Bethesda because a large group of people are standing around waiting and the man is unable to get into the pool. Afterward Jesus tells him: "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (5: 5-9). His command shares affinity with Ball's orders to pick up his pack and march. Bethesda (Gwynedd) is also a Welsh town on the River Ogwen. A "man in Bethesda" is thus a placeholder for a man in the Welsh regiment like Ball late to arrive on parade. (It is also funny because it is impossible to be late for the last judgment.) The regiment's going to France is a kind of last judgement; they would have known by December 1915 (more than a year into the war) that many would die. The reference to "sheep" and "lambs" evokes the idiom *like lambs to the slaughter*, and the "cattle trucks" the soldiers ride out in contribute to the slaughter motif (*IP* 2, 6, 9).

With its wide breadth of allusions, the poem has both a Christian and a Celtic frame of reference. Brân's head is a positive symbol of protection for these Welsh soldiers. This significance is easily obscured by lines from the medieval poem "Y Gododdin," by the Welsh poet Aneirin, which Jones uses for headings at the beginning of each section of *In Parenthesis*. These headings appear deliberate and obvious; however, they are misleading. Jones had "finished writing the text of *In Parenthesis* before…[he] read the English [translation] of *Y Gododdin*" (*Dai Greatcoat* 174).[94] *Y Gododdin* exerted little influence on the composition of the poem; and is rather an organizing feature, "with the title of the parts" added after the poem was written (*Dai Greatcoat* 174); any affinity with the main text is coincidental. *The Mabinogion* translated by Charlotte Guest (1812-1895) forms an important part the interpretive framework of *In Parenthesis* whereas the lines from *Y Gododdin* are part of its decoration.

Jones's Welsh allusions still have a clear intention in the text—they reinforce the theme of military failure leading to the loss of life. *Y Gododdin* is a series of elegies for warriors who fell in battle against vastly superior numbers. While Malory's Arthur stories seem the greater influence and may have ignited Jones's initial interest in the Arthurian sagas, he relies on earlier accounts which pre-date *Le Morte d'Arthur* in *In Parenthesis* because these earlier texts thematize massive casualties and the devastation of war, realities which resonate with Jones's wartime experiences. In addition to *The Mabinogion* and *Y Gododdin*, Jones also refers to *Culhwch ac Owen*, a medieval story featuring the Court of Arthur and the hunting of the mythical pig, the Twrch Trwyth. Miranda

[94] According to a statement Jones made to Dilworth, which was relayed in private communication with the author, Jones read the Edward Anwyl translation of *Y Goddodin*, found in a copy of the *Cymrodorian Society journal*.

Aldhouse-Green and Ray Howell have noted how *Culhwch ac Owen* resembles Arthur's exploits in the medieval text *Preiddeu Annwfn*, and both texts thematize military failure:

> Arthur's expedition is successful but only at immense human cost; he loses nearly all his ships and forces in the raid. Such a Pyrrhic victory outcome to battles is something which also occurs in the *Four Branches* and *Culhwch.* It may be that, in the context of the literary composition by the Christian clergy, the message conveyed by such tales has overtones of morality and Christian ethics, in which disapproval of war for gain is expressed. The same idea seems to be present in early Irish mythic texts, such as the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, which is […] woven through with (disguised) Christian moral issues and, in particular, discouragement of cattle-raiding. (143)

These Welsh texts, which speak to Pre-Christian beliefs in Britain, were produced in the tradition of the scriptorium and emphasise the human cost of battle. As Aldhouse-Green and Howell have noted, we must receive them with the potentially anachronistic, scholastic outlook of medieval monastic centres in their practice of adapting folklore stories with a connection to an ancient and pre-Christian past while still reifying contemporary Christian moral beliefs. However, Jones largely sympathized with this moral and aesthetic outlook. His project also seeks to retain these histories of defeat so that they might come to bear on the present. One can summarize his Celtic project thusly: in *In Parenthesis* Jones depicts how modern war changes the nature of warfare and threatens a link to an ancient body of knowledge. In this sense the loss of what Jones construes as Celtic history is despoliation in the face of devastation. *In Parenthesis* is his attempt at historical retrieval.

Jones alludes to the severed head of the giant Bendigeidfran at the outset of *In Parenthesis*. Jones also inserted material about the severed head into a late draft of Part 4, as Dilworth has noted, and this later "insertion mostly concerns the exhuming of Bran's head by Arthur and the disastrous expeditionary wars that were a consequence of that exhumation" (*Shape of Meaning* 111). In "Branwen Daughter of Llŷr," during the war between Ireland and the Island of the Mighty (Britain), the giant Bendigeidfran, also known as Brân,[95] is fatally wounded with a poisoned spear:

> Then Bendigeidfran ordered his head to be cut off. 'And take my head,' he said. 'And carry it to the Gwynfryn in London, and bury it with its face toward France. And it will take you a long time […] you will the find the head to be as good company as it ever was when it was on me. (*Mabinogion* 32)

Brân promises that so long as his head lies buried in London facing east, Britain will be protected. Aldhouse-Green and Howell have noted the miraculous or supernatural implications of Brân's promise. They summarize this section of the story as follows: Brân "commands his depleted band to behead him; after sojourning with the head for some years […] Brân's men finally inter it in London facing east […] during the long time span between Brân's decapitation and the burial of his head in London it remains whole and uncorrupted" (Aldhouse-Green and Howell 134). *In Parenthesis* is set in a period of time after the head has been uncovered and this idea is thematically central to its interpretation.

Brân's head is a corporeal symbol of protection, and, in a sense, it is Eucharistic. Like Arthur and ultimately Christ, Brân has sacrificed himself for the good of his people.

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[95] Bendigeidfran is hereafter always referred to as Brân.

His head is "blessèd" both as a talisman for the soldiers in Ball's regiment and as part of Welsh folklore. Throughout *In Parenthesis*, there is a deep sense of the idea of men (or humanity) without a leader and the impact of the leader's death – Christ, Arthur, and Brân, – who do not really die but are inaccessible in their bodily form. Headlessness thus has an important analogue in the poem because of the tension between order and disorder. An acephalous army, a "headless" military or army without a hierarchy, is doomed. This theme plays out in a realistic sense in Part 7, after Lieutenant P.D.I. Jenkins's death, when Ball's platoon have no head to guide them. In a deeper, archetypal sense, the uncovering of Brân's head in London symbolizes a loss of protection in the face of imminent danger in France.

The uncovered head forms part of Dai Greatcoat's boast in Part 4, a central oration which Jones uses to pose questions about the universality of violence and the meaning of war. Rees has argued that the "oddly anachronistic […] Dai does not, in a literal sense, exist; he is the bardic, mythic voice of the Royal Welsh regiment, […] the universal soldier" (62-63). However, in light of what has been established above about Jones's habit of combining contraries, one can argue that Rees distorts the purpose of the boast when he argues that by "allowing Dai Greatcoat this forum," Jones is "endorsing the warrior ethic" (63). Vincent B. Sherry has discussed the form and "deeply antagonistic structure" of Dai Greatcoat's boast in what is now a classic article on the subject ("A New Boast" 118). Sherry calls the boast the imaginative centre of *In Parenthesis*:

> Occurring as the part of the middle section, the heroic Boast is of central importance to the war book. […] Dai's set of adventures includes the major

> conflicts of Western history, legend, and myth: Cain's murder of Abel, battles of the Bible and of the classical world, the heroic era of Arthurian Britain, the Roman guard at the crucifixion of Christ. […] Dai speaks as a kind of Universal Soldier, viewing life through the metaphor of war and managing to condense aeons of human experience into his own timeless present.[96]
>
> ("A New Boast" 113)

Sherry argues that while Jones restores the ancient form of the heroic boast, he also adapts it to his modern purpose by employing the effects of the modern dramatic monologue. This dramatic situation has formal unity with the poetic contest Jones sets up in Part 4 of *In Parenthesis*. The implied exchange between the speaker and listener is the staging ground Jones uses to challenge the audience with Dai's riddle ("A New Boast" 115). Sherry observes that (1) traditionally the speaker of a heroic boast "would be paired with another poet while reciting in [a] hall"; and that (2) in the poem, "Dai squares his shoulders as though to confront" another solider, Nobby Clark ("A New Boast" 114). Sherry brilliantly excavates Jones's allusions in Dai's boast, noting that the riddles and problems of active passivity in war posed by Dai are ultimately resolved by Christ's redemptive suffering. But Sherry neglects the image of Brân's head entirely, failing to see Dai's discussion of the head as part of what Dilworth calls both a "metamorphic aesthetic" and a prayer "to prevent expeditionary war" (*Shape of Meaning* 117, 113).

Some rehearsal of the boast is required to get a footing in the narrative. Jones provides little description of the speaker, only that he "adjusts his slipping shoulder-

[96] Dilworth has echoed Sherry's claim about the centre, arguing that the boast is "structurally, spatially, and thematically the centre of *In Parenthesis.* A sort of poem-within-the-poem, his boast brings into focus most of its host poem's motifs" (*Shape of Meaning* 108).

straps, wraps close his misfit outsize greatcoat—he articulates his English with an alien care" (*IP* 79). This Welsh soldier prides himself on having been in every battle since the beginning of time. Dai makes a range of historical and biblical allusions in the opening of his boast:

> I was with Abel when his brother found him, under the green tree.
> I built a shit-house for Artaxerxes.
> I was the spear in Balin's hand
> that made waste King Pellam's land.
> […]
> I took the smooth stones of the brook, I was with Saul
> playing before him. (*IP* 79-80)

He was present at the first murder, the First Persian Empire, and claims to be the same David who used stones and a sling to kill The Philistine's champion, Goliath. This latter image informs the motif of severed heads: after killing Goliath, David is brought before Saul's court carrying the severed head of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:57). The head of Goliath is one instance in which paintings and visual imagination exert influence over *In Parenthesis*, particularly when Jones refers to "David" and "Jonathan" (*IP* 42, 163, 221 n.11). When David first meets Jonathan (appearing before Saul) he is holding the severed head of Goliath. The suggestion of this image is analogous with the head of Brân the Blessèd in *The Mabinogion*. Jones was intimately familiar with the story of David and Goliath and David and Jonathan. As an art student in London, Jones might possibly have studied Cima da Conegliano's painting of two boys, which came to the British National Gallery in 1910:

Fig. 6 “David and Jonathan” (Cima da Conegliano, c. 1507).

The painting depicts two boys – David and Jonathan – the figure on the left holds a severed head and balances a sword on his shoulder. Stones and a stream figure prominently in the foreground.[97]

The implied image of Goliath’s severed head in Dai’s boast anticipates his lengthy discussion of Brân and the severed head motif. Dai establishes the head’s protective powers and then argues that its uncovering is part of the reason these Welsh soldiers find themselves at war in France. Dai claims to have helped bury the head, saying “I trowelled the inhuming mortar”:

I saw the blessèd head set under

that kept the narrow sea inviolate.

[97] Cima da Conegliano’s painting was given the English title, “David and Jonathan (?)” by the British National Gallery (NG2505). See an enhanced version of the image here, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-battista-cima-da-conegliano-david-and-jonathan.

To keep the Land, to give the yield:

under the White Tower […]

the beneficent artisans knew well how to keep

the king's head to keep the land inviolate.

The Bear of the Island: he broke it in his huge pride, and over-reach of his imperium.

The Island Dragon.

The Bull of Battle

(this is the third woeful uncovering).

Let maimed kings lie—let be

O let the guardian head

keep back—bind savage sails, lock the shield-wall, nourish

the sowing.

The War Duke

The Director of Toil—

he burst the balm-cloth, unbricked the barrow

(cruel feet march because of this

ungainly men sprawl over us). (*IP* 81-82)

Arthur is figured in negative metamorphic imagery as "Bear" and "Dragon" of the island, and "Bull of Battle." But this is only one figuration evoked in Dai's boast. As Dilworth notes, the Arthur evoked by the above lines "breaks the primitive sacrament of the buried 'guardian head'" but there are "two Arthur-figures" – one negative and one potentially positive – "in direct symbolic conflict, for the buried head of Brân is correlative to

sleeping Arthur as potential redeemer," while the other "inadvertently wastes the land" (*Shape of Meaning* 116).

In the boast, Jones establishes a dynamic tension between mythical/ancient time and the contemporary present. On a realistic level, the allusions to "The War Duke" and "Director of Toil" correspond to positions in the British high command. According to Dai, their actions have caused a symbolic uncovering—"feet march because of this"—and he suggests the Welsh are outnumbered ("ungainly men sprawl over us"). Dai equates military officials directing the British Army in the First World War with the ancient councillors that urged Britain to go to war: "He urges with repulsive lips, he counsels: he nets us into expeditionary war" (*IP* 83). Given the imminent threat of violence during Britain's war with Germans, Dai's invocation of Brân's head becomes a prayer for protection in the present:

> O Land!—O Brân lie under.
> The chrism'd eye that watches the French-men
> that wards under
> that keeps us
> that brings the furrow-fruit,
> keep the land, keep us keep the islands adjacent. […]
> O blessèd head hold the striplings from the narrow sea.
> I marched, sixty thousand marched […] because of foreign machinations,
> (we came no more again) […]
> O Brân confound the counsel of the councillors, O blessèd head, hold the striplings from the narrow sea. […]

I knew the smart on Branwen's cheek and the turbulence in Ireland (*IP* 82-83)

Though not on equal terms, the symbolic power of Brân's head resonates with the Passion of Christ, which Dai evokes near the end of the boast when he claims to have witnessed the death of Christ as a soldier in Jerusalem:

I watched them work the terrible embroidery that He put on.

I heard there, sighing for the Feet so shod.

I saw cock-robin gain

his rosy breast. I heard Him cry […]

I saw Him die. (*IP* 83)

Brân shares some affinity with Christ because his death implies redemption and peace. In this sense, the boast unites Celtic and Christian imaginative strands in the poem. Francine Brooks has claimed this unity is crucial to Jones's aesthetics, arguing that Dai Greatcoat's speech is an Anglo-Welsh inheritance "which Jones associated with the Boast of the Welsh bard 'Taliessin at the court of Maelgwn' and with that of the 'Englishman' Widsith" (261). Brooks also notes the centrality of the word-hoard as an imaginative space within boasts in both *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* (64-65). The key difference between this dramatic monologue and others in Jones's oeuvre is that Dai's boast primarily stages the riddle it ends with:

You ought to ask: Why,

what is this,

what's the meaning of this.

Because you don't ask,

although the spear-shaft

drips,

there's neither steading—not a roof-tree. (*IP* 84)

Dai questions, in a universal and epic context, the meaning of war across centuries of warfare. All readers are implicated in this question, as Sherry has argued ("A New Boast" 113-126), because war has existed throughout history, universally relevant according to Dai, and inextricable from life. Maintaining active passivity when surrounded by widespread violence is the modern context that besets Jones in this work.

As has been shown, the image of the severed head forms a symbol through which Jones imbues the reality (and extreme violence) of modern warfare with ancient warfare and the Celtic past in *In Parenthesis*. The image bespeaks real violence (and is scary). For instance, in Part 7, Jones portrays an image of devastation he may have witnessed at the Somme during the Battle of Mametz Wood. Ball's comrades "put up a flare" which allows them to see "the severed head of '72 Morgan, its visage grins like the Cheshire cat and full grimly" alongside:

many men's accoutrements medleyed and strewn up so down and service jackets bearing below the shoulder-numerals the peculiar sign of their battalions.

And many of these shields he had seen knights bear beforehand. (*IP* 180)

The Celtic image (Brân's head) is still symbolically positive and redemptive, but it finds antithesis in the head of '72 Morgan. One recalls the humorous paradox put forward by the King and Queen of Hearts' executioner, who refuses to behead the bodiless Chesire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* arguing that "you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from" (*Alice* 66). The image is grimly ironic in the context in which Jones uses it, and serves as a key instance of his deep attraction to oppositions.

He combines contraries to create dynamic tension throughout *In parenthesis* and this practice establishes imaginative depth in the writing.

**Head coverings: The Lion, the Unicorn, and the Pickelhaube**

*In Parenthesis* won Jones the Hawthornden Prize in 1938. When he accepted the award in London, Jones remarked that "those same problems that face the painter confront the writer in almost identical proportion" (Jones qtd. In *DJU* 794). As with the severed heads of *In Parenthesis* which have their basis in mythology and scripture, the unicorn is another dynamic image with positive and negative associations that underpin Jones's visual aesthetics. He made several drawings and engravings of unicorns in the early-30s. Dilworth notes two important examples, the engraving of the "unicorn […] with a broken classical column" (*DJU* 510), and *He Frees the Waters in Helyon* (1932), a piece which corresponds directly with an allusion Dai makes in his boast in Part 4 (*DJU* 596). These artworks reveal a new aspect of Jones; they are examples of simultaneous, more-or-less received form, and Joycean-influenced; and they correspond to "The Lady and the Unicorn" tapestries, composed of six pieces now held in the Musée Cluny in Paris, which Jones saw in 1928 (*DJU* 435).

The unicorn forms yet another double image for Jones. On one hand, the unicorn's horn has traditional affinity with Christ, but also connotes German helmets, creating ambiguity in combination. From the point of view of John Ball in *In Parenthesis*, this locates the symbolically good and the bad together. The unicorn image has its basis primarily in romance, but it allows us to see Jones working within his Celtic aesthetic from the mythical, through romance, and into realism. He depicts the emotional and

realistic situation of modern warfare with fidelity. As we will see, Jones does not idealize war or romanticize historical situations in *In Parenthesis*, his allusions to literary romance add poignancy by establishing emotional and imaginative depth.

Halfway through Part 5 of *In Parenthesis*, Jones includes in the list of weapons and personnel assembled in preparation for the Battle of the Somme, "One thousand a hundred and one unicorn horns for a pride of lions" (*IP* 125). Pictured together, the lion and unicorn symbolize Britain. Both animals are heraldic supporters in the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom. The traditional enmity between these figures, depicted in British nursery rhyme and in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking-Glass* (1871), and the impending threat of violence, as Dilworth has argued, animate Jones's motif of "childhood's end" in *In Parenthesis*.[98] But Jones significantly portrays the contest as uneven. The number of unicorn horns vastly exceeds the number of lions in an average pride, and since lions are realistic and unicorns belong to romantic fantasy, the discrepancy reveals the greater power of romance in comparison to realism. The lion's fight with the unicorn figured poetically informs the escalation of the violence at the Somme. The disparity in numbers suggests military and political significance that helps structure interpretation of the final battle of *In Parenthesis* in which one sees affinity between devastating British casualties and the outnumbered lions and associates the unicorns with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. But this can be taken

[98] Dilworth argues convincingly that the motif of "childhood's end" in the poem "involves a series of allusions to works by Lewis Carroll, which underline the horror of war partly by recalling the protected world of childhood" (*Shape of Meaning* 76). He notes that the assault on Mametz wood, which the battalion is preparing for, "involves an escalation of the fight between the lion and the unicorn in the nursery rhyme and in Carroll's looking glass land" (*Shape of Meaning* 78). But Dilworth fails to expand on this insight in his more recent study, *Reading David Jones* (2008). Sherry also mentions Jones's allusions to Carroll's work and *The Hunting of The Snark* in Part 7 of *In Parenthesis*, noting the affinity between the "five Unmistakable marks" and the five wounds of Christ. See his essay, "'Unmistakable marks': symbols and voices in David Jones's *In Parenthesis*."

a step further, to where the images have associations with head coverings: lions evoke British Imperialism and the Crown, and Unicorns, in this wartime context, evoke German helmets.

The spiraling spike protruding from a unicorn's forehead resembles the Pickelhaube (spiked helmet worn by German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers), which has one elongated point projecting from its top. When Jones writes, "when unicorns break cover / and come down…the whole woodland rocks where these break their horns" (*IP* 168), he alludes to the legendary creature but also to the spike of German helmets rising above the trench line—literally breaking cover.[99] Unicorn horns, from medieval time until the eighteenth century when specimens were revealed to be tusks of the narwhal, were considered extremely rare. One specimen forms part of the imperial sceptre for the Habsburg dynasty, the Ainkhürn ("unicorn horn"), which has symbolic associations with the Austrian Empire.[100] According to Julia Teresa Friehs, the Ecclesiastical Treasury (Geistliche Schatzkammer) still contains an Ainkhürn:

> In 1564 the brothers – Charles II of Inner Austria, Maximilian II and Ferdinand of Tyrol – determined that…the 'Ainkhürn', in fact a narwhal tusk, was thought to be the horn of a unicorn and was the most valuable item in early modern cabinets

[99] The image also evokes the ferocity of unicorn in its depiction as the re'em (רְאֵם) in Hebrew mythology. The re'em is mentioned eight times in the Hebrew Bible usually translated as ox but often mistranslated as unicorn (Job 39:9-10, Deuteronomy 33:17, Numbers 23:22, 24:8; Psalms 22:21, 29:6, and 92:10; and Isaiah 34:7). The mistranslation of "unicorn" appears in the *Jerome Vulgate*, and *King James Bible* with which Jones was most familiar. The enmity between lions and unicorns in *In Parenthesis* echoes the archetypal enmity between the figures described in Rabbinical Literature, particularly when David encounters the re'em and prays to God to send a lion so that he might escape to safety (see Midr. Teh. xxii. 22).

[100] Julia Friehs notes that the Habsburg treasury contained the unicorn horn and the "agate bowl, the 'Holy Grail'… alleged to have caught the blood of Christ and … of huge religious significance." Both items would have been of immense interest to David Jones. See "The horn of a unicorn and the Holy Grail: the Habsburg treasure" on the University of Vienna's *World of the Habsburgs* website, http://www.habsburger.net/en/chapter/horn-unicorn-and-holy-grail-habsburg-treasure.

> of curiosities. It was considered to possess magical powers and was regarded as a symbol of Christ.

Given his wide reading in medieval history, Jones may have known of this connection;[101] but certainly, as a painter and engraver, his deep interest in unicorn imagery would have made it easy for him to associate the image of the unicorn horn with the point of the Pickelhaube on the German line.

The spiked helmet is not referred to in the poem but was a standard image in anti-German war posters and the helmet most associated with the German military prior to its phasing out in 1916.[102] The many references to helmets in the poem are to the British "saucer" helmets (*IP* 157; 101, 103, 213 n.1). Jones also frequently distinguishes the unicorn by its horn when referring to it in the text. Dai Greatcoat closes his boast with an image of a unicorn: "the Single Horn thrusting / by night-stream margin / in Helyon" (*IP* 84). Jones clarifies the allusion in a note stating that "in morning after sunrise," the unicorn purifies the river Marah by dipping "his horn into the stream" to remove the poison in the water so animals may safely drink of it (*IP* 210). Again, such action makes the unicorn "a Christ-figure of sorts" (Tuttle 30). Dilworth explains that "as the Horn, not the Unicorn, Dai is no more responsible for the good he does than for the evil he commits as the sword in Balin's hand…As man and symbolic Unicorn Horn, he may be the instrument of benign deity for in medieval iconography the unicorn symbolizes Christ" (*Shape of Meaning* 114). The unicorn typifies the evocative power that romance exerts

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[101] For a discussion of the range of Jones's reading before the writing of *In Parenthesis*, see chapters one to three of Dilworth's biography, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (2017). Jones's knowledge of "The Lion and the Unicorn" nursery rhyme preceded the writing of *In Parenthesis*.

[102] Dilworth notes that Jones associated the "ominous issuing of metal shrapnel helmets" with spring 1916, and the final events of the poem occur in July 1916 (*Shape of Meaning* 43).

over realism in *In Parenthesis*. It is one of Jones's more elusive allusions with connections to literary romance, helmets, history, scripture, redemption, and is an essentially gratuitous image. The allusion to the lion's fight with the unicorn is thus an important aspect of the contest between utility and gratuitous making—the central conflict of *In Parenthesis*, which Dilworth has discussed extensively (*Shape of Meaning* 64-72).

Jones's realistic depiction of the First World War and specifically the Battle of the Somme is seemingly at odds with his allusions to romance, and critics have frequently struggled to reconcile the poem's realistic content with such complex allusions. The most famous of these critics is Paul Fussell, who has argued that every "total experience of the war is 'romantic' in the strict sense of the word. Every successful memoir of that experience shares something with traditional literary 'romance'" (130). But Fussell interprets *In Parenthesis* as "curiously ambiguous and in-decisive," arguing that "*In Parenthesis* poses for itself the problem of re-attaching traditional meanings to the unprecedented actualities of the war," but he incorrectly interprets Jones's allusions to romance as "overtly patriotic and even propagandistic" (Fussell 146-147). Dilworth has cogently (and convincingly) refuted Fussell's argument (*Shape of Meaning* 94-107).[103] Jones sees continuity between ancient and modern warfare. As noted above, Dai Greatcoat poses a riddle about the meaning of all past war; but the modern war at hand in *In Parenthesis* threatens to annihilate the historical/spiritual connection to the past, and

[103] Earlier Jones critics have taken issue with Fussell's influential reading. Sherry, for instance, has argued "Fussell finds problems in the allusive and symbolic textures of the work, protesting, but too simplistically, that heroic allusions and religious symbols serve only to glorify an inglorious war. His objection can be understood, at the same time, as a baffled reaction to the sheer difficulty of Jones's symbols" (Sherry, "Unmistakable Marks" 63). In *David Jones Mythmaker*, Elizabeth Ward attempts to refute Fussell but is unsuccessful because her reading only deals with the surface events of the poem.

Fussell either fails to notice or rejects such continuity even though Jones's allusions largely support Fussell's view of war as utter catastrophe, with "its participants as victims" (Fussell 147).

Moreover, Jones's allusions to romance play a unique role in fictionalizing the past in *In Parenthesis*. Looking at Northrop Frye's "The Mythos of Summer" in *Anatomy of Criticism,* which Fussell cites frequently in *The Great War and Modern Memory,* we see that "romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream":

> it has socially a curiously paradoxical role. In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy. […] Yet there is a genuinely "proletarian" element in romance too which is never satisfied with its various incarnations, and in fact the incarnations themselves indicate that no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again […] looking for new hopes and desires […] marked by its extraordinary persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space. (Frye 186)

Subjective intensity distinguishes romance as a fictional mode in *In Parenthesis*. The common foot soldier's point of view governs the narrative, but rather than glorify death, which could, as Fussell claims, idealize war, allusions to literary romance increase the poignancy of the deaths of fellow soldiers.

For instance, in Part 7, when a soldier receives "a cushy one" (that is, a non-serious wound), and "relaxes" to wait for the stretcher-bearers, Jones tensions his portrayal of the enemy barrage with imagery from nursery rhyme and romance literature:

> Some of yer was born wiv jam on it clicked lucky and favoured
>
> pluckt brand from burning
>
> and my darling from unicorn horn with only a minute to go,
>
> whose wet-nurse cocked a superstitious eye to see his happy
>
> constellation through the panes. (*IP* 158-159)

Because his wound is only superficial, the "lucky" man is saved from carnage. Here, the "unicorn horn" is a threat – a sharp instrument used for impaling, like a bayonet. The words "darling" and "wet-nurse" connote the protection of childhood but, when one considers the assault as context, also suggest an obliteration of childhood. This fits Jones's vision of mechanized warfare: death is a calculated chemical efficiency, not a fight between lions and unicorns, or a man-to-man combat between the 38th Welsh division and the Germans—as romance and jingoistic propaganda would have one believe. A few pages earlier, Jones makes this same comparison in a mythical context when he compares the "Properly organised chemists" who have "more riving power" than the havoc wreaked by the "Twrch Trwyth" who kills several of Arthur's men in the *Culhwch and Olwen* story (*IP* 155).

One soldier is lucky and not seriously wounded, but the majority of men are not "pluckt" and saved from death. Jones's reference to "jam" correlates with the "bread" mentioned in "The Lion and the Unicorn" nursery rhyme. Alice recites the rhyme in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

> The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown: The Lion beat the Unicorn all round the town. Some gave them white bread, some gave them brown; some gave them plum-cake and drummed them out of town. (*Alice* 180)

"The Lion and the Unicorn" chapter of Carroll's *Looking-Glass* fits with acute affinity the moment in *In Parenthesis* when "unicorns break cover" for the counter-assault in Mametz Wood (*IP* 168):

> The next moment soldiers came running through the wood, at first in twos and threes, then ten or twenty together, and at last in such crowds that they seemed to fill the whole forest. (*Alice* 176)

Carroll's opening sentence corresponds with the scene of oncoming assault that Jones describes and follows his own "rule" for deploying allusions, namely that "one must have an experiential, concrete, contactual matter in the narrative that corresponds in some way or other with the quoted situation or name" (Jones qtd. in C. Hughes 22).

In sum, Jones's allusions to "The Lion and the Unicorn," Carroll's *Alice* novels, and *The Hunting of the Snark* serve also to reinforce the motif of childhood's end in which the implied protection of childhood terminates or becomes meaningless in battle. This is seen most distinctly in Part 7 when "No one sings Lully lully / for the mate whose blood runs down" (*IP* 174). Further, the underlying allusions to romance throughout this section of the poem, juxtaposed with the escalation of the violence in Mametz Wood, help to establish sympathy for the soldiers. Rees has argued that the men are seemingly portrayed as heroic figures, "but victims first" (123). Jones celebrates their defeat as passive actors without glorifying the conflict they find themselves in.

Allusions to romance are thus part of Jones's aesthetic of including everything that suggests the particular in the narrative. As he indicates in the preface, he excludes no detail "necessary to the understanding of the whole" (*IP* x). This practice has been misunderstood by critics like Fussell who find fault with Jones for being too inclusive.

One of his complaints about the poem in comparison to Jones's visual art is particularly illuminating in this regard:

> the poem is badly overwritten, just as the frontispiece drawing by Jones is too crowded with everything he can recall [...] It is the visual equivalent of diction like *millesimal*, *brumous*, *pernitrk*, *inutile*. (Fussell 154)

Overwriting and crowding are byproducts of Jones's gratuitous making; the word "inutile" (not especially abstruse) touches on the central contest of *In Parenthesis* in which utility and efficiency oppose gratuitous making. Fussell's issue with the poem, in this respect, may come down to his inability to see the narrative events. Jones's technique of abstracting forms causes aesthetic flattening. Dilworth has claimed this technique is a form of weaving and abstract patterning that is part of Jones's Celtic "metamorphic aesthetic":

> Looked at spatially instead of temporally, the motifs of the poem contribute to its form in another way. Both on the narrative surface and in the allusive substrata, motifs tend to dovetail with one another, partly because of shared allusive matrices. I compared their interrelationship with weaving. (*Shape of Meaning* 117)

Dilworth's interpretation is convincing given how frequently weaving imagery recurs in the text (*IP* 20, 32, 35, 59, 72, 165). Fussell's comment about the similarity between the text of *In Parenthesis* and its frontispiece also suggests something extraordinarily important for Jones: the fundamental unity of all the arts.[104]

[104] As stated, Dilworth has argued convincingly for the critical need to read visually as well as in a literary sense. He claims that Jones's engraving of "The Deluge" is a work of "literary imagination," and that Jones was "profoundly convinced [of] the fundamental unity of all the arts, for the illustration … is at once the

The unity of all the arts continues to influence contemporary discussions of Jones's aesthetics. Rosie Lavan has suggested that the war presents a "challenge" to communicate, and Jones's achievements in visual art and poetry "demand that we think comparatively, across genres and media, to isolate the specific problems … of making sense in language" (Lavan 92).[105] This is an important theme in Jones's oeuvre given that war represents a crisis of communicating, "frustrat[ing] efforts to articulate experience in words" (Lavan 92), which is an aesthetic problem as much as it is a cultural crisis. In a 2011 study of Jones's form, Saska Iris Jain argued that Jones's "elusive style" is meant to communicate with the common man, and the "key device" of *In Parenthesis* "is his use of footnotes as an esthetic marker on the page and syntactic complement to form and content" (39-40). Jones's endnotes, which Jain mistakenly calls footnotes, are an extension of the poem's form constituting Jones's (vital) "overwriting" (to borrow Fussell's qualifier). Jones paints myopic detail over the general outline of a lived experience, so that the full text gains psychological force by honouring small details from the past that are potentially threatened by exclusion from the formal historical record or by the loss of memory. Only "some" notes may be regarded as "integral" to the narrative (*IP* xiv). Had Jones noted everything that might elude "the common man" (Jain 40), he would have limited the meaning of the text and greatly reduced the pleasure of reading it; there would be little cause to re-read the poem. The endnotes enact a recovery and elaboration of vital detail. This practice has an analogue in the text, especially when we

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apex of his development as an engraver and one of the most important moments in the history of literary Modernism" ("The Deluge" 5).

[105] Whole collections of essays have been written on the interaction of Jones's verbal and visual art. (See Anne Price-Owen, and Belinda Humfrey, Eds, *David Jones: Diversity and Unity*, University of Wales Press, 2000).

consider how in one sense the unicorn evokes Christ's redemption and in another sense the opposing German line, which comprise contrary allusions that Jones does not explain in his notes, and which can thus reveal for us a clear distinction to the depth of meaning that romance and realism acquire at receding levels in the narrative.

**Conclusions: "the Celtic cycle […] a deep water troubling"**

Jones's writing is difficult. But that perceived difficulty in *In Parenthesis* follows from the author's representational strategy of exploiting the creative potential of opposites and combining contraries to generate emotional depth in the narrative. In this chapter, in terms of particulars, we have been restricted mostly to severed heads and helmets, but hopefully one has a sense of the gratuitous and discursive energy elicited by Jones's imagery. His allusions go together and run deep. In his preface, Jones justifies his deployment of simple images by how these in turn should elicit a shower of allusions, writing,

> No one, I suppose, however much not given to association, could see infantry in tin-hats, with ground-sheets over their shoulders, with sharpened pine-stakes in their hands, and not recall '. . . or may we cram. Within this wooden O . . .' (*IP* xi)

Jones follows the quotation with a long list of allusions. Underneath all of these literary references respecting British heritage, he claims that "the Celtic cycle […] lies, a subterranean influence as a deep water troubling, under every tump in this Island" (*IP* xi). His pervading sense of Celtic metamorphosis is subtle and visual throughout *In Parenthesis*, and perhaps best depicted in Part 4, when some of the soldiers journey back through the previous night's trenches on Christmas day. There is an utter metamorphosis

of the landscape that evokes hell for the second time. The "maze-likeness" of the group's going, their "blind doubling," recalls the "grinning and the gnashing" and the lack of "any light in that place" from Part 3 (*IP* 87, 31). The evocation of a maze gives the trenches visual affinity with Annwn, the Welsh Otherworld that Arthur enters with his army. The men smell "the same stenches" of rotting bodies "remembered from the darkness" (*IP* 93). Their morning mission turns out to be pointless, ("No party wanted here corporal"), the work they set out to do has already been done, military communication has broken down somewhere in the chain of command, but Jones poignantly establishes the significance of the path as part of the timeless/eternal, archetypal journey into Hell. In Jones's writing and art, which are both based in his experience, warfare is part of life, and certainly aspects of his experiences in the First World War were hellish from the perspective of the non-combatant.

But *In Parenthesis* is not, strictly speaking, life writing or memoir. David Blamires has argued that the "autobiographical element, strong though it obviously is, has been subordinated to an over-riding poetic intent, which has created of this material an independent work of art" (74). (And this obtains in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as well, as is discussed in the last chapter of the present study.) I have argued elsewhere that aesthetic flattening animates *In Parenthesis* because the war threatens artistic and literary ambitions, with "art for art's sake" particularly under threat (LaBine 65). Such aesthetic levelling corresponds to an actual, real levelling and destruction. The preceding analysis has shown how this flattening is an aspect of Jones's Celtic aesthetic theory, with the aim of establishing his respect for "art for art's sake." Readers apprehend Jones's aesthetic in the contest between gratuity and utility, especially when they see how this conflict figures

in the text as technological civilization threatening culture. We realize a deeper understanding of the importance of myth and romance in such events as the uncovering of Brân's head signifying the severing of a connection to ancient warfare, in the power of chemists rivaling the might of the Twrch Trwyth, and in unicorns metamorphosed into helmets, to rehearse but the most relevant instances of Jones' synthesizing Celtic aesthetic in *In Parenthesis*.

## Chapter 3

The previous chapter discussed David Jones's sense of the Celtic aesthetic as a combination of contraries, interwoven in its form, metamorphic in its power, and Eucharistic in its approach to turning images into symbols. This chapter focuses on the Scottish Orcadian poet and novelist George Mackay Brown (1921-1996), a writer who shared Jones's interest in Eucharistic anamnesis. What Jones understood as the anamnetic, time-uniting presence of Jesus in the Eucharist deeply affected his mythic imagination, so much so that he came to regard the Roman Catholic Mass not only as a sacred rite but also as the supreme work of art. This understanding of the Eucharistic celebration as art and an expression of the unity of all time made accessible through Christ are central motifs in Brown's oeuvre. As we will see, Brown gains imaginative access to all time through his Catholicism and licenses his portrayals of Celtic history.

David Annwn has also used Jones's understanding of the Mass to interpret Brown's writing. Annwn deploys Jones's key essay, "Art and Sacrament," to express Brown's theory of art:

> In "Art and Sacrament" David Jones wrote, "As it was the whole world that [Christ] was redeeming he involved all mankind […] in that act. If the very mean or channel of redemption is intricated in Ars we conclude that Ars and man are inseparable." […] For Brown, the successive 'translations' of Christ's loving act mirror that act. (Annwn 211)

Annwn was one of the first critics to connect Jones and Brown, examining their complementary portrayals of Catholicism and comparing their poetic projects.[106] He

[106] Four years after the publication of Annwn's study in late-June 1988, William Blissett and George Johnston visited George Mackay Brown. They documented the visit in *Inward of Poetry* (2011), a selection

writes that to "the Catholic artist the Christian story is the fulfilment of the collective strivings of Creation. Thus Jones finds Christ placing himself in the order of signs. Brown finds images of Christ's life everywhere" (Annwn 22). As Annwn notes, Brown's use of Orkney as a historical setting and an endless source of narrative emphasizes an instance of "recurrence and similarity which at one extreme folds history from the phenomenon of time […] to Brown the word is primal and contains sacramental power as palpable as its accumulated historical meanings" (157). This sacramental power has a unifying effect on the modes of writing Brown employs, establishing a synthesis "at the centre of Brown's art" (Annwn 157). Annwn's method of applying a synthesizing framework to Brown's use of various fictional/poetic modes is a productive way of interpreting his literary aesthetics, especially when one considers the disparity between Brown's interests in traditional Orkney life and his modernist literary influences.

Under such shared influences, Jones and Brown developed similar theories of Celtic forms of writing. Sabine Schmid, for instance, has noted how Jones's sacramental art theory informs Brown's approach to modernizing Celtic poetry.[107] Schmid situates Brown's poetry within Jones's theory of Celtic interweaving (Schmid 205-208): interwoven poetic lines are, Jones suggests, "meandering (but by no means an aimless meandering), strongly rhythmic but flexible, in which every peripheral part is just as essential as the more central parts" (*Letters to a Friend*, 89). Richard Griffiths has also argued that Jones and Brown share similar form and content. Griffiths claims importantly

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of letters, edited by Sean Kane, who claims Johnston "acted as emissary" when meeting Brown in Orkney (275). In April 2019, Thomas Dilworth asked Blissett whether Brown had read *The Anathemata*. Blissett "replied, 'oh, I think so' but had no specific memories of their conversation other than that Brown had read and admired Jones" (Email to author).

[107] Schmid closes her study by connecting Brown and Jones: "Another poet whose interests overlap considerably with Brown's is David Jones, whose essays on art and sacrament, to be found in *Epoch and Artist* (1959), would have to be scrutinised" (276).

that in Brown's novels, as in *In Parenthesis*, "poetry and prose are usually indistinguishable" (229).

Brown lived in the Orkney islands north of the Scottish mainland nearly his entire life. He wrote almost exclusively about local life and culture, and yet his literary efforts have been widely lauded by the likes of Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney,[108] and the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Lowell.[109] This is partly because, despite his intense focus on Orkney, Brown writes in a distinctly modern voice emphasizing the possibility of Orkney's universality. Like his father, Brown was born in Stromness and rarely left the Orkney islands, whereas his mother was a native Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic) speaker who moved to Orkney from the Sutherland region in the Highlands prior to her marriage. Brown's writing aims to reconcile his Gaelic origins (and outlook) within an Orkney setting. His understanding of place, migration, and historical forces, resembles the view Jones takes—that conventions of modernity juxtapose and, in some situations, threaten to annihilate timeless traditions.

As was shown in the last chapter, Jones's writing posits a theory of retrieving fragments. Brown shares this impulse. Simon Hall has called Brown "a despairing antiquarian, [who] records what he sees in order to rescue it from oblivion" (127). Paul Barnaby has reflected on Brown's place in geocriticism and his deeply inflected narrative

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[108] Seamus Heaney has argued that Brown deserves acclaim because "he transforms everything by passing it through the eye of the needle of Orkney," achieving a kind of universal view. Sean O'Hagan has affirmed Heaney's interpretation, noting that by using this transformative approach, Brown adheres to Blake's belief that art should be of "the minute particular" (O'Hagan, "Scottish poet's epitaph"). Brown and Heaney were friends for many years. John McGahern has noted, for instance, that when Brown received "the Society of Authors' Travelling Fellowship in 1968, he refused to travel further than Ireland, where he stayed with his friend and admirer Seamus Heaney" (*Love* 405). (Heaney's comment about the "needle of Orkney" is frequently printed on Brown's books, and Maggie Fergusson's biography of Brown originally had the subtitle "Through the eye of a needle.")

[109] Unfortunately Robert Lowell did not write about his visit to George Mackay Brown in his recently published *Memoirs* (2022) edited by Steven Gould Axelrod and Grzegorz Kosc.

materialist associations with Orkney. Excavating such materialist associations represents the longstanding focus of most scholarship devoted to Brown's work. Nigel Wheale has discussed the importance of Orkney space and insularity in Brown's first novel, *Greenvoe* (1972). Wheale argues that Brown's writing forms part of an Orcadian "self-definition" (37), noting that Brown's conversion to Catholicism in 1961 set him apart from Presbyterian traditions in Orkney, yet it provided him with access to "the transforming, sacramental nature of ritual" that animates Brown's representational strategy in his fictional project (Wheale 44).

All of Brown's fiction explores Orkney across time. Berthold Schoene has discussed narrative fragmentation and mythical closure as an aspect of Brown's work. Neil Roberts has identified this focus as Orkney's "historical continuity and the forces that threaten it" (181).[110] Roberts summarizes Brown's interest in local Orkney as part of a wider aesthetics "interested in art, religion and ritual, their relations to each other and to the agricultural basis of civilisation," and focused on "the relation of pagan to Christian religion, and of the Word of Christ to the word of the poet" (183). Annwn implicitly agrees with this view, arguing that "Brown, like David Jones, would place emphasis on the progress of belief, up to and including the Marian religion. In *Magnus* Brown shows the shortcomings of [human sacrifice in] Neolithic and Aztec religions. Heaney, however, looks back to the ceremonies and mysteries of Celtic lore without which contemporary religion seems shallow" (16). This Celtic element is important for Brown, and his second novel, *Magnus* (1973), establishes his affinity with Jones more directly than any of his

[110] In his insightful and substantial review essay of *Greenvoe*, Roberts discusses Brown's aesthetics in relation to his early short fiction published in the collections, *A Time to Keep* (1969) and *A Spell for Green Corn* (1970). Though ostensibly only a review, this important essay is an early piece of scholarship that categorizes Brown's prose and poetry up to the early-1970s.

poetry. Griffiths claims, "[t]hough he is a very different writer from David Jones, Mackay [Brown] shares some of Jones's universal view of human experience, centred on the Mass—and *Magnus* can, in certain respects, be seen more as a poem than as a novel" (229). This coupling of Jones and Brown speaks to their shared preoccupation with art and Catholicism, and their similar understandings of Celtic aesthetic as a decorative strategy that incorporates weaving.[111]

Brown interweaves medieval and modern histories throughout *Magnus* to tell the story of the twelfth-century martyr, Magnus Erlendsson, Earl of Orkney. Both Linden Bicket and Griffiths have convincingly argued that *Magnus* is a unique work of Catholic imagination in contemporary British fiction. The novel's descriptions of Magnus Erlendsson's pacifism, for instance, "are wholly modern, post-world war, post-Holocaust and post-Vietnam constructions that recreate a medieval saint to suit the modern age" (Bicket 116). Bicket claims there is no other Scottish novel like it; Griffiths supports this view, claiming that *Magnus* falls outside the norms of the post-war Catholic novel and recalls earlier values (229). *Magnus* is Brown's most aesthetically daring novel, and the most important work in his oeuvre, given that the historical continuity he attempts to establish (within the novel's theological framework) animates his entire fictional project.

The primary aim of the present chapter, then, is to show that *Magnus* is a late-modern Celtic novel that celebrates Catholic metaphysics. Once *Magnus* has been interpreted in light of Brown's Celtic theory and Catholic theology, the chapter will latterly connect Brown scholarship to two of his contemporaries, Jorge Luis Borges and

[111] Brown frequently likens writing to weaving. This weaving metaphor achieves its most important significance in *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), at text in which Brown uses Orkney's rich history to tie together diverse literary forms: ballad, travel writing, folk history, short stories, drama, narrative nonfiction, and poetry.

John McGahern (the focal author of the next chapter). Brown shared a separate personal connection with each author. He wrote to McGahern about his short story writing and admired his representational strategy. This correspondence with McGahern, which is discussed in detail below, has not been noted in Brown scholarship, although Ron Ferguson has argued that McGahern's intertwining of abuse, violence, and Roman Catholic ritual in *The Dark* and *Memoir* is as "stifling and life-denying as [Brown's] experience of Presbyterian church life" (145-146). However, Ferguson's argument about Brown's similarity to McGahern fails to hold because he discusses their differing views of religion without comparing the fictional projects in which we encounter those views. Ferguson also neglects the letters and articles Brown and McGahern wrote to and about each other, which must be considered for a comparison to hold: they are remarkably similar writers in that they both used a Gaelic-inflected English and reflected on this practice as something that placed them outside the British tradition.[112] Likewise, after it is established that Brown is a Celtic and Catholic writer, it will be necessary to examine Brown's comparison of himself with Borges. To achieve this, the chapter makes extensive use of Jay Parini's memoir, *Borges and Me* (2020), which is the only text to document Brown's discussion of Borges's aesthetics.[113] He and Borges share a modern

[112] Ferguson places Brown's manner of speaking outside or Orkney and notes anecdotally that Brown's accent sounded Scottish Gaelic like that of his mother "whose first language was Gaelic" (xxvii), whereas Wheale argues that Brown "never drew on his Gaelic origins" to develop an Orkney localism (38). Brown's fiction which is "seemingly confined to the small community of Stromness on Orkney mainland, consistently implie[s] larger contexts" and, according Wheale, engages progress and "modernity" (39).
[113] Alan Bold makes two passing remarks about Borges's influence on Brown's writing (12, 50). Brown's correspondence with McGahern has never been mentioned in Brown scholarship, but making such connections has only become possible recently: Madeline McGahern, McGahern's widow, included Brown's letters as part of larger donation of McGahern's outgoing correspondence. In June 2022, the James Hardiman Library at the National University of Ireland, Galway, catalogued the two letters Brown wrote to McGahern, which I have examined. McGahern's reviews of Brown's fiction and autobiographical writings are collected in *Love of the World* (2009), which Stanley van der Ziel edited.

preoccupation with fictionalizing the concept of eternity. Brown is almost exclusively thought of as an Orkney-based regional writer, not as a modernist. But by examining these connections, we will see that Brown's association with Borges and McGahern illuminates his simultaneously modern and Celtic project.

Brown and Jones both developed personal theories about the Celtic aesthetic. But despite their similar use of Celtic mythology, according to Annwn, "it is not to Jones […] we must turn to find where Brown gained his poetic reconciliation of Catholic belief and universal myth" (178). Bicket has argued, for instance, that Brown's interest in "true Celtic Christianity" has Scottish and Catholic origins (14), and this aspect of Scottish Catholic writing "should not solely be read as the product of Irish emigration, or as one and the same thing as Irish-Scots writing" (Bicket 14). Brown defined the Celtic aesthetic as a "complex interweaving" of his own linguistic inheritance:

> I think that, in the writing of narrative, I learned a great deal from *Burnt Njal, Grettir, Orkneyinga Saga*. It is good for certain kinds of writing to use as few words as possible. The structure and form of the saga stories are magnificent. I think I have learned from them the importance of pure shape. But from my mother's side, the Celtic, I delight too in decoration. Look at the intricacies of early Gaelic art. Whether it is desirable to marry 'pure narrative' with elaborate decoration is not for me to say. I write as I must. (*For the Islands* 56-57)

Brown wrote this statement in the mid-1980s while he was preparing material for his posthumously published autobiography, *For the Islands I Sing* (1997). However, his views on the Celtic have an earlier basis in his writing. In a 1967 memoir written shortly after his mother's death, Brown described how the Celtic informs his sense of mysticism.

In this earlier account, which remained unpublished until 1999, Brown notes how his linguistic inheritance extends to Scottish Gaelic material which he sought out in translation and associated with his "mother's Highland [ancestry]" (Bicket 88). He outlines his understanding of the Celitc as a profound linguistic and cultural inheritance (this may have also influenced his choice to style his authorial name "George Mackay Brown" rather than simply using his legal name, "George Brown"):

> In my own writing, a strong Celtic element is discernible, a mingling of mysticism and intricate image. A month or two ago a cousin of mine from the Mackay area of Sutherlandshire wrote to me about the great eighteenth-century bard of the Mackays, a marvellous poet called Rob Don Mackay. I have still to read his poems in translation. I like to think I may be related, however distantly, to Rob Don. (*Northern Lights* 132)

Brown's 1967 discussion of this strong Celtic element in his aesthetics predates the writing of all five of his novels. It therefore provides an important lens for studying his work. For example, the Orkney-born narrator in the title story of Brown's second collection of stories, *A Time To Keep* (1969), finds himself among Gaelic speakers, fishing beside "three strange boats [of] Highland fishermen" from Mhairi Brown's native Sutherlandshire (*Keep* 50).[114] In "Tartan," a group of Gaelic speakers stand in relative

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[114] In the story "A Time To Keep," Brown has a character transliterate the Gaelic expression for whisky, "uisge beatha," water of life:

> They shouted to me in Gaelic. I shook my head. One of them waved a bottle of whisky. 'This will be a language that you will be understanding,' he said in English. We drifted together. […] 'are they still making whisky up among the Orkney hills?' 'A few,' I said, 'but it's dangerous.' 'Ah, now,' said the old man, 'that is the real whisky, water of life, and could a man get that stuff to drink every day from the day of his weaning he would live forever.' 'I drank it once,' I said, 'and it nearly killed me.' 'People are made different,' said the old man; 'to me now it is like mother's milk.' (*Keep* 50-51)

Given Mhairi Brown's native Gaelic, there's delightful irony in the Gaelic fisherman's description of whisky as "mother's milk." There is a similar scene with Gaelic-speaking fishermen in *Greenvoe* (1972)

safety, beside a "cairn" (*Keep* 138), watching vikings raid houses in Orkney. Such raids are echoed in "The Nativity Bell and The Falconer," in *The Masked Fisherman* (1989), when Fergus laments: "Our little Celtic communities always drew the longships. We excite the viking greed. Our silence irritates them" (*TMF* 179). Brown frequently returns in his fiction to points in Orkney's pre-Scandinavian, Celtic past.

Brown positions Gaelic Celticness as a representational strategy at the centre of his artistic practice. In his story "Sealskin," published in *Hawkfall* (1974), Magnus Olafson imagines writing a poem "or even an opera - with Celtic themes" (*H* 129). At the end of the story, in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, Olafson discovers "an ancient Gaelic manuscript. In the margin, in faded exquisite script, some student had scratched out a translation […] from an old Irish sermon" (*H* 129-131). For the narrator this Celtic sermon counters "the new priesthood" of materialism and progress:

> the world went down on its knees before every tawdry miracle - the phonograph, the motor car, the machine-gun, the wireless - that they held up in triumph. And the spoliation had hardly begun.
>
> Was this then the task of the artist: to keep in repair the sacred web of creation - that cosmic harmony of god and beast and man and star and plant - in the name of humanity, against those who in the name of humanity are mindlessly and systematically destroying it? (*H* 131)

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when Mr McKee observes a young fisherman with black curly hair, "pleading in Gaelic at the open door of one of the cottages, turning and pointing occasionally to the rain-squalls in the west. Obviously, in his opinion, it was not a good day for setting lines. A fierce passionate voice answered him from the interior, in Gaelic also" (*G* 146). Gaelic fisherfolk figure in "Sylvanus, Monk of Eynhallow" from *The Masked Fisherman* as well. The Gaelic-speaking fishing girl in Brown's novella, *The Golden Bird* (1987), who "doesn't speak English, […] only Gaelic [and] comes from a place in the west of Scotland called Ullapool" (*TGB* 36), has Mhairi Brown as a prototype.

For Brown, the ancient Celtic mingling of mysticism and intricate image provides the means for resolving the problems of modernity. This statement about despoliation and sacred repair, as we will see, is thematic in Brown's novel *Magnus*, which he considered his most significant literary work. Brown called the Magnus sections of the *Okneyinga Saga*, which he adapted for the novel, "the most intriguing part" of the saga narratives, and the "cornerstone" of all his writing (*For the Islands* 2-3).

*Magnus* follows Brown's literary theory about saga narratives and Celtic decoration. This allusive, embedded aspect of his writing provides a basis for documenting the various ways Brown's work is conversant with the writers of international modernism: Brown is engaged in a fictional project that aims to resolve the spiritual crisis of modern materialism that his characters face through Catholic mysticism.

### *Magnus* and Brown's Celtic-Catholic Project

*Magnus* is not Brown's only Celtic novel, but it is his most modern and most aesthetically ambitious project. The novel is the culmination of all Brown's writing on Saint Magnus, a figure of obsession for Brown and a lifelong fascination. Timothy C. Baker has claimed that *Magnus* reads "as an expansion of *The Loom of Light*" (68), which Brown confirms:

> I cast the whole Magnus story in a play called *The Loom of Light*. Later still it became the novel *Magnus*, sections of which I think to be among the best writing I have done. Few readers agree with me. But it's always like that, I think. 'What thou lovest well' is often looked at coldly by others. (*For the Islands* 158-159)

*Magnus* is the central text of Brown's oeuvre, and it is one of his most important Celtic works as well. A few comparisons will make this distinction clearer.

*Vinland* (1992) is a late example of the Celtic element in Brown's literary aesthetic borne out in a novel format.[115] In *Vinland*, Brown examines several geographical regions during a single historical period rather than his typical portrayal of Orkney over the centuries. Brown depicts the exploits of Thorfinn Sigurdsson (c. 1065), which predate the historical period covered in *Magnus*. He thematizes voyages throughout the eleventh century, focusing on Orkney, Iceland, Greenland, Vinland (Newfoundland), Ireland, and Norway. Like *Magnus*, *Vinland* adapts material from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which Brown also deploys in his earlier poetry and fiction, particularly in *Hawkfall*.

*Vinland* and *Magnus* are similar. *Vinland* depicts non-Christian Scandinavians and a community in transition; but the central character, Ranald, is the typical outsider figure in Brown's oeuvre: he is a devout Roman Catholic, influenced by Irish monks, and

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[115] This chapter deals primarily with Brown's novels and thus excludes his use of "'heptahedrons' seven-leaf poems," which he discusses in his autobiography (*For the Islands* 172), and which certainly express Christian and Celtic elements in his poetics. Brown writes:

> People who bother to comment on my poems and stories mention how often the number seven occurs. It is a mysterious and beautiful number in itself, and it occurs often in nature and in ceremony: the colours of the spectrum, the continents, the days of the week (the seven-syllabled Word of creation), the deadly sins and the cardinal virtues, the ages of man, the family ('seventh child of a seventh child') […] the five loaves and two fishes of the miracle; the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin. In the making of a story or a poem, the number seven has extraordinary power. The writer can look at a character, or an event, or place from seven different viewpoints. It is obviously impossible to hope to grasp and hold a totality; art imposes a pattern on the endless flux. My particular pattern is the heptahedron. I have relied often on the seven-faceted poem or story. (*For the Islands* 156-157)

This aspect of Brown's aesthetics has a basis in classical poetry in several Celtic languages. In classical poetry in Irish Gaelic for example, there are three types of heptasyllabic meter. Eleanor Knott's *Irish Syllabic Poetry 1200-1600* is a study contemporary to Brown that discusses heptasyllabic meters (Knott 13-20). Brown mentions Gàidhlig poets within the Mackay family and poetry in similar Scottish-Gaelic classical meters. In spoken modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, it is common to use the number seven as an intensifier: *mo sheacht mallacht*, "my seven curses," *rinne mé mo sheacht ndicheall*, "I did my seven bests."

his death in the final chapter of the novel, "Tir-nan-og," (after the Celtic Otherworld, discussed in chapter one of this dissertation), depicts a mystical, Celticized final voyage. While this last section remains spatially in Orkney, Brown uses a Celtic Christian imaginative to imbue Ranald's death with symbolism. Like most of Brown's central characters, Ranald is typically non-violent, chaste, sympathetic to Ireland, which he calls "the country of the dead" (*Vinland* 118). Ranald finds himself in a self-imposed exile among the Vikings of historical Orkney, yet Brown remains ambiguous about Ranald's death. He does not invite a simplistic mimetic interpretation of Ranald's piousness. A theological reading suggests Ranald has passed into eternal life; the Celtic reading also implies that he has a made a final journey to Tir-nan-og, literally the land of youth, and also eternal life, which may indeed be a kind of heaven or simply a metaphor for remembering in old age his youthful journeys (to Iceland, Greenland, Vinland, and Ireland). Realistically, Ranald dies, and life goes on in Orkney. Brown overlays these symbolic aspects of the narrative as transparencies on top of the realistic events of the novel.

As a historical novel, *Vinland* resembles *Magnus* in its form, but its timeline remains exclusively in the eleventh century whereas the historical setting in *Magnus* shifts abruptly from twelfth-century Orkney to a German concentration camp during the Second World War. This radical switch in *Magnus* forces the reader to consider the symbolic relationship between both timelines. Brown's final novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994), features a German prisoner of war camp but is firmly set in the twentieth century. Thorfinn Ragnarson imaginatively projects himself into a slowly receding Celtic past. As a boy, Thorfinn daydreams that the "Broch," a ruin quietly eroding on the

Norday beach, is "a Celtic church" and his castle stronghold (*Ocean* 65). He imagines himself as a poet in an ancient Celtic court inside the Broch with "a different name […] an early Celtic name long forgotten" (*Ocean* 74-75). At the close of the novel, Thorfinn has become a writer and "is sick to death, now, of historical thrillers. He is trying to dredge something rich and strange out of the mythical past of the islands," and his imagination turns to "Celtic legend" (*Ocean* 189, 192). The significance of *Magnus*, then, is its ability to unite its disparate medieval Celtic, Viking, and twentieth-century settings. Brown achieves this unity by breaking the conventions of the historical novel and by suggesting that the transposition of timelines is mythical and therefore more than simply imaginative projection of time in Orkney.

Jason Goroncy has argued that this narrative feature is an aspect of the "catholicity" of time in *Magnus*. Brown employs an anamnetic symbol to rationalize shifting timelines. Just prior to the break in the twelfth-century portion of *Magnus*, he uses the Eucharist to conceptualize universality during Mass when those in attendance share communion with all Catholics past, present, and future. Brown depicts God's Eucharistic presence, in the moment of anamnesis, which unifies all time:

> [This act] counters the possibility of 'finding symbolic resonance in the present' apart from the community's own history and its hopes for the future. […] Brown imagines that 'community' and 'communion' – the communion of the living and of the dead and of the not-yet born – is a sharing not simply of linguistic morphology but, more importantly, of realities unoffended by time and free from the burdens of timelessness and of utopian erasure of discord. (Goroncy 26)

As a result, *Magnus* requires a theological reading, the interpretive lens which licenses the imaginative leap to the twentieth century, the temporal shift considered by several critics to be the novels central failing.

Bicket convincingly situates her reading of *Magnus* within a wider sphere of Scottish Catholic writing. She interprets the novel "within the textual conventions of hagiography and Norse belief and culture" (112). One can add to this reading several instances of Brown's Celtic decoration which thematize both the despoliation of early Christian history and a theology of Absolute Peace (rather than war), which Bicket and other critics have reductively read as "pacifism" (114-117). While a growing number of Brown scholars have acknowledged the Catholic focus of work, with Bicket's *George Mackay Brown and the Scottish Catholic Imagination* (2017) being one of the best recent contributions to this area of study, nearly all Brown's critics have neglected his personal "Celtic" literary theory in relation to his broader modernist aesthetics. Alan Bold's *George Mackay Brown* (1978), the first monograph on Brown's writing, suggested that it "is impossible to place George Mackay Brown into […] the literary revolution initiated by […] Joyce, Pound, Eliot, [and] Wyndham Lewis […] His work, not being determined by the dictates of a critical theory, has neither the gimmickry of modernism nor the quasi-photographic fidelity of documentary realism" (1). Yet contrary to these claims, Brown had clear and deliberate modernist influences. His biographer, Maggie Fergusson, has noted for instance, that Brown acquired a record player and a recording of Eliot reading his own work (a rarity in wartime Orkney), which Brown played "so often and so loud" that his mother and sister were reciting lines from *The Wasteland* and *Murder in the*

*Cathedral* as they did their housework (Fergusson 64).[116] Brown also had anthologies containing poetry by Jones and T. S. Eliot.[117] While Bold sees Brown as writing outside of modernism, he nevertheless cites Brown's modernist influences as "Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, Jorge Luis Borges, Brecht, Eliot, Hopkins, Yeats, Dylan Thomas" (12) and interprets *Magnus* as a work of "aesthetic gospel" (14). One can add the influence exerted on Brown by Edwin Muir, with whom Brown studied at Newbattle Abbey College, and Hugh MacDiarmid, whom he met in Edinburgh during his undergraduate years.[118]

Apart from the similarity of Brown's fiction and poetry to work by other modernists, the Catholic and Celtic elements of his project establish an original schema through which he explores historical time and Eucharistic time in Orkney. This resolves a central problem for some critics with the anachronistic style and content that feature prominently in *Magnus*. Bold considers this an unresolved problem, arguing that "anachronism is […] one of the main stylistic features of *Magnus*" (102); one can argue

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[116] Eliot's influence may indeed be obvious to some readers. For example, in *Magnus*, Brown adopts Eliot's model for a modern martyrology, specifically his portrayal of the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), with his own account of Magnus Erlendsson's life and death.

[117] In 1975, Brown and Jones were published together in Faber's *Twentieth-Century Verse* anthology, edited by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright. This collection includes Brown's "Dream of Winter" as well as an excerpt from *The Anathemata* and Jones's "A, a, a, Domine Deus" from *The Sleeping Lord*. Brown read anthologies; he discusses acquiring an "anthology with some T. S. Eliot" (*For the Islands* 37), while being treated for tuberculosis in a Kirkwall hospital in 1941. His copy of the Oxford University Press edition of *Modern Verse, 1900-1940*, is signed "George Mackay Brown, February 25th, 1941" and is owned by me. This anthology contains poetry by Hopkins, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Dylan Thomas among many others.

[118] Brown recalls his meetings with Muir and MacDiarmid in *For the Islands I Sing*. Brown addresses MacDiarmid's disagreements with Muir about writing exclusively in Scots (Muir called MacDiarmid the one deliberate and eminent innovator in Scottish literature); he also notes the reception of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (*For the Islands* 115-119). Brown liked MacDiarmid's *In Memoriam James Joyce* which, as Brown notes, the author published in English rather than Scots. In discussing Muir and MacDiarmid's disagreement over dialect, Brown identifies a major issue in Scottish poetry with respect to international publishing and reception. For instance, on 25 June 1924, Joyce's first publisher, Grant Richards, wrote to MacDiarmid rejecting his collection "Penny Wheep": "We cannot help feeling this is a book that ought to be published in Scotland. A large proportion of the work would be unintelligible to the general English public." See "Grant Richards papers, 1897-1930, 01/01/MSS00351," held at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

further that Brown justifies the novel's combination of styles and its mixture of twelfth and twentieth-century events, despite the jarring effect this switch has on the narrative timeline, by thematizing sacred time. He writes about historical events in a unified liturgical way rather than simply as sequential occurrences. Bold allows Brown "a fourth dimension of timelessness wherein things happen regardless of chronology. […] It is this timelessness that gives Brown's writing such intimations of the eternal" (Bold 6-7). He argues that Brown tends to focus on "the essential spirituality of a given situation" (50), and therefore Bold sees the killing of Magnus Erlendsson as "an event of timeless significance" (Bold 106). However, Bold's understanding of *Magnus* as something essentially "timeless," dogmatic, and didactic is flawed. Brown's novel rejects both collective violence (war) and unnecessary sacrifice (to bring about peace), and it instead posits an ideal of absolute peace and "grace given for no apparent merit" (Brown qtd. in Bold 3).[119] Bold's claim that "Brown's acceptance of the Catholic version of sanctity tends towards credulity" (108) must be unpacked in further detail.

Brown depicts the martyrdom of St. Magnus, formerly Magnus Erlendsson (c.1080 – d.1115), who shared the Earldom of Orkney with his cousin Haakon Paulsson in the early-twelfth century, before switching to a twentieth-century timeline dealing with the killing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), the German Lutheran theologian and anti-Nazi dissident. It is easy to misread *Magnus* as a text that mimetically reifies a Catholic conception of sanctity (which Bold disagrees with) through its depiction of ritualistic immolation. For instance, Baker citing Girard claims, "Magnus's death must be

[119] Brown revisits this idea of evaluating sacrifice in art at the end of "Sealskin," which was first published while he was writing *Magnus*. The character Magnus Olafson wonders about "the use of art" (*H* 129). His realization at the end of the story, that what had been taken from him "was a necessary sacrifice" (*H* 131), ultimately informs his new artistic outlook.

understood as both martyrdom and sacrifice […] René Girard has shown the sacrifice of an individual, as a surrogate victim or a scapegoat, serves to remove violence from a community" (74). However, we should qualify Baker's reading by noting that Erlendsson's death is ultimately an unnecessary sacrifice, one that seems necessary within the confines of the historical moment but is not so when we consider the theological premise across a greater timespan. For Christians, universal peace, which includes the redemption of mankind initiated by the death and resurrection of Christ, which is the central mystery of the Christian faith, is made possible through the teachings of Jesus Christ. Baker argues that "Magnus's death is an instance of classic martyrdom, an act that displays the glory of God through the death of the individual believer […] it is only through Magnus's death that peace comes to Orkney" (75). While this is true in one sense—Magnus's martyrdom *is* the ultimate expression of what it means to witness (and participate in) Christ's suffering—his death is unnecessary to achieve peace in the dialectical sense the novel implies. The murder of Erlendsson leads to a cessation of widespread violence across the islands and political stability, but this is not universal peace. To achieve that, Haakon Paulsson, his followers as well as all Christendom—within the novel's theological framework at least—must repent, abnegate political will, and live a peaceful life following the teachings of Christ.

For Girard, only Jesus's sacrifice is necessary to achieve this end. Other scapegoating serves a mimetic function but not one necessary for peace in the universal sense Brown implies. If, as Baker's claims, Magnus's death was indeed necessary, it would negate the significance of Christ's sacrifice which supersedes and animates Magnus's martyrdom. It is in this way that *Magnus* forms a dialectic with universal peace

and war as its primary coordinates; but any synthesis of these opposites that would negate the meaning of Christ's sacrifice in the context becomes false: to accept peace through Christ and reject war renders further violence unnecessary. This theme aesthetically accommodates the Bonhoeffer section of the novel because Bonhoeffer's story is another instance, in a universal sense, of mankind's failure to accept Christ. Only such an explanation helps clarify Brown's reasoning for including Bonhoeffer's killing: Magnus's murder may have ended war with Haakon Paulsson and temporarily resolved political turmoil in Orkney, but Bonhoeffer's death certainly does not end the war in Germany. With collective murder at the camp in the background ("They all knew that the people who were arriving in cattle-trucks were Jews from the east"), the reader learns Bonhoeffer is to be executed because

> For years he has spoken about such things as 'the brotherhood of man', 'the spirit of peace that ought to brood upon all peoples of the world', 'the universal kingdom of love' […] nothing softens a nation's will to victory more than such talk. […] The man would not hold his tongue […] We have proof that he sheltered Jews and spies in his church. (*M* 176)

Bonhoeffer dies testifying to the power of Christ's sacrifice to bring about peace. The miracle that ends the final "Harvest" chapter of *Magnus*, which returns to the twelfth century, is not didactic; it is simply an instance of Brown's conception of grace bound up in Magnus's prayer for Bonehoeffer during the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist – "A man can therefore direct his purified will into the future for the alleviation of the pain of the future" (*M* 141).

If *Magnus* is meant to be allegorical, the two sacrificial deaths Brown depicts are not didactic nor are they aimed at confirming the faithful. This notion contradicts Baker's claim that "[t]he reader is naturally expected to oppose this killing and to side with the apparent martyr" because the death of the martyr echoes the death of Christ (87). Baker notes accurately that the deaths of Magnus and Bonhoeffer have "lost their particular import and singularity" (87), but they implicate the reader in an ongoing need to reject violence and foster faith. In this sense the novel evangelizes its readers. Bicket correctly asserts that "Bold's hesitancy to suspend disbelief and engage with this Catholic story on its own theological terms means that he simply rejects it wholesale" (117).

Brown presents the idea of uniting disparate points in time in Orkney as a key conceit of the novel. He noted this conceit in a 20 October 1990 letter to Margaret Tournour: "I'm glad you enjoy *Magnus* – bits, at least. Time is all mixed up, intentionally: to show, I suppose, that a martyr is a martyr for all time" (Brown qtd. in Bicket 118). Thus Brown exemplifies this mixed-up condition by using a combination of radically different styles which engenders a sense of multiple timelines, seemingly giving readers access to all times at once.

"The Killing," the penultimate chapter featuring the death of Bonhoeffer, opens with poetic description appropriate to the twelfth-century saga stories invoking a higher, sacred timeline which overlays the historical account: "When that holy season of pasch was overpast, the jarls busked them both for the tryst" (*M* 123). Brown then shifts from this middle-English alliterative style and adopts a modern style that includes "jarring journalese" and "reflection and meditation" on the nature of time (Murray and Murray 143). While this discrepancy remains an unresolved, "anachronistic" problem for Rowena

and Brian Murray, one buttressed by their contention that "this was exactly the effect Brown hoped to achieve" (145), they fail to note how Brown licenses this disparity through Magnus Erlendsson's reflection on the meaning of the Eucharist, with its power to unite all time, during the Mass celebrated shortly before his death (*M* 139-141). Brown justifies his radical shifts in style by having events in sacred time supersede his representation of historical time. As Bicket claims, Brown's "vertical, God-centred theology of time disrupts the novel format, and forces his reader to grapple with a challenging and provocative medieval story that contains all the political difficulties of the current age" (139). Magnus prays during Mass for future martyrs and thus also Bonhoeffer, and the timing of their deaths following Easter celebrations evokes Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, symbolically placing these killings side by side in a sacred sense, in an atemporal space, even though the historical events are separated by more than eight hundred years. The reader expects "The Killing" to feature the death of Magnus but instead is met with Bonhoeffer's murder. This substitution is the prime example of Brown's Celtic interweaving and a dovetailing of the novel's timelines.

In this respect, Brown depicts time within a modernist framework. As Rowena and Brian Murray have argued, "Brown was, like other writers more frequently considered modernist, such as Woolf and Joyce, simultaneously engaging with time in two different ways: synchronic […] and diachronic treatment, in his ongoing chronological, transhistorical time scheme" (171). Charles Taylor has made a similar distinction about interpreting historical events across both "ordinary" (secular/historical) and "higher" (sacred) time:

> Revolutions themselves are understood by their heirs and supporters as such kairotic moments. And nationalist historiography is full of such moments. But what has changed is that around which these moments gather. In the pre-modern era, the organizing field for ordinary time came from what I want to call higher times. The most obvious term to introduce here would be 'eternity' […] the philosophically and theologically consecrated term for higher time. But I need the more general term, because (a) there was more than one kind of eternity, and (b) these didn't exhaust the higher times. (*A Secular Age* 55)

The political situation that led to Magnus Erlendsson's death – the need to unite Orkney under the sole rule of Haakon Paulsson as Earl – can, in the context of Brown's novel, be conceived as grounded in something sacred and therefore higher than mere human action in secular time. This organizing feature, which Brown deploys as a representational strategy, informs the various associations that comprise Orcadian society: parishes, boroughs, trade guilds. The aspects of life for Brown are woven together with ritual and worship.

The core of Brown's theological argument for peace in the modern age in "The Killing" occurs in the moment when he substitutes Magnus's martyrdom and his Orkney setting with the 1945 hanging of Bonhoeffer in a Nazi concentration camp. Central to this anachronism is the last Mass Magnus attends before his betrayal, where he accepts his death. Brown's writing on the Roman Catholic Mass and timelessness (*M* 136-141) set up and justify the imaginative leap to the murder of Bonhoeffer:

> [The Mass] takes place both in time, wherein time's conditions obtain, and also wholly outside time; or rather, it is time's purest essence, a concentration of the

> unimaginably complex events of time into the ritual words and movements of a half-hour. […] The end and the beginning. All time was gathered up into that ritual half-hour, the entire history of mankind, as well the events that have not yet happened as the things recorded in chronicles and sagas. That is to say, history repeats itself and does not repeat itself. (*M* 139)

The Eucharistic unity represented here maximizes potential for metamorphosis: "Since all the round of time is gathered into this ritual half-hour, the actions of Everyman, once the bread of divine wisdom is in his body, have an immense importance; what he does and says and thinks reverberates through the whole web of time" (*M* 141). Brown includes Celtic time in this equation, drawing on pagan and pre-Christian history of human sacrifice in Orkney (Griffiths 229), and medieval miracle plays (Bicket 132).

By joining Magnus's death to Bonhoeffer's, Brown attempts to make a spiritual commentary on modern war. Elsewhere Bicket has noted that Brown figures a "Celtic" time anagogically by associating important historical events in the Celtic past with the Christian calendar, such as Cath Chluain Tarbh or "The Battle of Clontarf" in the "Ireland" section of *Vinland* which Brown sets on Good Friday. This setting corresponds to the historical battle on 23 April 1014 by the River Tolga, one hundred years prior to the Martyrdom of Magnus; both "are set in the season of the Passion and Easter" (Bicket 129-130). In both novels, the Battle of Clontarf was fought and won on Good Friday and Magnus died on Easter Monday one hundred years later. While these portrayals are possibly imprecise in terms of the exact historical timeline, the sacred timeline justifies Brown's imaginative license.

In *Magnus*, Brown relocates the Battle of Anglesey in a Celtic past, emphasizing its Catholic cultural value over historical fact. The *Orkneyinga Saga* informs Brown's vivid depiction of a Viking raid on Anglesey:

> A score of Norsemen surged up and across and staggered to their feet under the sail with the red dragon sewn on it. Celtic cries mingled with Norse cries, one cold tremulous rant. […] Magnus Erlendson was standing up in the bow, and he was reading the words out of his psalter. It was a dangerous place to stand. Three Welsh arrows were sticking awry out of the strake where Magnus leaned with his scroll. Indeed some weapon must have brushed him; there was a smear of blood on his forehead. (*M* 56)

Poetic language is at the fore of the scene. Welsh and Norse heralds joust verbally in bardic fashion as the battle rages. Magnus refuses to fight, singing psalms instead. The image of a trinity of Welsh arrows lodged in wood, with Magnus at their centre, and his bleeding forehead, all reinforce his affinity with Christ in his Passion, which take on symbolic significance when we re-read them in light of his martyrdom later in the novel. Brown downplays the Anglo-Norman affiliations of Hugh, Earl of Shrewsbury, the leader of the Welsh ship, portraying him instead as a sympathetic figure for his Welsh crew with Cúchulainnesque determination to stand at the moment of his death:

> [The Earl] spat out a few red teeth into his hand. Then slowly began to sink to his knees. The Welsh guardsmen caught him by the arms and shoulders. They held him up, as if they could keep their leader alive by speaking sweet gentle consoling words to him; as if death could come to no man so long as he stood on his feet and faced across at his enemies. (*M* 56-57)

Bicket has argued that Brown's hybridized rendering of the Orkney legends counters liberal humanist and realist visions of the novel format, as well as "contemporary Scottish literary fashions" (129). This is partly due to the novel's Catholic content but also to its deeply allusive style suited to modernist poetry. For instance, when the Welsh ship is set on fire, Brown writes, "twilight was dappled then with torches going in procession from ship to ship" (*M* 60). This scene could well be drawing inspiration from mystical Catholic vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" in its use of "dappled": "Glory be to God for dappled things—For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow" (Hopkins 132). In Hopkins's conception, God animates all life, dappling it with colour, "He fathers-forth [creates] whose beauty is past change" (133). Life is everlasting despite death.

History includes war and bloodshed; but for Brown the terrible images are glossed by the dappled vision, a moment amid the fighting which for him, as for Jones in *In Parenthesis*, provide glimpses of light and beauty. The dappling effect in *Magnus* is processional and follows acts of extreme violence, but in Brown's vision this is surrounded by a beautiful sky animated by God's presence in all living things.

**The Two Georges: Brown and Borges on Eternity**

Jay Parini's recent memoir, *Borges and Me* (2020) is the first text to document his encounters with both Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) and George Mackay Brown during the early-1970s when Brown was writing *Magnus*. Parini has called the memoir "a bit of a palimpsest, a text written over another text, with many erasures" (298); it began as a novel but became memoir. He records how he met the Argentine writer during Borges's visit to Scotland in 1972 and drove him across the Highlands before taking the ferry to

Orkney to meet George Mackay Brown. Parini has also claimed that this account "LIVED in memory for fifty years, its contours enhanced or distorted in the usual ways by time and retelling" (297).[120] Nevertheless, Parini's memoir is the only text that notes Brown's comparison of himself with Borges; *Borges and Me* also importantly records a discussion of Brown's theology at a time contemporaneous with his writing of *Magnus*. It is possible to document these exchanges to some extent using books referenced in Brown's newspaper articles, books in his personal library, and other materials in his archive. The significance of doing so is two-fold: (1) the connection reveals that Brown read and discussed Borges with Parini during his most productive writing-period, while he was working on *Greenvoe*, *Magnus*, and *Hawkfall*. And (2): Brown and Borges share similar conceptions of time and eternity—ideas which, as we have seen, Brown thematizes to great effect in *Magnus*. Parini's *Borges and Me* thus provides a sound basis for exploring how Brown's work is conversant with work by Borges (and international modernism generally). As we shall see, Brown thought of his creative work as being part of a Celtic and modern project. As well, Parini's memoir helps us better understand Brown's understanding of the anamnetic function of his aesthetic.

A brief rehearsal of the events of the memoir and how Parini found himself first on the northern mainland with Borges and then in Orkney with Brown will provide context for this discussion. According to Parini, Borges was happy to accompany him to Orkney if it meant he would have the opportunity to meet Brown:

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[120] Parini uses a fictional mode in *Borges and Me*. At one point the Jay Parini character says candidly, "I don't care about knowing shit. Forgetting is hard enough" (Parini 276). Details have been creatively coloured-in in this book. Parini notes that his "journey with Borges was in fact two trips, which [he] combined […] for narrative efficiency" (298). *Borges and Me* thus uses a hybrid form: fictional history within the mode of documentary realism.

> I seized the moment and put forward my plan for a visit to Orkney to Borges, and he didn't object.
>
> "What a splendid idea," he said. "I want to meet your man, this illustrious poet of the north world!" (Parini 192)

Parini records a phone conversation with Brown where he mentions Borges only as a blind Argentine writer, not by name:

> I went back into the lobby to call Mackay Brown through the hotel manager, who was happy to oblige […] It was time to arrange a visit to Orkney, where I would get a sense of the physical place, meet the man himself, and actually hear the human voice behind the words. […]
>
> The writer picked up on the second ring. "Hellooo? Is anyone there?" […]
>
> "Mr. Brown, this is Jay Parini. From St. Andrews. We exchanged letters, and you sent me your number. I'm writing a thesis on your work […] I'm wondering if I might stop by, Mr. Brown. I'm in Inverness with a friend, an elderly Argentine writer, a poet, a writer of stories. Like yourself. He's blind."
>
> "I'm not blind."
>
> "No, my friend is blind."
>
> "Oh, dear. This is very bad news."
>
> "I'm guiding him around the Highlands." (Parini 190-191)

In the memoir's modified narrative, after Parini leaves Borges behind in Inverness and travels to Stromness, where he meets Brown for the first time and realizes that Brown had already guessed the identity of the blind Argentine writer. Parini also establishes Brown's familiarity with Borges's work:

> From the pocket of his threadbare mac, [Brown] pulled out a paperback of *Labyrinths* by Borges. "I suppose you have this?"
>
> "I don't." I held the book in my hand, a lovely and well-thumbed Penguin, with a noticeable sticky spot of jam on the spine. It had done its time at the kitchen table in Mayburn Court beside the Bible.
>
> "I had two copies," he said.
>
> "You admire him?"
>
> "Read the ones that I've marked with an *X* in the contents."
>
> I opened to the contents and saw that nearly every entry had an *X* beside it. (Parini 238)

Not only does this account establish that Brown read *Labyrinths*, but it also gestures towards Brown's and Borges' shared spiritual-aesthetic vision:

> "He is Jorge, I am George. But we're very different. He travels in the heavens. Out of time, mostly. But I'm here, rarely more than a few miles from where we linger. The clock ticks on my mantel. It's too loud, aye." […]
>
> "Will you pass a greeting to your man, Señor Borges?"
>
> I assured him that I would, but it puzzled me, this turn. Did everything come back to Borges in the end?
>
> "In particular," Mackay Brown said, just before we parted, "read 'Borges and I.' It's important for us." (Parini 238-239)

One must remember that all of Brown's statements are coloured by Parini's point-of-view, rhetorical aims, and memory, yet he nevertheless implicates both Brown and Borges in the "us" in the statement he attributes to Brown. He also reconstructs a

conversation about the theology of anamnesis, what Brown calls "Real Presence" concerning time, history, and the Eucharist, which is deeply important to *Magnus*:

> History is what we Christians call God, I think […] He holds us in his large mind, within the totality of time unfolding there. It's not old calendars tucked in a drawer. Do you know the line in the letter to the Hebrews? 'Christ the same today, yesterday, and forever.' I do love that. […] We believe…we do, in my church, that God—that Jesus himself, as part of God—is present in the host. It's not symbolic. It's the spirit becoming flesh. And the cup is filled with his blood. And we who come to the altar, poor wee creatures each and every one, we're broken, too. But restored. We fall apart, and we're restored. Again and again […] we're present when the host is present, and all of eternity advances toward us in this moment. It's our way of entering heaven while marooned in this sorry state. (Brown qtd. in Parini 228-229)

This discussion encapsulates much of Brown's theology, especially the anamnetic function of the Eucharistic celebration so important to *Magnus* because, for Brown, it licenses his metamorphic technique of interweaving. As we have seen, Brown uses this technique effectively when he substitutes the Bonhoeffer sections at the end of "The Killing," but his discussion of the Eucharist as all "History" provides him with simultaneous access to many literary styles in any historical setting – ballad, saga narrative, news reel, bardic contest, essay, and prayer. This anamnetic understanding of "History" is the most important animating feature of Brown's Celtic aesthetic because it informs his strategy of patterning or weaving-in different moments in time.

In his memoir, Parini wonders "how Borges would have responded" to Brown's statements (Parini 229).[121] He records for the first time – albeit in a novelistic way – the only surviving historical account of Brown and Borges interacting, though he fails to make the connection: Brown's contention that he and Borges are "different" because Borges writes about eternity ("He travels in the heavens […] Out of time, mostly") is undermined by Brown's long explanation of the function of eternity which, as we have already seen, is deeply important in all his fiction. It is evident that Brown and Borges shared aesthetic interests, but *Borges and Me* presents a challenge for critics to historically trace their interactions. Both authors knew of each other, and this is now more widely known because of Parini's memoir.

Outside of the memoir, they communicated one-person-removed from one another, with Brown speaking to Borges through Parini or his friend Peter Maxwell Davies, and Borges through his American translator Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Brown also mentioned Borges in his weekly columns for *The Orcadian*, which were republished as *Letters from Hamnavoe.* On 25 April 1974, Brown writes about culling books from his personal library and describes how he treasures Borges's books:

> To only about a hundred books am I thirled [sic] with any passion—I could go on reading them, quite happily, over and over again, for the rest of my days.

[121] The critical significance to draw from Parini's memoir is that Brown and Borges held a similar views despite having different aesthetic outlooks. In his preface to *In Praise of Darkness*, Borges writes, "I am skeptical of aesthetic theories. They are generally little more than useless abstractions; varying with each writer and even with each text, they can be but occasional stimulants or tools" (*Praise* 9-10); however, he favoured a "metaphysics" and claimed, "The aesthetic act can only occur when the book is written or read" (*Praise* 10).

> One of the authors I delight in is an old blind Argentinian called Jorge Luis Borges. He hasn't written much—only a handful of stories (some of them very short indeed) and a few poems. But they are so perfectly imagined and wrought that they are models of their kind. I was extremely pleased the other day, therefore, to get from Borges' translator, as a gift, two new books by the master—a new group of stories called *Doctor Brodie's Report* and *Borges on Writing*. (*LH* 153)

Brown describes Borges's stories as "new" because they had just appeared in new English translations, part of nearly a decade-long collaboration between Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Weeks after this article was written, Brown received a copy of Borges's *In Praise of* Darkness, signed by di Giovanni to "GMB" from "Saint Andrews, 29 May 1974," the university Borges had visited in 1972, where Parini was completing his doctoral work.[122] The historical account of how Brown's signed copy of *In Praise of Darkness* made its way to Orkney has been consigned to oblivion.[123]

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[122] Opening Brown's *In Praise of Darkness*, one notes a torn-out article from a Catholic newspaper, folded into a bookmark, with a prayer for St Thomas More entitled "The living Spirit." Brown shared similar reading habits Borges. They both admired the Norse Sagas. Borges also knew Brown's close friend, the British composer Peter Maxwell Davies who, according to Brown, sent Borges a copy of the *Orkneyinga Saga* in Argentina (*LH* 154).

[123] *In Praise of Darkness* was among Brown's personal books when he died in 1996. I purchased it from a bookseller who acquired it from Brown's estate. Parini believes he likely hand delivered *In Praise of Darkness*, or possibly mailed it to Brown himself:

> I forget when I actually visited Brown. I certainly mixed trips in [*Borges and Me*] for the sake of the narrative arc. Lots of smoke and mirrors. I do believe I would have sent the Borges book to Brown. Did he come to St Andrews? Not a hundred percent sure but I could easily have introduced him to Norman di Giovanni. My rear-view mirror is cloudy. Which is why I chose the fictional memoir form. I know my portrait of gmb is pretty accurate. At least it's how I remember him. I was going to write on Brown but was discouraged by my supervisor-Falconer. (Parini, Email to author, 1 March 2021)

Parini's email amplifies his views and misgivings about the fictional-memoir form. At one point, he records Borges as saying, "Anything that passes through memory becomes fiction, you see. *Fictio*—in Latin, it means 'to shape'" (Parini 97). Borges's concept of shaping memory informs how one must read Parini's account. There is something very tantalizing about connecting a little-known Scottish poet like Brown, who spent most of his life on the Orkney Islands with Borges, a prominent figure from Spanish and World Literature. Brown's biographer, Maggie Fergusson, discusses Parini's visits (dating back to the early-70s)

It is worth considering how Borges's growing English-language reception in the early-1970s was affected by shifting market considerations. Di Giovanni has said in his own memoir about his time with Borges that "Within a few brief months of our meeting [in 1967], publishers began to compete for his stories and poems and essays in the new versions of them that we were making" (*Lessons* 9). This revival of interest in Borges's work is counterpointed by the popularity, and more often lack of popularity, of Brown's regionalist, Catholic and "primitive" Celtic aesthetics in an increasingly diverse and global modernist culture. But if Parini had written *George Mackay Brown and Me*, the memoir would not have had as wide a reception as *Borges and Me*. As we will see in the next section (and the next chapter), Brown was likewise interested in the possibility for market success and viability of the short story form as his letters to John McGahern attest.

**Conclusions and Two Letters to McGahern**

As we have seen, Brown's development of the Celtic element in his fiction is inextricable from his exploration of Catholicism, and in this respect Brown's work shares great affinity with David Jones's writing and other modernist Celtic writers. Brown plausibly situates his own writing between a minimalist, pure narrative style and the elaborate decoration and "the intricacies of Gaelic art" (*For the Islands* 56-57). His texts have a regional focus; they are always set in Orkney; but his sense of himself as a Scottish

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in her biography, but does not mention Borges (*The Life* 233). Parini's dissertation adviser at St. Andrews, A. F. Falconer, apparently discouraged him from writing a thesis on George Mackay Brown. Parini that "a decade later [Falconer] succumbed to dementia, ending his days in a mental asylum at Stratheden, a few miles from St. Andrews, where he spent his time writing Shakespeare's sonnets from memory, convinced they were his own and amazed by the felicity of his pen" (Parini 41). This is a veiled allusion to Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (1939) wherein the titular writer believes he has written Don Quixote in the modern day.

Orcadian "Celtic" writer engenders connections to a wider understanding of the Celtic and different locales: to Ireland via Joyce's fiction and the affinities Brown's novels and stories share with *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, as Baker notes; to England through Brown's admiration for Hopkins, which has been noted by nearly all Brown scholars; and to Wales through Dylan Thomas (as Bold notes in his study). These coordinates situate the Celtic element of Brown's aesthetic within the wider modern Celtic aesthetic—one aesthetic among others, making its way (with success) in a broad and diversifying cultural market.

Brown and Orkney are almost synonymous. He constantly wrote about Orkney both within and outside of its contemporary historical moment. Baker has rightly claimed that very few writers are as closely associated with a particular place as George Mackay Brown. Nevertheless, it is still remarkable to see Brown left out of John Brannigan's *Archipelagic Modernism* (2015), which studies literary representations of the seas surrounding Ireland and the British Isles as some of modernity's forgotten material spaces. Brannigan has argued that "the social and cultural connections of the people who live in the archipelago always exceed the limits of state or national formations, and that the spatial imagination of maritime zones may encompass some of those connections more fully than land zones" (10), and this certainly extends to Brown's work. His religious and philosophical commitments cause his fiction to be "out of time" in the manner Parini attributes to Borges, and "out of place" among the hybrid-Norse and Scottish Presbyterian representations often associated with the Orkney islands. Resituating Brown in his archipelago, a short sea journey away from Ireland, building on what Brannigan sees as the "'insular turn of late modernism" (16), it becomes easier to

place Brown within a group of writers such as Hopkins, McGahern and Heaney, and to interpret the Celtic element in his writing more firmly within a shared Celtic imaginative. For example, Brannigan claims that Hugh MacDiarmid's fashioning of a literary Scots after Joyce is a transnational aesthetic that is "Celtic" (160). Following this argument, one observes that Brown's (arguably more subtle) strategy of expressing a firmly Catholic theology in his fiction using a stylized, Gaelic-patterned English is both indicative of this transnational Celtic aesthetic as well as an ideological stance intrinsic to the wider history of the islands in which Brown lived.

In this respect, *Magnus* is a key text for Brown studies. Both Bicket and Griffiths have convincingly argued that *Magnus* is a work of Catholic imagination occupying a liminal space in contemporary British fiction (Bicket 116; Griffiths 229). The novel attempts to actuate universal themes: redemption, peace and history, the unity of time, Sacrament and sacrifice are difficult concepts in *Magnus*. Brown endeavours to have the reader identify with those characters implicated in the collective violence that precedes the killing of Magnus and Bonhoeffer. He therefore aims to have the reader recognize a contemporary need for Christ's redemptive sacrifice, which the martyrs themselves witness to the fullest extent possible. However, their deaths are strictly unnecessary for peace in a theological and philosophical sense. Brown suggests one must freely reject violence and accept peace. This message may be especially troubling for a contemporary reader more secular than religiously Christian.

Brown's sense of the Celtic imaginative is unique within this sacramental context. The Celtic remains a central element in his fiction (and especially in *Vinland*, *Magnus*, and *A Time To Keep* as discussed above). Brown uses the Celtic aesthetic as a decorative

transparency, an allusive immaterial framework imposed like a palimpsest over instances of historical realism. Brown writes, “Realism is the enemy of the creative imagination” (*For The Islands* 168). But this view does not contradict O’Nolan’s conception of Celtic realism discussed in the first chapter as a kind of truth-telling located in nature; Brown’s representational strategy seeks to unite the Celtic imagination with the sacred by emphasizing higher time, Catholic ritual, and the cyclical rhythms of Orkney in the context of an even wider network of islands. Brown’s aesthetic is contemporary (and modernist-influenced) for how he seeks to represent the universality of these ideas in relation to an emerging modernity that threatens loss, despoliation, and a severing of the unity of time.

Brown shares Jones’s sense of sacramental art, but an anamnetic representational strategy unites all four authors in this study. This partly explains the wish Brown expresses to John McGahern—that the “gift of story” might stay with him always—such an artistic gift, freely given, represents a kind of Grace for Brown. On 24 April 1986, he wrote to McGahern:

> I have just finished reading your second book of stories *Getting Through.* Every story in the book is the work of a master. I practice the art in a way myself, and know what it is to “desire this man’s art and that man’s scope.” Many thanks for these true beautiful and compassionate stories. I think of you as the best writer of short stories in English today. May the gift of story stay with you always. (John McGahern, incoming correspondence, NUIG)

In setting up the comparison between McGahern’s writing and his own, Brown quotes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29, “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes.” He changes

the verb tense of “Desiring” to the infinitive form, using Sonnet 29 to praise McGahern and ambiguously reflecting the dismay of Shakespeare’s speaker who wishes to be like “one more rich in hope, / Featured like him, like him with friends possessed.” It is high praise from Brown.

On 19 June 1986, during the St. Magnus Festival in Orkney, Brown wrote to McGahern again indicating that this unqualified praise of McGahern’s fictional technique was genuine and distinct, not handed out lightly:

> It was most kind of you to send your latest book of stories. They have great beauty & poignancy—I have just been mentioning it in a little column I write for the local newspaper. And I tell all my friends. Here we are in the midst of St Magnus Festival. On the whole I don’t like mixing too closely with too many artists, musicians, and writers. Still, I suppose such get-togethers are happening everywhere, and can’t be avoided. […] Long may you write your powerful and beautiful stories. Perhaps you’ll come and read to us in Orkney some day? We had Seamus Heaney 4 or 5 Festivals ago. (John McGahern, incoming correspondence, NUIG)

Brown’s use of the word “powerful” to describe McGahern’s stories calls attention to the primitive power of the writing, which is not to lessen the importance of his fiction’s literariness, its allusive power, as we will see in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

This chapter on John McGahern (1934-2006) and the Celtic aesthetic begins with a discussion of McGahern's sustained interest in a classic Irish language text, Tomás Ó Criomhthain's autobiography, *An tOileánach* (1929). The first section takes the form of a short survey of some of McGahern's book reviews and occasional writing from the mid-1980s through to the early-2000s. These essays inform a methodology for reading one major Celtic aspect of McGahern's fictional project, taken up in the second section, specifically in his novella *The Country Funeral* (1992) and in his portrayal of funerals, spiritual renewal, and the afterlife.[124] An examination of this text forms a basis for comparing McGahern's fiction to work by other writers covered in this dissertation.

As we saw in the last chapter, George Mackay Brown admired McGahern's fictional technique. Though they deal with different subject matter in their writings, they appear to share an aesthetic outlook. Brown's letters to McGahern are the only documents that attest to the two-sided nature of their correspondence.[125] The only trace of the McGahern portion of their exchange appears in McGahern's collected essays, *Love of the World* (2009), which includes reviews and occasional writing with other material

[124] *The Country Funeral* was published as a standalone novella in 2019. Frank Shovlin has called it "McGahern's masterpiece in short story writing" and noted its initial rejection by several of the most prominent American literary magazines (*Letters* 595). Colm Tóibín echoes this appraisal of the work as a masterpiece in his review of *The Letters of John McGahern* for the *London Review of Books*. McGahern initially published it as the final piece in his *Collected Stories*. It was the only previously unpublished fiction McGahern included in the collection first published in 1992. It is certainly his longest short work and reads more like a novella than a short story. "The Country Funeral" runs to thirty-four pages in *The Collected Stories*, and seventy-nine pages in the Faber edition published in 2019. In his interview with Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, McGahern calls it a novella rather than a short story.

[125] Brown's letters to McGahern are now held with the McGahern Papers at the James Hardiman Library, University of Galway. The finding aids for both the "George Mackay Brown Correspondence" held at Edinburgh University Library and his collections in the National Library of Scotland do not list any of McGahern's responses. Similarly, *The Letters of John McGahern* (2021), which Shovlin recently edited, does not include any of McGahern's correspondence with Brown although Shovlin may address their relationship in his forthcoming biography of McGahern.

from his archive. In this collection, Stanley van der Ziel has republished two of McGahern's articles on Brown: a 1989 review of *The Masked Fisherman* called "Sagas from the North" (*Love* 346-347); and a longer, more biographical article on Brown, focusing on his posthumous anthology, *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources* (*Love* 405-407).[126] This later essay, which McGahern titled "On the Turning Wheel of the Year," notes Brown's tendency to portray the passage of time in Orkney, "a place he rarely left":

> He had already travelled far in a rich harvesting (a favourite word of Brown's) of poems, stories, novels, essays, plays, books for children, moving easily between verse and prose, generations and centuries. His language is poetic and true and moves swiftly in simple lines and sentences, often in very short paragraphs […] It is interesting that one of the most exciting living short-story writers, Alistair MacLeod, different in temperament and much more sparing than Mackay Brown, likewise moves with the same imaginative ease from present-day Nova Scotia to Colmcille on Iona to the generations that left Skye at the time of the Clearances, as if they were all part of the same eternal day. (*Love* 405)

McGahern connects Brown with MacLeod because both are practitioners of a short story form that is intrinsically tied to place across a time continuum, what McGahern calls "the same eternal day": Orkney across time in Brown's case as we have seen already, whereas MacLeod primarily writes about generations of people in Cape Breton. Both are insular writers in that they write about islands. One could place Brown and MacLeod on McGahern's list of modern Celtic writers, as authors who, like himself, adopt a representational strategy to imbue English writing with a primitive Celtic linguistic

[126] For the earlier versions, see McGahern's "Sagas from the North," *The Irish Times,* 1 July 1989, p. 8; and "On the Turning Wheel of the Year" *The Irish Times,* 3 July 1999, p. 8.

quality while also expressing a Catholic outlook. Unlike Brown, McGahern does not directly describe his "Celtic" literary practice; he simply implies one.

This aesthetic is best exemplified by McGahern's fiction, but he outlines a literary theory in his essays. One can extract McGahern's view of an insular (rather than nationalist) Irish-Gaelic representational strategy from the central essay "What Is My Language?" (*Love* 260-274). In this longer, more substantial essay, McGahern develops his idea of Gaelic-Catholic infused English as a poetic inheritance:

> The speech my mother gave me was the English spoken on the Iron Mountains. That language still contained within it at least the ghost of the Irish language. It was a slow, careful, humourous speech, grounded and practical, with a strong Northern accent, its rhythms almost entirely Gaelic, and Gaelic words were retained in English usage. Her speech […] was refined by education, my speech was probably tempered in turn by an indiscriminate reading of books in English and by the prayers and ceremonies of the Catholic Church. If I have used that language in any way well, it will in its turn have used me. (*Love* 273)

McGahern speaks to his unadorned style, which resonates with Brown's discussion of his Scottish Gaelic inheritance, suggesting a poetic kind of un-British writing, English suffused with Gaelic rhythms. McGahern gestures at Brown's Celtic method (discussed in chapter three of this dissertation) when he critiques *Northern Lights* as a posthumous publication "scraping an already well-scraped barrel":

> Nearly everything new in *Northern Lights* [Brown] had chosen not to publish and most of the inclusions prove him to have been right. The one exception, and the saving grace of the volume, is the section […containing] portraits of his mother

> and father […] In these moving portraits they are truly honoured, and Mackay Brown's method serves him and them superbly. He makes himself as anonymous as the old ballad makers, allowing the portraits to emerge in their own unfettered light with an artfulness that is all the more effective because it is nowhere visible and consciously simple. (*Love* 406)

McGahern suggests an ideal style as something attached to place and artful for its invisible "artfulness." This idea that originated in his 1989 essay on Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* was accompanied by a short translation project published by *The Irish Times*. These pieces were later folded into "What Is My Language?" a central reflection in McGahern's oeuvre which, as van der Ziel has noted, the author developed in a series of articles in English and Irish published from 1985 to 2005 just before his death (*Love* 434-435).

In one of these articles, "Springtime comes to the turf bog" published in the Saturday edition of *The Irish Times* on 2 November 1991, McGahern translated a section of *An tOileánach*.[127] He selected a passage from the autobiography about turf cutting that resonates with his own experiences of cutting turf described in his *All Will Be Well* (2005), and *The Dark* (1965); but the selection is also significant for its depiction of youthful sexuality. It is also a section of the text that An Seabhac ("The Hawk"), the nickname the Blasket islanders gave to Pádraig Ó Siochfhrada (1883-1964), the editor of the 1929 edition, "bowdlerised in the first" according to McGahern.[128] In another 1989

[127] The editorial comment at the end of McGahern's article does not name Tomás Ó Criomhthain but notes "the latest edition" of *An tOileánach* "edited by Pádraig Ua Maoileoin […] published by Helicon Books (1980)."

[128] This comment about a "bowdlerised" passage appears in italics at the end of McGahern's article and may have been written by him or subbed by the editor of the newspaper at the time of publication.

essay published by the *Irish Review* (which anticipates the publication of his translation, but was likely written after he had worked on translating *An tOileánach*), McGahern suggests his agreement with Jorge Luis Borges that literary authenticity potentially entails sacrificing "local colour" in order to capture "reality" faithfully ("An tOileánach" 55). McGahern argues that the practice of cutting turf is simply a characteristic of Ó Criomhthain's reality and therefore something that need not be described in detail: "what stands out is a mountain that has to be climbed, where turf has to be cut and won and creeled home" ("An tOileánach" 55). He sees this simplicity as something connected to place and literary form. Brian O'Nolan implies a similar view in his discussion of *An tOileánach* as Ó Criomhthain's aesthetic of unsophistication, a primitive literary form.

McGahern was not the first Irish writer to translate a section of *An tOileánach* for publication in *The Irish Times*. In his "Cruiskeen Lawn" column published on 3 January 1957, O'Nolan had already promoted *An tOileánach* as the model for his parody *An Béal Bocht*. His "Islanding" article from that day includes a short translation of Ó Criomhthain's depiction of his mother's funeral. In an essay accompanying the translation, writing as Myles na Gopaleen, O'Nolan notes how he first read *An tOileánach* "with awe […] Not, as is customary, with "Aw":

> That book […] is the superbest book I have ever read. Its sheer gauntness is a lesson for all. […] It is the symbol of a Gaelic order gone under for good. […] it is worthwhile to learn the Irish language to read this work. Against it about 90% of books in English, with their smear of sophistication, fall into the ordained bin of trash. ("Islanding")

O'Nolan champions the text's simplicity (its "gauntness") and is also quick to echo another critic's point that Robin Flower's 1934 translation of the text – *The Islandman* – fails because it mistranslates the source material and gives a "wholly wrong impression" ("Islanding"). In his essay published more than thirty years later, McGahern discusses Flower's problematic translation but credits Ó Criomhthain's inimitable style for this difficulty:

> it was only when I tried to translate parts of it myself that I came to realize how good a translation Flower's actually is and that the difficulty was deep in the language itself, in the style. If we think of the style as the man, of style as the revelation of personality in language and that the quality of the personality is more important than the material out of which the pattern is shaped, then the opposite can be argued: style itself must be the outcome of a view of reality. [Ó Criomhthain's] is a definite style, in the sense that a persistent way of seeing and thinking falls naturally into an equally persistent form of expression. His view of reality is at no time a personal view and it is never at variance with the values of his society as a whole. ("An tOileánach" 55)

McGahern understands style then as an interweaving of various social and psychological factors that in turn sustain the literary mode of expression.

McGahern sees place and action as inseparable in *An tOileánach*. He believes that place as an aspect of setting imposes a constraint on literary form:

> Nowhere in the work does he attempt to describe the little island he lives on. […] I believe this fact to be linked with [Ó Criomhthain's] view of his world, his view of reality. Within that view such a description would be pointless. […] Places are

> seen in their essential outline, which is inseparable from their use or function. Sometimes a place is seen as friendly to whatever action happens to be afoot, more often it is hostile. Always place and action are inseparable. One cannot subsist without the other. ("An tOileánach" 55)

This view informs McGahern's wider aesthetic outlook. When he restates these opinions in "What Is My Language?" in 2005, he argues for "the presence of the older [Gaelic] language in the English [that Irish people] speak and use in Ireland, in many speech constructions, in its rhythms and its silences, and in those words withheld deliberately or left unspoken. This is the very opposite of that pseudo Irish/English we have from time to time been afflicted with" (*Love* 262). Place and action are inseparable; the language one uses to describe these is intrinsic to the place that informs style; McGahern therefore believes that the constraints of uniting these elements of literary art must dictate the form and shape of a given text. The language used then is everything. McGahern frequently claims, "Style is all that matters" (*Letters* 139).

In outlining his sense of how style emerges from a view of reality, McGahern relies on Henri Bergson's theory of the comic. McGahern sees reality and unreality as a dichotomy. Bergson writes, "it is only in its lower aspects, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking contrast to reality: the higher it rises, the more it approximates to life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high-class comedy that the stage might adopt them without changing a single word" (136). Bergson's emphasis on language suited to content informs McGahern's sense of an unrealistic Gaelicized English ("pseudo Irish/English"). McGahern's claim that style is the view of reality in *An tOileánach* resembles a complaint O'Nolan makes about Flower's translation, primarily

that the language of the translation does not suit the content. O'Nolan accuses Flower and *The Islandman* of "hiding" the reality of *An tOileánach* within "covers of opulent tweed" ("Islanding"). But McGahern makes an important distinction between a style that emphasizes reality versus a fantastic one suited to farce or myth. In this respect, he distinguishes between the kind of Celtic realism discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, which in McGahern's estimation should limit or hide its artifice, and a form of unrealistic Celtic farce which is justified in using the artifice of "pseudo Irish/English" because this amplifies its unreal quality:

> I would exempt most of Synge and especially *The Playboy of the Western World*, which I view as a great farce […] *The Playboy* conforms to all the Bergsonian laws of farce, in that an artificial language is used to reflect the unreal or unnatural happenings. If a natural or living language is used in farce, Bergson argues, emotion or recognition will inevitably filter through to render the unbelievable happenings no longer either funny or enjoyable, and the great liberating kick farce takes at reality becomes ineffectual because the farcical events aren't hermetically sealed in an equally artificial language. (*Love* 262)

This statement could be used as a justification for reading both the understated realism of *An tOileánach* (something O'Nolan turned into farce in his Gaelic parody *An Beál Bocht*) and the homicidal unreality of *The Playboy of the Western World* (a play which strikingly resembles *The Third Policeman*) as two sides of the same Celtic coin.[129] Moreover, a

[129] Several critics have noticed the resemblances between *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Third Policeman*. Clissmann has argued the description of Mather's death "is verbally similar to the description of the slaying of his father which Christy Mahon gives […] The punishment of the narrator for the murder of Mathers may have been intended as a criticism of Synge's apparent lack of moral comment" (354 n.20). Hopper has contradicted this claim, arguing that "Christy Mahon makes a (sublimated) intertextual appearance in *The Third Policeman*" and that this is "a mythological repudiation of the nativist writers who

notion of something seemingly unreal, or mythical, like hell in *The Third Policeman* is attributable to a common source in a society in which religion, and religious dogma, was a common symbolic language. This common symbolism extends to a Scottish Catholic writer such as George Mackay Brown. These writers were all navigating the terrain of belief in mid-century Ireland, Scotland, England etc., in what was, after all, a relatively small literary milieu.

McGahern and O'Nolan share clear views about style and reality in fiction (especially as these ideas relate to *An tOileánach*), and yet few critics have remarked on the possibility of a shared aesthetic outlook. The views McGahern expressed in "What Is My Language?" can serve as an interpretive key for his fiction, but also as a testcase for O'Nolan's Celtic aesthetic outlined in chapter one. The latter aim is especially important when one considers the poor reception McGahern accorded O'Nolan's writing throughout his career. McGahern apparently disliked O'Nolan's writing, but it nevertheless may still have held importance for his own writing practice. The following section compares McGahern's *The Country Funeral* with O'Nolan's portrayal of hell in *The Third Policeman* as a case study for a shared understanding of the Celtic aesthetic.

**McGahern and the wider Celtic Imaginative**

McGahern disliked the fiction O'Nolan wrote as "Flann O'Brien." In a letter to Patrick Gregory on 1 December 1964, McGahern writes:

> Provincialism is I think only a state of mind and heart, O'Connor is as provincial as O'Brien, equal rubbish. I never could like even Swim 2 Birds, it's impossible

followed Synge's wake" (*Post-Modernist* 27-29). Joseph Brooker and Thomas Dilworth both have forthcoming critical work on Synge and O'Nolan and the play's influence on *The Third Policeman*.

> to see it without Joyce, and there's some meanness, [but in] it only cleverness, and it takes passion or savagery to make cleverness comic, when style passes beyond the conceit of vision into true humanness. Style is all that matters but I do not trust myself much, let it be. Provincialism like every other ism is primarily cowardice in the face of reality, its bravado is the easiest to see.[130] (*Letters* 139)

Since there is little mention of O'Nolan elsewhere in McGahern's writing, critics have generally neglected to probe the significance of McGahern's dismissal of O'Nolan in the wider context of a comprehensive comparison of their work and the modern Celtic imaginative.[131] When one compares *The Country Funeral* with O'Nolan's portrayal of hell in *The Third Policeman*, the resemblances between the two texts becomes even more significant given McGahern's antipathy towards O'Nolan and his coterie, as well as his proximity and close access to Dublin writers.

Early drafts of his novella in the University of Galway archive reveal that McGahern's original working title was "The City and The Country," and later "The

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[130] McGahern continued to dislike *At Swim-Two-Birds* until late in life. In a 26 August 2005 letter to Neill Joy for instance, McGahern cited a list in the *Irish Independent* that included *At Swim-Two-Birds* as "a series of Irish classics (some are far from classic)" (*Letters* 790).

[131] In his essay, "A Poet Who Worked in Prose: Memories of Michael McLaverty," published in the *Sunday Independent* on 29 March 1992, one week after McLaverty's death, McGahern alludes to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, writing, "Years ago when I was an evening student at UCD – one of those National Teachers Flann O'Brien observed as they came into Earlsfort Terrace after work on their bicycles" (*Love* 75). The allusion to *At Swim* reveals to some extent the personal impact O'Nolan's writing had on McGahern's generation despite Stanley van der Ziel's claims to the contrary. (See the "Editor's Preface" to *Love of The World*, p. xxxv.) It is possible that McGahern knew O'Nolan's circle in McDaid's Public House in Dublin during the early-1960s. McGahern frequently mentions McDaid's in his letters from this period (*Letters* 135, 161, 191, 205). For example, he wrote Michael McLaverty on 31 May 1965 to say that the "worst review of *The Dark* was by a Dublin public house oracle, Anthony Cronin, in the *TLS*" (*Literary Correspondence* 40). He echoed his disdain for McDaid's and Cronin in a letter to Patrick Gregory, dated 25 October 1964, in the voice of O'Nolan's friend, the poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967):

> The McDaid world is such a jungle that it's impossible. There's a few images. When Cronin's Riley failed here I heard Kavanagh go round McDaid's: 'Phoor Cronin. Phoor Cronin. Aah, sad, sad, His ambition was to rite [sic] a bestseller before he was forty. Med [sic] too many enemies. Phoor Cronin. Sad. […] And he'll never get another publisher. Because he won't sell 800 copies. It won't pay for the fucking printing even foo fum.' (*Letters* 135)

Country and The City," before he decided on *The Country Funeral*. McGahern develops a productive dichotomy between city and country that reveals an Irish literary past. If he associates his portrayal of the country with universality on the one hand, and O'Nolan's provincialism with the city on the other, then the synthesis he attempts in *The Country Funeral* becomes even more significant to both his oeuvre and his wider sense of a modern Celtic imaginative. Going to a funeral in the Irish countryside for McGahern is an act of remembering and a kind of inversion. He posits that "funerals remain our most frequent and important carnivals" (*Memoir* 215). Wakes, removals, celebrations of funeral mass, burials, and the local customs surrounding these rites, frequently recur in McGahern's fiction. O'Nolan's novel about a character who is dead throughout the narrative, and which portrays his spiritual damnation in Hell, may potentially be a catalyst for McGahern—part of a national ideology and aesthetic regime which suggests a rich intertextual dialogue—as he advances a concept of spiritual renewal in *The Country Funeral*.

McGahern never discussed *The Third Policeman* in any of his extant letters or essays. However, the 1966-1967 portion of his correspondence with the Irish author Aidan Higgins (1927–2015) has been conspicuously left out of McGahern's published letters. Higgins's letters from this period discuss both O'Nolan and *The Third Policeman*. For example, in his 7 May 1966 letter, Higgins thanks McGahern for the condolences he shared following the death of Higgins's mother and alludes to two recent literary deaths in Dublin, Frank O'Connor on 10 March 1966 and Brian O'Nolan three weeks later on April first. In a handwritten postscript at the top of the typed letter, Higgins writes: "Thanks for funeral tidings […] Extraordinary crop of death in Dublin last year &

beginning of this year. My mother loved At Swim & early O'Connor."[132] In another letter dated 23 September 1967, he notes Bernard Share's recent stay at the Higgins' family home in Malaga before moving on to McGahern:

> How is your own work going? Send us for the love of God a copy of *The Dark*, preferably Knopf. I read and liked Share's Knopf novel, a kind of ersatz *Watt*, which was already a deliberately ersatz novel. He might surprise us yet. A certain Dr. Chance, Jill says the whitest black sheep she has ever seen, presented me with *The 3rd Policeman*, Myles' posthumerous [sic] novel, written immediately after AS2B [*At Swim-Two-Birds*], and the only one that can stand comparison with the great first. I read it in two gulps. It's a fine breathing book. I hear the crrrrrritics—London—could not make head nor tail of it. Well.[133]

This tantalizing letter may have prompted McGahern to read *The Third Policeman*. It is certainly suggestive to see O'Nolan's novels mentioned in the same paragraph as McGahern's work by one of his friends. While McGahern's thoughts on the novel remain a lacuna for McGahern scholars, the letters he received from Higgins (specifically this unpublished 23 September 1967 letter) suggest a basis for comparing *The Third Policeman* and McGahern's fiction with the aim of determining how O'Nolan's similar attitude toward a modern Celtic fiction relates to McGahern's aesthetics.

In taking the view that these authors share pertinent similarities even though they write with oppositional aims (that is, McGahern's primitive realism opposes O'Nolan's

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[132] See Aidan Higgins, 7 May 1966 letter, P71/1632, John McGahern Papers, James Hardiman Library, University of Galway.

[133] Aidan Higgins, 23 September 1967 letter, P71/1632, John McGahern Papers, James Hardiman Library, University of Galway. I have italicized the literary titles Higgins lists. His invitation for McGahern to visit him in Spain ("Won't you come out and see us? We enjoyed having Share here for three days") suggests the possibility a of longer correspondence not currently represented in McGahern published letters.

farcial/mythical metafiction), the reading put forward below does not contradict the current critical interpretation of *The Country Funeral*. Rather it aims to show how a side of his own interpretive framework for Irish (and more broadly Celtic) fiction set out in "What Is My Language?" is largely absent from McGahern criticism, and *The Third Policeman* helps us to see how McGahern re-enforces the importance of the non-urban, marking an essential connection between the Irish countryside, hell, and eternity. These representations comprise McGahern's stylistic and formal coordinates. However, acknowledging the "spectral presence" of *The Third Policeman* in *The Country Funeral* requires some brief justification.[134]

In his 1996 study, *Ghosts of Modernity*, Jean-Michel Rabaté argues that modernism is haunted, and he reads the modernist enterprise through hauntings. Such hauntings form a metaphor for historicizing the present. Rabaté argues for "a more open network of intertextual relations" because these are "textual or historical specters that have not been properly laid to rest" (xvi, vii). Modernity for Rabaté is by definition "never contemporaneous with itself, since it constantly projects, anticipates, and returns to mythical origins" (3). The ghostliness and the haunted aspects of modernity are part of its projecting function. Death and ghosts comprise Rabaté's central metaphor: the transformation of writers into specters: "I wish to conjure up the figure of a ghostly writer who imagines himself posthumous so as to mediate between his past and future to judge

[134] A consistent and careful use of the notion of "spectral presence" (a form of W. H. Auden's argument that ghosts hover about the writer's shoulder) via both Jean-Michel Rabaté and the Flann O'Brien scholar Ruben Borg helps clarify this line of reasoning. Making the argument that McGahern was particularly influenced by O'Nolan in writing *The Country Funeral* tells us about realistic style in mid-century Irish writing, emerging, for instance, from the impoverished Blasket islands described in Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*.

the present" (Rabaté 3). In *Fantasies of Self-Mourning* (2019), Ruben Borg has argued that Rabaté's metaphor for historicity forces us to reflect on modernist literary networks: "if the ghost stands for the memory of generations, […] it is also bound up […in] certain material conditions of production and transmission" (Borg 111). This framework is imperative to resituating McGahern as a major Irish Modernist (and interpreting his work as conversant with Irish modernism generally) because it draws attention to a principal theme in all his work – the cycles of life and death, particularly the spiritual renewal that comes from experiencing death in life.

Following this claim for spectral presence as a literary network not fully addressed—or not laid to rest in Rabaté's terminology—McGahern must contend with O'Nolan as a writer who helped to shape Irish modernist literary endeavour after Joyce before McGahern entered the literary scene. Their similar views speak to shared ideologies. Yet it is difficult to know whether McGahern wished to assert that his, rather than O'Nolan's, was the true voice of rural Ireland; or that he wished to authoritatively map a "disappearing Ireland" and O'Nolan is part of substantiating that project. Readers can easily distinguish between McGahern's closely observed realism and O'Nolan's closely observed unreality of Celtic mythical realms (what Keith Hopper has called magic realism). However, their views of realism are comparatively similar, as we have seen already.

O'Nolan and McGahern employ cyclical form. The journey the narrator makes in *The Third Policeman* is a never-ending circle, an endless continuation of his punishment in death. McGahern emphasizes a continuation of country life at the close of *The Country Funeral* and in his 1979 novel *The Pornographer*. But *The Country Funeral* actually

shares several similarities with *The Third Policeman*: McGahern associates pedalling bicycles with the passing years (*TCF* 31), implies that the novella's setting, Gloria Bog, is a kind of "hell" (*TCF* 44), portrays an old, dead miser who keeps an "iron box" filled with money (*TCF* 25, 50), and focuses point of view on three men (one of whom is missing his legs and uses wheels instead). So, it is surprising that no critic has yet seen an affinity between McGahern's novella and O'Nolan's novel.

Contrarily, critics writing about how McGahern responds to Irish modernity neglect O'Nolan's writing as a model. Denis Sampson has suggested O'Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh were two figures in the Irish literary discourse familiar to McGahern and that they served as models because both were "urban modern, eclectic, and not followers of any established political or religious agenda" (*Young John McGahern* 44-45).[135] Stanley van der Ziel has noted "that while McGahern admired Flann O'Brien he found *At Swim-Two-Birds* 'too tricksy' for his own liking" (*Imagination of Tradition* 212). He claims McGahern's fiction should be regarded in a specifically Irish modernist tradition, "in the context of a narrative trope shared by a number of prominent twentieth-century Irish writers," with O'Nolan among them (*Imagination of Tradition* 211). But van der Ziel also credits Hopper for recording McGahern's views on O'Nolan and *At Swim-Two-Birds*. His impression of McGahern's literary tastes, namely that McGahern preferred the "pared-down" style of Joyce's *Dubliners* and early chapters of *Ulysses* over *Finnegans Wake* (*Imagination of Tradition* 212), could also pertain to the pared-down

[135] Kavanagh and O'Brien are often connected. In an interview with Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis published in 2003, McGahern remarked that "Patrick Kavanagh was the first winner [of the A.E. Memorial Award in 1939], and it had always been given to poets" (3). McGahern appears to have been unaware that Brian O'Nolan ("Flann O'Brien") shared the award with Kavanagh in 1939, receiving £25 for *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

style of *The Third Policeman*.[136] Interestingly, van der Ziel also notes that "Flann O'Brien" is a "minor character" in McGahern's short story "My Love, My Umbrella" (*Imagination of Tradition* 193), but he is mistaken. The whiskey-plied man whom the narrator calls a "poet," and who admires "the blossoms of Kerr Pinks more than roses" (McGahern *Collected Stories* 66), is almost certainly modelled on Patrick Kavanagh, a writer with farming experience, and not on the variously pseudonymous Brian O'Nolan / Myles na gCopaleen / Flann O'Brien.

Less astute critics reject the claim that McGahern is working in the Irish modernist tradition. Richard Robinson has argued that "McGahern does not pick up the baton of modernism with the serio-comic panache of […] Flann O'Brien – and it is hard to think of more different writers, despite the shared bicycles and police barracks" (3). David Malcolm has noted a similar tendency in which critics distinguish McGahern's writing from an "experimental Irish tradition that includes late works by Joyce and the novels of Flann O'Brien and [John] Banville" (5). But such distinctions are largely misleading: McGarhen's writing is inextricable from the continuum of Irish modernism, whether we consider his fiction experimental or not; he and O'Nolan were contemporaries living and writing in Dublin at the same time, though they were born twenty-three years apart, and their styles are indeed different. Few comparisons have been made between O'Nolan and McGahern's fiction, though there have been a few. Hopper has noted the similarity of McGahern's and O'Nolan's views on "celibacy" (*Post-Modernist* 58); but he does so in a study of *The Hard Life* (1960), not *The Third Policeman*. Brian Hughes has noted the importance of "Flann O'Brien's […] physically

[136] Thomas O'Grady noted recently that McGahern dismissed Flann O'Brien, deriding the author as "pseudo Joyce" during a seminar at University College Dublin in Fall 1977 (email to author, 29 July 2021).

gruesome" characters to desolation in McGahern's fiction (94), but he fails to link this insight to any specific work by O'Nolan, listing modern Irish authors instead, and stating generally that McGahern "had a lengthy tradition to draw on for his intense and desolate stories of the competing tyrannies of mind and body" (B. Hughes 94).

There is, however, a turn within McGahern studies to read the author's work alongside the modern Celtic imaginative outlined above. Frank Shovlin has argued for a kind of hermeneutics that situates McGahern's subtle and allusive style of fiction among works of classic literature, calling him a "profoundly literary writer" (Shovlin 15). He notes O'Nolan's importance for McGahern as a writer who pays "homage to Joyce" (Shovlin 23).[137] Shovlin claims that McGahern "only uses writers whom he has fully absorbed and for whom he has unswerving regard" (13). Despite McGahern's criticism of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Nolan should be considered such a writer of influence. Details from McGahern's life via his *Memoir* suggest many reasons he may have felt drawn to *The Third Policeman*, again for these congruences: McGahern's father, for instance, was a sergeant in the Gardaí Síochána; the family lived in the police barracks during McGahern's childhood, as Robinson has indicated; McGahern rode a bicycle everywhere (his father frequently repaired his shoes with old bicycle tires). The connection between O'Nolan and McGahern's fiction remains to be seen, but such affinities can be seen initially to establish McGahern more firmly within a continuum of Irish modernist writers and would situate his writing within a broader modern Celtic imaginative.

[137] Shovlin does not include *The Country Funeral* in his study, and he sees Dante, and not O'Nolan, as exerting influence over McGahern's "references to heaven and hell" (171-172).

**Hell and *The Country Funeral***

*The Country Funeral* follows Philly, Fonsie, and John Ryan, three brothers who return to Gloria Bog—their mother's village in the west of Ireland—for their uncle's funeral. Graham Price has noted that the brothers remember their time in Gloria Bog differently, as either "happy or hellish" (Price 96). The action begins during early summer and a spell of good weather when "terrace doors were open and people sat in the doorways" (*TCF* 3). The Ryan brothers' return to Gloria at the beginning of summer is both nostalgic and symbolic of a perennial return because their mother brought them there every summer when they were children. They have not visited the village, nor their uncle, since their "father died" twenty years earlier (*TCF* 16). The text thematizes the leadup to the event of a funeral as a network of many smaller rituals.

The timeline of *The Country Funeral* corresponds to the two combined timelines of *The Third Policeman*: "Four years" pass in the first chapter of the novel, and another "sixteen years" at the end (O'Nolan, *TTP* 11, 203). McGahern mentions "Twenty years" (*TCF* 30) during Philly's conversation with the local grocer, Luke Henry:

> 'I remember you well coming in the summers. It must be at least ten years.'
>
> 'No. Twenty years now.'
>
> 'Twenty.' He shook his head. 'You'd never think. Terror how they go. It may be stiff pedalling for the first years but, I fear, after a bit, it is all freewheeling.'
>
> When Luke smiled his face became strangely boyish. (*TCF* 30-31)

The change to youthfulness in Luke's face and his metaphor about bicycles and years passing evoke key features of *The Third Policeman*. At the end of O'Nolan's novel, after having been "away three days" in the policeman's parish, the unnamed narrator cycles

home to learn from his former friend John Divney (who now appears much older) that he was murdered and has been "dead for sixteen years" (*TTP* 207, 203).[138] O'Nolan sets most of *The Third Policeman* in a hellish countryside, an eternity, where time works differently. Similarly, McGahern sets his fiction over a period of "three whole days" (*TCF* 11), compressing time, and subordinating the reference timeline of twenty years.

Furthermore, the reference to a wheel in connection with eternity also resonates with McGahern's discussion of Ó Criomhthain and *An tOileánach*. In "What Is My Language?" McGahern writes,

> If the interdependence of scene and action serves to reduce one another to bare essentials, the sense of timelessness that [*An tOileánach*] has – of being outside time – comes from the day, a single day breaking continually over the scene and the action. (*Love* 265)

To support his interpretation of timelessness, McGahern quotes chapter seventeen of Flower's translation of *An tOileánach*: "People say that the wheel is always turning, and that's a true saying, for in the part of the world that I have known it has turned many times" (*Love* 265). *An tOileánach* may have exerted influence over McGahern's understanding of freewheeling time. He thematizes the passage of time in Gloria Bog to establish the village as a place outside of conventional understandings of time. The expression Ó Criomhthain uses in Irish, "an roth ag iompó do shíor" (220), suggests the wheel that is always in motion, turning forever, but he also alludes to a cyclical ebb and flow of time and good fortune, a thought very much in line with the stiff

[138] O'Nolan explained his decision to do this in a letter to William Saroyan on 14 February 1940: "all the queer ghastly things" happening in the policeman's parish is "a sort of hell which [the narrator] earned for the killing" of Phillip Mathers at the beginning of the novel (*Collected Letters* 69).

pedaling/freewheeling analogy that McGahern uses.[139] Gary Bannister and David Sowby's translation of this passage from *An tOileánach* is more figurative than Flower's literal rendering, "the wheel of life is constantly turning" (Bannister and Sowby 203).

*The Country Funeral* and *The Third Policeman* evince several other key parallels. Uncle Peter's matchstick "sheep" (*TCF* 51) share a likeness with the sheep O'Nolan's Sergeant Pluck mentions as he explains his nonsensically comic Atomic theory, whereby the Irish and their bicycles are exchanging atoms and attitudes. The dead man in McGahern's novella spent hours upon hours, a figurative eternity, "making the shapes of animals out of matchsticks" (*TCF* 52). Peter's sheep are comprised of tiny pieces like the tiny particles of sheep which Pluck describes: "millions of little bits of sheepness whirling around and doing intricate convolutions" (*TTP* 86). It is also significant that Peter makes his animals out of spent matchsticks picked up off the floor (*TCF* 42). The image of spent matches figure repeatedly in *The Third Policeman* and are symbolic of the narrator's paradoxical and hellish degradation. Pluck brings O'Nolan's narrator to "eternity," an endless series of industrial rooms with ovens, situated at the bottom of a lift in a building buried deep in a forest, a place where:

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[139] The figurative translation of "an roth ag iompó do shíor" is my own. The quotation in context reads:

> Ós rud é go ndeir na daoine go mbíonn an roth ag iompó do shíor, is dóigh liom gur fíor an port é, mar is mó casadh déanta aici insa pháirt don tsaol go bhfuilimse féin gafa thríd, agus má bhí croitheadh beag ar an saol timpeall na mBlascaod an tamall úd don tsaol, agus gur thug Dia an sórt so rachmais dúinn, is dóigh liom nár fhéachamair ceart chuige, mar gach ní do shroichimíd bog is gó bog do ligimíd uainn é. (Ó Criomhthain 220)

Bannister and Sowby translate this passage as "I suppose it's true, as people say, that the wheel of life is constantly turning. My life has certainly taken many a turn. And if the Blaskets got a bit of a shake-up at that time, and even with God giving us this sort of wealth, we probably didn't look after it properly, for everything we easily acquired we spent just as easily" (203).

> your pipe will smoke all day and still be full […] MacCruiskeen lit a match for our cigarettes and then threw it carelessly on the plate floor where it lay looking very much important and alone. (*TTP* 137-138)

As Pluck explains the replicating feature of eternity to the narrator—that every room is identical—the narrator is seized with terror: "I gave a cry as my eye caught a spent match lying clearly on the floor" (*TTP* 139). The burnt-out match paradoxically defies the logic of an unchanging eternity. The narrator is about to be hanged, and though he is already dead and in eternity, he does not know it. If he dies again, he may cease to exist. The match suggests a paradoxical changing of state in eternity, but one that fits with the internal logic of the novel. It becomes a symbol of the narrator's epistemic uncertainty: he is flabbergasted by the policemen's paradoxes, and his eternal punishment is to face each conundrum anew with no memory of what went before. McGahern's Philly faces a similar situation. His ultimate decision to buy Peter's cottage and settle in Gloria Bog – the eternal countryside – necessitates forgetting his life in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and ignoring his brothers' recollection of their uncle's brutality during childhood. The key difference is that McGahern's setting has the power to be redemptive whereas O'Nolan's does not.

McGahern's Gloria Bog also has hell as archetype. Inside his uncle's house, after the removal of the corpse, reflecting on life and death, Philly Ryan thinks, "He must be already well out past halfway" (*TCF* 52). This thought evokes the opening of *The Divine Comedy* in Hell, which famously begins, "Midway upon the journey of our life" (Longfellow 12). Fonsie connects the countryside to hell. Discussing economic relocation to the city, Fonsie says, "If they were that well off why had they all to do their best to get

to hell out of the place" (*TCF* 44). This getting "to hell" has its symbolic counterpart in the funeral party's journey up the hill to Kileelan cemetery, which can be understood to evoke the heavenly ascent from purgatory to paradise in Dante. Fonsie watches from the car and, despite his being the most acerbic character in the story, is uncharacteristically moved:

> In spite of his irritation at this useless ceremony, that seemed only to show some deep love of hardship or enslavement – they'd be hard put to situate the graveyard in a more difficult or inaccessible place except on the very top of a mountain – he found the coffin and the small band of toiling mourners unbearably moving as it made its low stumbling climb up the hill, and this deepened further his irritation and the sense of complete uselessness. (*TCF* 60-61)

The journey up the hill thus suggestively mimics Dante's journey with Beatrice, and aesthetically the hell imagery throughout *The Country Funeral* suggests a spiritual plane that is absent from the realistic level of the story's action.

These evocations of a spiritual plane establish an imaginative possibility for renewal. In his *Memoir*, McGahern writes that from a young age he knew "Heaven was in the sky. Hell was in the bowels or the earth. There, eternal fire raged. The souls of the damned had to dwell in hell through all eternity [...] Between this hell and heaven, purgatory was placed" (*Memoir* 13).[140] This concept of fire in the bowels of the earth finds expression in the story when, "looking at the bog," Philly says, "I used to think it was on fire" (36). Hell is metamorphic for McGahern because even a sunset stretching

[140] Shovlin quotes this passage on hell from McGahern's *Memoir* in his chapter on "Dante and epic style" (172).

across the land can become a hell-scape.[141] Denis Sampson claims, "light over the landscape […] seems to inspire Philly to return to his uncle's place, and in that way to preserve the memory and the meaning of his uncle's life," which Sampson interprets as a "resurrection" ("Alight in the Mind" 127). When Philly's wonder is awakened, he feels renewed. His decision to buy his uncle's cottage, retire in the country, and die there, also renews the cycle of the country funeral. Robinson reads this effect in the text through what he calls its "ethically symbolic geography of country and city" (179), antagonistic counterforces he associates with the dead and the living respectively. (This schema of country and city provides the basis for understanding *setting* as an important dialectic in McGahern's fiction, about which more below.)

The spectral presence of *The Third Policeman* in *The Country Funeral* is worth observing further because doing so helps establish other instances in modern literature where the west of Ireland evokes eternity. *The Third Policeman* features a one-leggèd narrator; Fonsie Ryan has no legs at all, only the wheels of his wheelchair, which are practically an extension of his body—reminiscent of O'Nolan's bicycle bodies in *The Third Policeman*'s hilarious atomic theory (*TTP* 85-94). Fonsie wears "legless trousers [...] sewn up below the hip" (*TCF* 1). McGahern's depiction of disability is more sympathetically contemporary than O'Nolan's, which is farcically modern: "In one of the places where I was broadening my mind I met one night with a bad accident. I broke my left leg (or, if you like, it was broken for me) in six places" (*TTP* 10). Fonsie's difficulties in the mostly inaccessible countryside are poignantly felt. McGahern had also written about a funeral party on a hill prior to publishing *The Country Funeral*, but never from

[141] McGahern's portrayal of hell is similar to O'Nolan's but differs in that it does not borrow from the Irish myth of Oisín's journey out of Tír na n-Óg.

the point of view of a wheelchair-bound man confined in a car at ground level. The short story "The Wine Breath" features the Killeelan hill cemetery and briefly mentions a man who, like Fonsie Ryan, "lost both legs in an explosion" (*Getting Through* 103). The passages mentioning "timeless mourners" (*Getting Through* 106-107), and the ascent of the coffin, anticipate *The Country Funeral*:

> Ahead, at the foot of the hill, the coffin rode slowly forward on shoulders [...] High on Killeelan Hill the graveyard evergreens rose out of the snow. The graveyard wall was covered, the narrow path cut up the side of the hill stopping at the little gate deep in the snow. The coffin climbed with painful slowness, as if it might never reach the gate, often pausing for the bearers to be changed; someone started to pray, the prayer travelling down the whole mile-long line of mourners as they shuffled behind the coffin in the narrow tunnel cut in the snow. (*Getting Through* 95-96)

Like Fonsie, the priest in "The Wine Breath" seems to find the memory of the burial procession unbearably moving. But "The Wine Breath" and *The Country Funeral* have essential thematic differences.

The end of *The Country Funeral* centres on Philly's decision to ultimately die in Gloria Bog, which implies a cyclical continuation that will result in yet another country funeral when he dies. This kind of continuation is denied to the priest in "The Wine Breath," who reflects that he will die but remains focused on the image of a man courting a woman, which might have been his reality had he not taken vows and been ordained. He is instead (not unlike Uncle Peter) a celibate with no children. Bruen's burial at the top of Killeelan "had been nothing more than a funeral he had attended during a dramatic

snowfall when a boy, [but] seemed bathed in the eternal, seemed everything we had been taught and told of the world of God" (*Getting Through* 98). The reader at once sees the significance of the memory of Bruen's death: it likely obliterated any possibility of the priest-character's courting Bruen's daughter, solidifying his choice to enter the priesthood. And while the priest worries about saying a mass of remembrance for Bruen, the story can be read as that remembrance. Niamh Campbell has argued, "Philly's feats of affiliation by omission allow him to reintegrate into the community" (54), echoing Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, who has interpreted *The Country Funeral* as a socially symbolic fiction about a funeral crowning McGahern's *Collected Stories*, which cannot help but suggest similarity to Joyce's "The Dead" not only for its position at the close of the volume but also for its return to the west of Ireland signalled in Gabriel's thoughts at the conclusion of Joyce's story. Paccaud-Huguet also focuses on this "symbolic filiation" between Joyce's Gabriel Conroy and Philly Ryan, touching on the stories' shared death-intoned "rift" (1-10),[142] but this reading misses the significance of setting which, given McGahern's prioritizing of the relation between place and action, should have primacy in interpretation.

Gloria Bog and Killeelan Cemetery maintain subtle, allusive associations with eternity and endlessness. Paccaud-Huguet writes that Gloria Bog is "a rather enigmatic placename, a kind of oxymoron which combines sublime radiance with the death-in-life

[142] When Josiane Paccaud-Huguet notices that Uncle Peter's death and wake "has ripped up the fabric […] where the act of story-telling places a veil" (1-10), one sees the rift caused by Gretta Conroy's story about the death of Michael Furey in a new light. The conversation between Gretta and Gabriel at the close of "The Dead" is a memorial, a kind of funeral that passes over "the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried" (Joyce, *Dubliners*, 223). Paccaud-Huguet remembers this scene from Joyce's story but fails to note its shared effect in *The Country Funeral*, especially when Mrs. Ryan tells her sons, "'Everything you do down there will be watched and gone over. I'll be following poor Peter in my mind until you rest him with Father and Mother in Killeelan'" (*TCF* 10).

of the bog" (4). The name in its Roman Catholic context evokes the Minor Doxology in Latin: "Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto, Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum," further evoking eternity and the theme of a world-without-end.[143] In Paccaud-Huguet's reading, the image of Uncle Peter at his matchsticks is a reflexive comment on the ethics of artistry, rather than on the concrete connection to the burnt matchsticks and a spent life, not to mention the image of the spent match in O'Nolan's eternity cited above. The sense of eternity as a place on top of Killeelan resonates deeply with O'Nolan's "eternity" in *The Third Policeman.* Both texts demonstrate evocative power of the west of Ireland. The sound of Gillespie's sawing in "The Wine Breath," for instance, splits the priest's consciousness of the present moment with his reverie of the snowy funeral. This image resonates of eternity in *The Third Policeman* as well: the narrator's thoughts are interrupted and "silence [is] split by the sound of loud frenzied hammering" (*TTP* 136).

These similarities between O'Nolan and McGahern's poetics, and the possibility of shared aesthetics, are remarkable given that McGahern disliked O'Nolan's fiction on the one hand and yet shared, on a level beyond realism, his preoccupations with death and the afterlife. What relates McGahern and O'Nolan most significantly, however, is the hellishness they see in the Irish countryside.

**McGahern's wider project**

The wake and funeral, rites located at the centre of McGahern's poetics, close his final novel, *That They May Face The Rising Sun*. Gerald Lynch sees Johnny Murphy as a

[143] Paccaud-Huguet also does not appear to know, or neglects to mention, that Gloria Bog was also a real place where McGahern recollected cutting loads of turf to fill his father's contracts (*Memoir* 173).

character type similar to Uncle Peter, and has argued that "Murphy is a final type of this displaced rural Irishman, and his life and fate are [...] central to McGahern's valorizing of the rural and organic with respect to self-identity […] Johnny's death provides opportunity to explain the novel's title" (Lynch 163). Peter's death similarly animates the title of *The Country Funeral*. In his final novel McGahern spiritualizes his natural setting, "in a suggestive conflation of pagan and Christian that becomes typical of McGahern's religious vision" with a "metaphysically signifying lake" (Lynch 164; 169).[144] One might further Lynch's argument by noting that these "pagan and Christian" / Gaelic-Catholic elements of his fiction and his reflection on the meaning of time are the primary coordinates of his Celtic aesthetic. These concerns give McGahern further affinity with George Mackay Brown.

The first half of *That They May Face The Rising Sun* is set in ordinary time. (Jamesie's clocks suggest the symbolic importance of time within the novel - the natural clockwork Lynch notices which echoes the chiming clocks and funeral bells in chapter fourteen of *The Dark*.) Lynch has argued *Sun*'s opening paragraph is "audaciously [...] repeated word-for-word, though beginning 'Easter morning came clear'" (*Sun* 251; Lynch 164), as is the bit from the second page about "the game" of handshakes and "no misters here" (*Sun* 2; 251-252). The second time we see the passage it is new and different: time has switched over to Eastertide; the word "Easter" changes the whole significance of the section and establishes a vitally important cyclicality. Without this, the novel would just be a series of sketches and would not succeed as it does. The repetition, Lynch agrees, "makes plainer the intermingling of spiritual orders suggested in the

[144] The lake has almost life-saving power when we consider the anecdote about Big Bernie Reynolds (*Sun* 252-261).

original opening and anticipates the meaning of the novel's title respecting burial and resurrection" (Lynch 164). Lynch argues that Johnny's death is the "climactic event of the plotless [novel]" (Lynch 169).

On a realistic level, Johnny dies of a heart attack, but the positioning of his death in the novel and the context informing it have hellish implications. Johnny's death also has affinity with John Divney's death which is likewise the climax of *The Third Policeman*, and Johnny shares a likeness with Divney.[145] Both men are killers. Divney kills Philip Mathers and the narrator of O'Nolan's novel. Johnny kills his beloved hunting dogs that were treated like people or members of the family. Divney's death at the end of the novel, his moaning and "cries," his "mutter[ing] things disjointedly like a man raving at the door of death" (*TTP* 203), is echoed in Johnny's "ravelled" final words, and his disconcerting "sort of a moan" (*Sun* 284). Significantly, the last image of Johnny in *Sun*, before he his death, is seen from Ruttledge's point of view: Johnny is riding a bicycle, and comically a "girl's bicycle" (*Sun* 273), details which again recall *The Third Policeman*, especially Gilhaney's outing with a "lady's bicycle" (*TTP* 92). McGahern's detail about the girl's bicycle is repeated both times we meet Johnny. Johnny meets eternity on a girl's bicycle. Later on, the bicycle becomes a sexual metaphor in *Sun*: "Tom Casey married Ellen, who was a bicycle and ease and comfort to the whole country" (*Sun* 304). "Ease" and especially "comfort" are the terms O'Nolan uses to sexualize the bicycle in *The Third Policeman*.[146]

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[145] Even Johnny's shortness of breath in the town, "that small bit out of puff" (*Sun* 279), is reminiscent of Sergeant Pluck's expressions "Never in my puff" (*TTP* 63) and "In my natural puff" (*TTP* 69).

[146] O'Nolan associates the bicycle with comfort: "Her bicycle was gone but here was Gilhaney's leaning there conveniently and trying to look very small and *comfortable* and attractive" (*TTP* 92, my italics). In eternity, the narrator notes the "*ease* with which the Sergeant [...] produced a bicycle" (*TTP* 140, my italics). During his tryst with Sergeant Pluck's bicycle, the narrator extolls its comfort:

McGahern establishes a hellishness concerning Johnny's fate that is (at least partly) resolved at the end of the novel. His death is foreshadowed in several ways: the dead black sheep is a prelude to his death because Johnny is the black sheep of the Murphy family. Jamesie's story about the war and Big Bernie Reynolds bleeding out in the lake, calling out hello with a "terrible gap between the 'Hel-' and the 'Low'" evokes hell at the centre of the novel's setting (*Sun* 257; 252-261). When Jamesie and Ruttledge go to the memorial for the War of Independence, their two-ness, coupled with their descent into a hellish past which Ireland has emerged from, evokes Dante and Virgil's journey into the Inferno in *The Divine Comedy*; Shovlin has remarked on this feature of the book, noting how Ruttledge casts Jamesie as his Virgil when he calls him his "sweet guide" (Shovlin 172-173; *Sun* 312). Johnny's appearing to "grow younger" inside Luke Henry's bar echoes how Luke Henry's face becomes "strangely boyish" in *The Country Funeral* as he tells Philly Ryan about "pedaling" and "freewheeling" through the years (*Sun* 276; *TCF* 31).

Gloria Bog recurs with hellish symbolic associations in all of McGahern's fiction, which establishes and affirms an essential imaginative link between hell and the Irish countryside. These affinities and Johnny's death inform the recognition that hell will be

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> How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly. She moved beneath me with agile sympathy in a swift, airy stride, finding smooth ways among the stony tracks, swaying and bending skilfully to match my changing attitudes, even accommodating her left pedal patiently to the awkward working of my wooden leg. (*TTP* 179)

The sexual echo repeats:

> I led the bicycle to the centre, started upon her gently, threw my leg across and settled gently into her saddle. She seemed at once to communicate to me some balm, some very soothing and pleasurable relaxation after the excitements of the tiny police station. I felt once more comfortable in mind and body, happy in the growing lightness of my heart. I knew that nothing in the whole world could tempt me from the saddle on this occasion until I reached my home. […] My feet pressed down with ecstasy on the willing female pedals. (*TTP* 200)

Johnny's eternal afterlife, which gives a symbolic significance to Mary and Jamesie's decision not to grant his request to retire at their home.

**The city-country Dialectic and Conclusions**

In *The Country Funeral* McGahern establishes vital symbolic importance for Gloria Bog and Killeelan cemetery, and more so than in any of his other fictions. While Eamon Maher and the other critics mentioned above have noted key moments of "arrivals and departures" in McGahern's fiction (Maher 27), no one has yet seen these phenomena in dialectical relationship. The journey from city to country, or even from Dublin to London, dialectically speaking, is a form of leave-taking that necessitates a new arrival and the possibility for a poignant synthesis. For a writer so fascinated by life and death, their synthesis—a spiritual renewal after experiencing death in life—must be paramount to any understanding of McGahern's oeuvre. This eschatological musing recalls an early passage from *The Pornographer* (1979):

> The womb and the grave. . . . The christening party becomes the funeral, the shudder that makes us flesh becomes the shudder that makes us meat. They say that it is the religious instinct that makes us seek the relationships and laws in things. And in between there is time and work, as passing time, and killing time, and lessening time that'd lessen anyhow, such as this going to the dance. (*TP* 30)

The inevitable return to the country to attend a funeral is a predominate feature in McGahern's fiction. It figures in nearly all his novels. Discussing arrivals and departures, Maher's essay offers some of the best analysis of *The Country Funeral* and McGahern's short fiction generally. He claims that *The Country Funeral* is "probably McGahern's

best" work (33). The return to the city that closes the novella echoes the ending of *The Pornographer*. Maher was the first critic to notice this affinity between *The Country Funeral* and *The Pornographer*, observing that the unnamed narrator of McGahern's fourth novel returns to the west of Ireland to attend his aunt's funeral, which is a similar kind of plot development (Maher 35).

*The Pornographer* anticipates *The Country Funeral* by ending with a country funeral and a return to Dublin, but this return presents an important renewal: the narrator's decision to marry Nurse Brady and move back to Leitrim renews the cycle of life. Nurse Brady already has a nominal connection to the narrator's country home through "Brady the old foreman" (*TP* 245). Lynch has argued,

> Characters who live in McGahern's urban environments (Dublin and London), most strikingly *The Pornographer*'s (1979) [narrator], often seem to have been psychically disfigured by the jangling rhythms and life of a noir-ish metropolitan modernity, and they must, or they should, return periodically […] to their rural origins for any hope of reconnoitring a sense of continuity with their roots, the natural world, and themselves. (Lynch 162-163)

For these reasons, *The Pornographer* is one of McGahern's most aesthetically ambitious novels and therefore one of his most complex. For example, protagonist Maloney constantly prompts literary allusions to Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which underscore consciousness and reality in McGahern's text. Comparatively, Joyce was the first Irish literary 'pornographer,' but Merriman's *Midnight Court* is also an overtly sexual text. Maloney's parody, "Ireland wanking is Ireland free" (*TP* 25), recalls Joyce's "Ireland sober is Ireland stiff" (*FW* 214); the two

uncles fighting throughout the novel evoke Shem and Shaun; the narrator's aunt could be Annalivia, although Josephine could be as well. H.C.E. is glimpsed at the end before they go to see the gravestone when Maloney says, "Here comes the happy widower" (*TP* 244). These allusions to *Finnegans Wake* reinforce the novel's main conflict between fertility and futility. John Updike, Rüdiger Imhof, and Shovlin rightly praise it (although the latter two critics erroneously refer to the narrator—who is unnamed—as "Michael," a mistake that Lynch repeats).[147]

McGahern's third published novel, *The Leavetaking* (1974), anticipates the atmosphere of the country wake. In part one of the novel, Patrick Moran briefly remembers his grandmother's death and wake in the mountains, and the reader glimpses, for a moment, the room full of people: "dark green bottles of stout in the window […] lazy swirls of smoke" (34). While McGahern focuses on the preparation of the corpse, wake, removal, and burial in *The Pornographer* and *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, it is only in the shorter fiction, *The Country Funeral*, that he addresses metaphysical conceptions of hell and the afterlife. Re-addressing the schema established earlier about city and country, one might say that in the countryside, rather than the city, Ireland's mythical and mystical past are remembered more readily, and more easily.

[147] In the first major review of *The Pornographer* published in *The New Yorker* on Christmas Eve 1979, John Updike noticed McGahern's distinctive crafting of Hiberno-English and, for example, highlighted the sentimental attractiveness of Josephine; but in misreading the novel essentially as a failure, Updike himself fails to credit McGahern with a fully purposeful creation. He also expressed a clichéd view of the Irish, as if they were a strange species emerged from a time warp. His discussion of Joyce's *Ulysses* amounts to little more than noting two writers whom he thinks inscribe Dublin well, although his heralding McGahern as the "Hibernian Camus" and the connection he makes to *L'Etranger* could be fruitful (Updike 97). Imhof calls *The Pornographer* "an important achievement in McGahern's career" (223). The narrator has no name. The woman with whom the narrator carries on a sexual relationship for most of the novel may be called "Josephine" after her aunt, but her uncle in his final illness may also have confused them. Conventions of naming are destabilized in the text.

Gesturing towards larger significances requires a two-fold effort. The first essential significance is that the longer fictional texts that comprise McGahern's oeuvre can be read as a unified project reflecting a singular aesthetic outlook—they share a deeply focused and synthesizing imagination. Michael McLaverty was the first reader to suggest this in passing when he noted in 1965 that *The Dark* read as a sequel to *The Barracks*.[148] On the other hand, by examining McGahern in the context of O'Nolan studies, and arguing for their shared aesthetics, this chapter attempts to steer McGahern criticism towards O'Nolan by noting both authors' similar preoccupations with death and the afterlife within a wider modern Celtic imaginative. Their writing about life and death, their synthesis—a spiritual renewal after experiencing death in life—must be paramount to any understanding of McGahern's oeuvre. One can see the city and the country in a similar dialectical relationship. Each journey from city to country, any leave-taking that necessitates an arrival, creates the possibility for a poignant synthesis, and one that is subordinate to this theme of spiritual renewal.

McGahern's last novel signals the end of a way of life in the country more than its renewal (the renewal might be postponed until the Resurrection, the "rising sun"). It is impossible to dismiss redemptive associations such as the naming of Uncle Peter in *The Country Funeral*. He is not accidentally named for the first Apostle—the rock foundation (*petra*) on which Christ would build his Church—who stands at the gates of Heaven deciding who may enter. Moreover, Gloria Bog is a mixture of hell and heaven, as Paccaud-Huguet has observed; its redemptive power is certainly inaccessible to Fonsie (in more than one sense). John is a kind of forerunner who feels at peace in the wake

[148] On 23 May 1965, McLaverty wrote to MacGahern, "*The Dark* could be read as a continuation of *The Barracks* with Regan and Mahoney one and the same person" (*Literary Correspondence* 39).

house. Philly connotes the "filial," the sense of brotherly duty and a natural succession from Peter to Philly. Such a reading of religious and eschatological themes—along with establishing the historicity of McGahern's fiction within a continuum that includes *An tOileánach* as well as Brian O'Nolan's "Flann O'Brien" writing—has been the primary purpose of this chapter. *The Country Funeral* and much else of McGahern has been analyzed with a view to placing his fiction rewardingly in a modern and Celtic context.

Such context is defined by the representational strategy of crafting a Celticized, and therefore un-British, English usage. Gloria Bog is a real place which, in terms of McGahern's aesthetic, draws our attention to its inherent style. Style is ideological for McGahern because it is tied to place, finds expression in a mode that arises from necessity, and speaks to constituent social values. In this respect, McGahern's Celtic aesthetic is modern, Irish, Catholic, and tied to the speech of his mother's Iron Mountains. As well, we have seen from the preceding chapters the ways in which McGahern's thinking and style are similar to O'Nolan's and Brown's in terms of the Celtic aesthetic.

## Conclusion

The preceding four chapters examined four separate modern writers, each of whom professed a Celtic literary theory and applied it to his writing practice. Their theories interrelate and from these points of relation we have explored an emerging Celtic aesthetic in twentieth-century fiction. We have seen, for example, how Brian O'Nolan's concept of truth-telling and his interest in a Celtic realism originating in medieval Irish, Welsh, and Scottish poetry, enabling him to set *The Third Policeman* in a Celtic Hell. We have seen how David Jones's theory of combining contraries informed his practice of interweaving Celtic myth and violence throughout *In Parenthesis*, wherein the deaths of Welsh soldiers at the Battle of the Somme are aligned with the devastation of the Welsh in Ireland in *The Mabinogion*, the death of Arthur's men in *Culhwch and Olwen*, and the defeat in Catraeth from *Y Gododdin*. Such allusions heighten the reader's emotional sense of what the soldiers were experiencing; war is imbued with deeper meaning and transformed into something phenomenological. George Mackay Brown developed a similar method in *Magnus* by marrying Celtic decoration, Sacrament, and war imagery. We have seen how he exploited the anamnetic potential of the Sacrament of the Eucharist to justify a move across time and space, shifting narrative events from twelfth-century Orkney to a German concentration camp.

The final chapter of this study presented a problem in the case of John McGahern. Unlike Brown, Jones, and O'Nolan, McGahern did not explicitly state a "Celtic" theory but rather adopted a consistent strategy which he mobilized throughout his oeuvre. We have seen how he focused on style-tied-to-place, English writing that is Celticized because it retains Gaelic usage, and a Roman Catholic interpretation of death and the

afterlife. These effects animate his portrayal of funerals especially; and in this respect, McGahern's writing shares affinity with O'Nolan's Celtic realism and finds unity with O'Nolan's immaterial or spiritual aims, even though McGahern criticized *At Swim-Two-Birds* and categorized its style as too provincial.

The Celtic, as we have thus seen it, contains within itself a presumption of transcendence. In the introductory chapter this transcendent aspect was compared to British literature's investment in materialism. Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling have argued that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for instance, O'Nolan resists American and European material investment in Ireland through his use of anamnetic placenames and by depicting the Shannon River valley as locus for Celtic myth (307-325). Rather than rely on an orthodox theological interpretation of anamnesis as Jones and Brown do, Keohane and Kuhling develop an alternative definition of the anamnetic function of the Celtic aesthetic:

> *anamnesis*, a 'naming', the calling of a divine power instituting a centre of the world, […] is achieved by incanting a *verba concepta* that interrupts the ordinary passage of time and by repeating the archetypical gesture […] in modern Ireland we can identify precisely the place and time of the mystical inaugural rite that initiated the Mythic Age of Globalization. In this instance the *verba concepta*, repeated as a mantra ever since, is 'Tax-Free Zone'. (307)

Keohane and Kuhling argue that twentieth-century economic development in the Shannon area, and notably Ireland's "Tax-Free Zone," are at odds with the mythical and legendary associations evoked by, "*Snamh Dá Ein* [literally Swim-Two-Birds], an island at a ford on the River Shannon at the geographical centre of Ireland" (324), the anamnetic

site of O'Nolan's novel and the area from which the title, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, originates. Apart from its commercial potential, as a place visited by both Saint Patrick and Sweeny, and as the setting for Oidheadh chloinne Lir (the legendary "Children of Lir" story), Keohane and Kuhling observe that "Snamh Dá Ein" is a locus for the transcendent (324). They show that Celtic placenames have an anamnetic function in modern literature in English. The Celtic mythical and legendary associations of Snamh Dá Ein supersede its material importance in modern Irish literature, or at least form an essential gloss that cannot be ignored. Such resonances help explain Jones's interest in Anglicized Celtic placenames. Ignoring these anamnetic concerns about place enacts a similar despoliation to the one Jones wrote about regarding the loss of an ancient Welsh tradition as well as the erasure of Orkney's Celtic past that Brown explored, and the disappearance of rural modes of Irish life which McGahern fictionalized.

In all the above examples, modern Celtic writing in English retains this kind of existing aesthetic framework – i.e. symbolism and representational structures – received from a Celtic language. We have seen how these texts by O'Nolan, Jones, Brown, and McGahern evoke places, use names, borrow medieval conceptions, and how these become the primary coordinates of a literary aesthetic – a representational strategy. These authors claim the material from Gaeilge (Irish Gaelic, as with O'Nolan and McGahern,) and Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic in Brown's work,) or Cymraeg (Welsh for Jones). They are therefore all engaged in a retrieval of Celtic effects which they use uniquely to say something about the present.[149] O'Nolan's retrieval of the aesthetics of *Saltair na Rann* in

[149] This projecting-into-the-present function in George Mackay Brown's fiction is beginning to be recognized by Scottish critics working in Gàidhlig: Cathy Dhòmhnallach notes, for example, that Brown "credited his mixed Orkney/Gaelic heritage for his style and inspiration" in *Greenvoe*, what Dhòmhnallach

*The Third Policeman*, for example, suggests his commitment to Celtic authenticity and Irish language scholarship as Louis de Paor has argued. But, as we have seen, these effects also enabled O'Nolan to make an original Celtic contribution to a modern literature, and all four authors adopt similar strategies. We have seen how these strategies are metamorphic in the sense that each approach to image and setting is anamnetic and transformative.

The three sections that follow touch on two key neglected areas in this study. The first two sections pertain to women working within the modern Celtic aesthetic. The final section looks to instances where the Celtic aesthetic finds new expression in twenty-first century fiction. A whole new chapter could be devoted to Kate Roberts (1891–1985), a Welsh nationalist author and Plaid Cymru supporter who wrote almost exclusively in Welsh. While a brief discussion of some English translations of her work is included below, it was thought advisable to limit the scope of this study to authors writing predominantly in English (thus too the absence of the modern Irish writer Pádraic Ó'Conaire) and to historicize their transnational sense of the Celtic aesthetic.

In this respect, I have echoed John Brannigan's aim in *Archipelagic Modernism* to shift scholarly understanding from a unified concept of modern British literature, which is frequently incapable of denoting the plural history of the group of Celtic linguistic cultures located in the North Atlantic, toward a more encompassing, modern Celtic imaginative.[150] For example, Brannigan observes that in relation to twentieth-century

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calls his "nobhail fàisneachail" (i.e. a "prophetic novel") in an episode on Brown and *Greenvoe* for her BBC Alba programme, *Sàr Sgeòil*.

[150] Brannigan cites J. G. A. Pocock's argument that one must adopt a geographical and oceanic approach for covering the Celtic area: "Wales in the south, the Gaelic Highlands and Islands in the north-west. The latter area merges oceanically into that of the Irish peoples" (Pocock 10).

historiography, J. G. A. Pocock has already noted the inadequacy of the term "British history" for dealing with "the plural history of a group of cultures situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination" (Pocock 7). However, he claims it has taken longer for a plural, archipelagic approach to the political identities of Ireland, Scotland and Wales to take hold and, "make an impact on studies of literature" (Brannigan 8). Therefore, I can justifiably conclude that any study of modern Celtic literature must be polyglot.[151] An anglophone account is just one contribution to a rich literary history. An additional survey of primary texts and criticism in Gaeilge, Gàidhlig, Cymraeg, Manx Gaelic, and the Breton language would strengthen a wider polyglot approach to the Celtic aesthetic.

**Women and Celtic Scholarship**

The individual studies set out in each chapter are limited to long form prose works by four male authors. Curiously – and presumably without conscious collaboration – these four writers furnish individual literary theories and insights, the cumulative effect of which suggest a coherent modern Celtic aesthetic. The lack of Celtic fiction and scholarship by women implies a masculinist critical outlook, one that seems to have been inherent in the modern period of Irish literature. However, in the last four decades this critical narrative has begun to shift dramatically.

[151] This study focuses on English texts, but the preceding chapters engage material written in the Irish language (Gaeilge) and address instances where Celtic languages are fused to English. In *Gaeilge: A Radical Revolution*, Caoimhín De Barra argues convincingly for the hermeneutical value of Irish language in this regard.

Recent Celtic language scholarship by women is significant because it frequently takes this masculinist literary outlook to task.[152] In an essay titled "The Female Principle in Gaelic Poetry" published in 1983, the Irish language poet and scholar Máire Mhac an tSaoi (1922-2021), writing as Maire Cruise O'Brien, remarked on the "very male-dominated social structure" in early Christian Gaelic society, arguing that "much of what we know of Gaelic society corresponds to what we know of Celtic societies generally" (Cruise O'Brien 27-28). Despite this masculine bias, Cruise O'Brien has claimed that the Celtic aesthetic, as we have seen it, serves as a generative representational strategy for women. For example, she notes that in her historical novels, Mary Renault (1905-1983), "must certainly have drawn on modern Celtic scholarship when working on her reconstruction of the ancient [Greek] world" (Cruise O'Brien 26). In another example, Cruise O'Brien argues that the "Celts esteemed homosexuality […] for ritual purposes" (29), and this led to instances where male poets donned female personas for literary expression:

> The Irish poet was fully conscious of his supernatural role. When his verse legitimised the ruler, the poet *was* the goddess. Earlier custom seems to have required a cruder acting out of the relationship, a simulated copulation. (Cruise O'Brien 29)

[152] For the same reasons that I only briefly dealt with Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) in the introduction, and Thomas Kinsella's *Táin* in chapter one, I have intentionally ignored genre fantasies that rework Irish mythology like the novelized, *Finn MacCool* (1994) by the Irish-American author Morgan Llywelyn (b. 1937), which recasts the Fenian Cycle stories. I have focused instead on English texts that have erudition in Celtic language scholarship and use those elements for modern/contemporary literary expression.

As we saw in the first chapter, O'Nolan appears to anticipate Cruise O'Brien's sense of this supernatural – and homosexually-coded – male-female copulation in *The Third Policeman* during the narrator's sexual tryst with Sergeant Pluck's purportedly female (but decidedly male) bicycle.

Elsewhere, Cruise O'Brien notes how appropriating the female perspective is characteristic of sixteenth-century Gaelic poetry. In a poem addressed to Eochaidh Ó Heoghusa, which Joan Keefe has translated as "O'Rourke's Wife," Cruise O'Brien argues that the point of view of the wife is a rhetorical costume for the male poet and his patron. Cruise O'Brien notes that "the poet plays the female part" in a text that "is supposed to be addressed to her [absent] husband, Hugh O'Rourke, son of Brian, and to her lover Tomás Costello, son of Siurtán" (29). However, Cruise O'Brien claims significantly that while "Keefe thought of this poem as having been written by an actual historical person who was a woman […] this was what was generally accepted as being so by authorities in this field until about 1955" (31).[153] Cruise O'Brien thus establishes instances within Gaelic poetry, and the modern Celtic imaginative more broadly, where the female perspective is used to establish male point-of-view.

Despite the fidelity to Celtic scholarship that we see in O'Nolan's fiction, female and feminist influences remain key neglected areas in Flann O'Brien Studies. As with any spacious field of historical study, there remains more work of inclusion to be done. For instance, archival records document how Agnes O'Farrelly (1874-1951), O'Nolan's

[153] For example, this misconception about O'Rourke and his wife nuances the naming conventions of Maura Laverty's "No. 9 Liffey Lane," one of the vignettes included in her story cycle, *Liffey Lane* (1947), in which a young married woman troubles over her affair with a man named "David" while her husband "Hugh" is away at war (Laverty 123-158). Like the Eochaidh Ó Heoghusa poem, conflict between the two men is figured as a sexual competition.

MA supervisor at University College Dublin, helped him shape his early thinking about modern Celtic writing.[154] As I discussed briefly in the first chapter, critics have also neglected O'Nolan's correspondence with Ethel Mannin (1900-1984). Maebh Long and Anthony Cronin both fail to nuance her cold reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds* when it first appeared in England – and the socialist and nationalist contexts in which Mannin interpreted the novel – problematized by her comment that O'Nolan should be emulating Shakespeare rather than copying Joyce.[155]

Further, the contemporary writings of both Eavan Boland and Anna Burns can productively be read through the lens of the modern Celtic aesthetic. Boland's poem "Anna Liffey" (1997) reclaims the authentic female voice for the Liffey after *Finnegans Wake* and Joyce's Anna Livia. Burns's *Milkman* (2018) presents opportunities for reading through the lens of the Celtic aesthetic in various modes of modern and contemporary writing and would reward considerable further discussion.[156] Burns positions middle sister, her female narrator, in direct opposition to the widespread violence and male-dominated culture in her Irish community. The novel is Celtic for how it politicizes middle sister's reading, interweaving classic English and Irish texts, which take on radical and transgressive resonances in the context.

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[154] Agnes O'Farrelly (1874-1951), known by the Irish version of her name, Úna Ní Fhaircheallaigh, was O'Nolan's MA supervisor at University College Dublin. She was influential in shaping his early thinking.
[155] O'Nolan corresponded with Ethel Mannin (1900-1984) about his first novel from 10-14 July 1939. Mannin's discussion of Joyce, Shakespeare, and *At Swim* is dealt with in the first chapter of this study. Her letters to O'Nolan are included in the Flann O'Brien Collection, held by Southern Illinois University Special Collections Research Center, at the Morris Library in Carbondale IL. O'Nolan and his circle had been interested in Mannin since the early 1930s, and they knew about her close relationship with W. B. Yeats. In their correspondence, O'Nolan imposes on Mannin to connect him with the founder of the Irish Women's Franchise League and the Irish Women Workers' Union, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.
[156] *Milkman* garnered the 2018 Man Booker award and the 2020 Impac Dublin Literary Award, and both help substantiate the importance of Burns's contribution to contemporary Irish literature and the Celtic aesthetic generally.

Other recent Irish writers have sought to reclaim the female voice in Irish literature. For example, Eimear McBride's recent novel *Strange Hotel* (2020) directly alludes to Samuel Beckett's plays for female voices: "Not I" (1973), "Footfalls" (1975), and "Rockaby" (1981).[157] McBride aims to nuance Beckett's female monologues, building on these plays that thematize regret. Her allusions to these plays throughout the novel restore them to a more unified and complex female point of view.

There will be many future opportunities for generative work on women and Celtic scholarship. The previous chapters accord with Cruise O'Brien's view of the modern Celtic imaginative as espousing a masculinist critical outlook; while this outlook has indeed been inherent in the tradition, new studies are beginning to engage wider critical debates about gender and sexuality studies. Kate Roberts substantiates one such example, and I also encourage further study of her work in a transnational Celtic context for the reasons outlined below.

**Kate Roberts and Celtic Otherworlds**

The relevance of the modern Celtic aesthetic obtains for Kate Roberts and Welsh writing. Roberts did not write extensively on the Celtic aesthetic as a concept, but rather focused on Welsh literature and culture. She emphasized the importance of Welsh writers finding their own unique voice and not simply imitating English literature.

[157] Eimear McBride was made a creative fellow for the Samuel Beckett Research Centre at the University of Reading in 2017. On receiving the fellowship, McBride said: "It's a tremendous honour, and pleasure, to be the inaugural holder of the Samuel Beckett Creative Fellowship and I'm very much looking forward to the daunting task of creatively engaging with Beckett's inestimably important archive" ("Mouthpieces"). McBride devotes another small book to Beckett called *Mouthpieces* (2021). Knowing these connections help us better understand what McBride is saying about female identity and relationships. Her allusions to Beckett in *Strange Hotel*, looked at in this context, become intertextual. For example, the man in "Austin," and "his footfalls away" (102-103), evoke "Footfalls" in the penultimate section of the novel.

Roberts uses a distinctly Celtic representational strategy in a modern Welsh context within the anamnetic and transcendent definition discussed above. Katie Gramich has likened Roberts's focus on northern Wales to Joyce's technique in *Dubliners*, arguing that she admired Joyce and writes in "an analogous way to some notable Modernist contemporaries" but with her own sense of "vision and culture" (Gramich 29). In Roberts's 1922 short story, "Yr Athronydd" (The Philosopher), a series of "senseless deaths" during the First World War, and the recent loss of his niece, cause Ifan, the titular philosopher, to question the existence of God. "Yr Athronydd," according to Gramich, "enters into the realms of fantasy [when] Ifan hears music and sees two beautiful dancers; at the same time, Roberts's habitually spare, realist prose becomes unusually figurative and poetic" (Gramich 20). Ifan's encounter with the beautiful young couple is anamnetic in the sense that they exist outside conventional time, in an atemporal realm where no one dies and no one needs poetry because, as Gramich has argued, "poetry can only exist where there is fear and death" (21). The story ends with Ifan's decision to join the couple in a cave dwelling and be reunited with his niece. Gramich attributes the central theme of "Yr Athronydd," and this abrupt shift from a realistic Welsh setting to a mythical one, to what she calls,

> its refusal of any Christian afterlife in favour of a distinctly Celtic Otherworld […] it moves effortlessly into a magic realm situated at the heart of Snowdonia and derived from the magical medieval prose tales of *The Mabinogion*, which Roberts would have studied at university, taught in school, and which remained a constant inspiration for her own writing. (Gramich 21)

However, it is possible to further complicate this dichotomy about the spiritual ending in a Celtic-Christian context. Like the portrayals of the Gaelic conceptions of Tír na nÓg discussed in chapters one and chapter three of this dissertation, *The Mabinogion* depicts the Welsh Otherworld ("Annwn") as a magical realm that is spatially located underground and in hills and caves in different parts of Wales. This rendering does not altogether negate or reject a Christian conception of an afterlife (an end to death), it simply complicates it by fusing the Christian and the Celtic.[158] "Yr Athronydd" is significant for how it exemplifies Roberts's attempt to deal with the violence and despoliation experienced by people in modern Wales in a Celtic way. Roberts attempts to resolve this conflict by transitioning from a realistic fictional mode to a transcendent Celtic one. Discussing work in the former mode, Francesca Rhydderch has characterized Roberts as a "politically rigorous anti-modernist rather than provincially unfashionable realist" (Rhydderch qtd. in Grimach 42). However, we cannot ignore this secondary Celtic mode.

Grimach has suggested that Joycean modernism remained important for Roberts even in her later realist fiction. Her 1956 novel, *Y Byw sy'n Cysgu*, which Wyn Griffith translated into English as *The Living Sleep* in 1976, focuses on modern concerns for women: infidelity, marital breakdown, and financial freedom. Roberts gives these social problems a Celtic form of expression. The female protagonist, Lora Ffennig, describes her husband's desertion of the family and her resulting fallout with his relations as an event that "rouses a host of evil spirits within [her]" (*Sleep* 71). Grimach claims that text is also experimental: Roberts departs from "her usual realist mode into lengthy passages

[158] This Celtic-Christian depiction of the afterlife is also the method that McGahern deploys in his final novel and the meaning of its title, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

of dream and interior monologue; she also incorporates extracts from [Lora Ffennig's] journal" and depicts "the society of a small and small-minded north Welsh town, much as […] Joyce used the recurrent image of paralysis in the stories of *Dubliners* (Grimach 73-75). Roberts diagnoses similar social stagnation during a dialogue between Lora Ffennig and Aleth Meurig early in the novel:

> 'In my opinion, it wasn't the war itself that did the damage, but the chance it gave for travel. That's what makes men crave for a change from sitting in an office all day.'
>
> 'That and living in a dull little town like this.'
>
> 'Yes, an old town that has lost for years now what it had by way of culture.' (*Sleep* 31)

In the original Welsh, this final sentence, "hen dre wedi colli i diwylliant ers blynyddoedd" (*Cysgu* 35), laments a loss of Welshness, or "diwylliant," which means Celtic culture in the context.

Like McGahern, who associates the transcendent and dying modes of life with the Irish countryside, Roberts establishes the Welsh mountains, and particularly Bryn Terfyn and Ty Corniog, as places from an older time. They are otherworldly in a symbolic sense. Lora Ffennig recalls after a visit to her sister's house:

> All the life she had been re-living this afternoon was just like a photograph of the period […] There they were, stock still, having lived, and yet not living, touching no chord within her, her own longings dying into stagnation. Some day the picture on the card would fade into dimness and she would be unable to recall them to mind. (*Sleep* 69)

Lora and her children eventually flee their stifling homelife in the modern town in search of a more authentically Welsh life in Ty Corniog. They re-establish their connection to a place in Wales Lora believes is outside of modernity even though their experience there is modern in a material sense: they have electricity installed, the bus stop is nearby, and they still travel into town regularly. This partly resolves Lora's anxieties about lost culture and disappearing ways of life, although the social conflicts Roberts portrays are underwritten by economic pressures. The loss of Iolo Ffennig's income necessitates that Lora either divorce her husband and remarry (something she refuses to do) or that she relocate her family to her uncle's house in Ty Corniog. In these ways briefly considered in the foregoing, Roberts can be seen to uniquely illustrate the female point of view within the modern Celtic imaginative, a perspective that considers contemporary social and economic realities for women living in Wales and uses the Celtic tradition to animate them.

**The Celtic Tiger**

Contemporary fiction frequently figures the Celtic not as a representational strategy, but as aesthetic periods such as those associated with the economic realities of pre- and post-Celtic Tiger booms in Ireland. For example, Derek Hand and Eamon Maher have argued that "in Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger Ireland writing such as McGahern's acts as an indicator of how far the nation has come" (*Essays on John McGahern* 52). Claire Bracken, and Tara Harney-Mahajan have argued that the "overt posturing of hyper-masculinity associated with the boom time Celtic Tiger era" was also a period in which Irish women became "increasingly disempowered by and subsumed under the ethos of

materialist consumerism" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing" 1).[159] Bracken and Harney-Mahajan notice how the Post-Tiger period marks a moment of signal importance for the history of Irish women's writing which "has defied the logic of austerity as it uses the recessionary (and post-recessionary) vantage point to stage a reckoning into the past, and therefore, into the present" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing" 9). Ireland's 2008 economic crash, for instance, ushered in an "altered, yet still heteronormative, gendered economy of representation, enfolding a masculinity in crisis with more traditional and domestic representations of the feminine" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing" 1).

This economic shift also signaled a return to a rural focus, farming, and a retrieval of Celtic effects. *Addlands* (2016) by Tom Bullough, for example, explores the link between language and landscape and the border between England and Wales after the post-war period and into the present. Bullough also acknowledges his indebtedness to David Jones's Celtic art in reimagining Anglo-Welsh identity.[160] Similar to Bullough's

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[159] This article along with other essays included in a special issue of *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* were eventually published in a collection edited by Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, *Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and Contemporary Women's Writing* (2021).

[160] Bullough's publisher noticed affinity between Jones's Celtic art and *Addlands* as he read the novel in manuscript. According to Bullough, he stylized the title of his novel using a font created by Jones, what Bullough calls "David Jones lettering":

> It was the idea of my then-publisher, Max Porter, to use it - though we discussed it, of course. Jones […] lived for a time at Capel y Ffin, a village in the Black Mountains, a couple of miles from the landscape […] on the cover of the *Addlands* paperback. […] I did know a reasonable bit about Jones's work before *Addlands*, etc. In fact, this house, when I arrived 13-odd years ago, was completely empty apart from a copy of *In Parenthesis*, so I read that then. And such pictures as *Y Twmpa* define a way of looking at the landscape; I'm sure that's fed into my way of seeing things. Since then, I have read Thomas Dilworth's biography and paid much more attention to Jones's work. From a local point of view, he always seemed to me to belong more to the south side of the Black Mountains and to be more from "off" - i.e. from outside the area - than the likes of Francis Kilvert who lived locally for years. I think his unquiet, therefore generative relationship with Wales and, particularly, his paintings of this part of the world have had an increasing effect on me. Other writers around here look to him as well. […] Max, I think, made those sort of parallels when he first read *Addlands*. (8 May 2020 email with author)

project, some of the most exciting recent fiction we can call "Celtic" has been written in response to work by the focal writers in this study who originated their own Celtic aesthetic; for example, Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* directly alludes to O'Nolan and *The Third Policeman*, and Claire Keegan's *Walk the Blue Fields* fictionalizes John McGahern's *Memoir*. Bullough's text helps us to see how Celtic literature straddles borders which in turn points to the need to read outside of a strictly nationalist framework, along the fringes, so to speak.

This dynamic shift associated with the post-Celtic Tiger period finds expression in the recent Scottish story, "Stagecoach" (2022), by the Glasgow-based author Chris Kohler. The narrator of "Stagecoach" is looking for an English colleague after his breakdown and hospitalization during a work trip to London. This temporarily attenuates Scottish/English political tension. Kohler writes, "Scots are afraid of London. They won't take our money down there" (6). In the story the experience in the larger city feels alienating, and this can be confused with anti-English sentiment: "Stagecoach" reflects contemporary Scottish politics. It is set during or shortly after the Scottish Independence campaign. The narrator's English work colleague Rick is caught on the wrong side of this debate. Nichola Sturgeon is leaving, the political landscape following the 2014 referendum is changing. The purchase and dissolution of the company at which Rick and the narrator work has a counterpart in the centralization and deflation of the Independence movement. "Stagecoach" follows the tendency of some of the other modern Celtic fiction discussed in this thesis by aiming to transcend these economic realities or at least to resolve them through metaphysical description. Kohler has

acknowledged that Rick takes on a mystical meaning at the end of the story.[161] The narrator is outside his place of work during a fire drill, and he sees two geese who make a W and V (and are travelling south towards London); Rick has disappeared but has an earlier association with birds. The final scene evokes the idea that Rick is the harbinger of change in an immaterial sense. "Stagecoach" seeks alternatives to dominant cultural and economic structures. Rick and the narrator's outsideness can be understood as a response to the failures of modern capitalism and a search for new ways of being and creating in the world.

While each chapter of this dissertation is limited to long form prose works by four male authors, their individual literary theories and insights suggest a coherent modern Celtic aesthetic that is widely applicable and generative for contemporary writers. The Celtic, as I have defined and employed it, animates the possibility for transcendence. Modern Celtic writing in English retains such symbolism and representational structures as they are received from Celtic language, places, names, traditions, and ancient pasts. These remain the primary coordinates of the Celtic literary aesthetic. This aesthetic helps us to understand transnational points of relation in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England rather than through any other essentialized distinction, one aesthetic amongst others, making its way in a broad and diversifying global literary-critical market. While I have made use of some existing critical categories and themes, such as the concepts of fragmentation and violence, I have shown these ideas are subordinate to the metamorphic/anamnetic function of the Celtic aesthetic. Texts responding to the world

[161] Discussing the mystical depiction of Rick near the end of "Stagecoach," Kohler has queried the Rick narrative: "is this about Jesus […] It made me think, maybe the narrator has denied Rick just as Peter denied Christ, then set about trying to repent. Who knows!" (2 March 2023 email with author).

wars (by both Jones and Brown) and other features of the twentieth century have been read with a view to understanding the viability and survival—the meaning—of a Celtic aesthetic in modernity. The authors in this study use the metamorphic potential of the Celtic to portray a modernity that more faithfully reflects the collective experiences of these writers and the traditions in which they were working.

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