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Drink-Music: The 'ól' in Brian Ua Nualláin's '!CEÓL!' (1932)

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In the illustration accompanying '!CEÓL!' (!Music!), Brian Ua Nualláin's 1932 Irish-language story about radio and gramophone music, Ua Nualláin uses an established but outdated spelling of 'ceol' to suggest a polysemantic pun. This pun is significant given the story's subtitle – 'Eachtra an Fhir Ólta' (The Tale of the Drunkard) – because it places 'ól,' the Irish word for drink, inside the word for music, 'ceol.' The resulting portmanteau in Ua Nualláin's illustration is interfusional in Thomas King's sense, because it blends the textual with the oral. The orthography Ua Nualláin uses for his visual representation of '!CEÓL!' draws attention to how the word is spoken, and the stress on the second half of the word makes it sound drunken. We argue that the story's implied title, 'Drink-Music,' thematises intertextual play in ways that anticipate Ua Nualláin's Middle Irish Joycean pastiche 'Pisa bec oc Parnabus' (1935/1938). This note provides the first critical discussion of the '!CEÓL!' illustration, observing the presence of Ua Nualláin's initials in the bottom right-hand corner of the image.

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The deliberate, stylised, o-*fada* spelling of ‘ceól’ in the illustration accompanying Brian Ua Nualláin’s 1932 Irish-language story, ‘!CEÓL!’ (Figure 1),¹ is significant given its subtitle – ‘Eachtra an Fhir Ólta’ (‘The Tale of the Drunkard’).



Figure 1: Illustration from Brian Ua Nualláin’s short story ‘!CEÓL!: Eachtra an Fhir Ólta,’ published in *The Irish Press* (24 August 1932): 4.

Figure 1 presents the title and subtitle of the Irish-language short story ‘!CEÓL!’ as laid out in its original publication in *The Irish Press* on 24 August 1932. The image of title, subtitle, and byline was reprinted by Breandán Ó Conaire in *Myles na Gaeilge* in 1986.² Ó Conaire did not reproduce the Irish text in *Myles na Gaeilge*, but he supplied an English translation of the story which was published by John Wyse Jackson in *Myles Before Myles* in 1988. Ó Conaire translates the title into English as ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ omitting any translation of the word ‘ceól.’³ Jack Fennell’s translation for *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien* in 2013 restores this part of the title, although Fennell

¹ Brian Ua Nualláin, ‘!CEÓL!: Eachtra an Fhir Ólta,’ *The Irish Press* (24 August 1932): 4.

² Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shoathar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1986), 5.

³ Flann O’Brien, ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ in *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O’Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson, trans. Breandán Ó Conaire (London: Grafton, 1988), 173–5.

includes the word as a subtitle, naming the story: 'The Tale of the Drunkard: Music!'⁴ We refer to Fennell's translation throughout this note.

Despite Fennell's and Ó Conaire's translations, we maintain that the large word appearing in the foreground of the drawing, '!CEÓL!', is the first title and that the smaller heading above it is the subtitle. Ó Conaire and Fennell give the subtitle preference because it appears at the top of the image, and is seemingly first, but if we read the original publication layout visually it becomes clear that '!CEÓL!' should be given preference for its larger size and distorted appearance. Interpreting the visual rendering of the title enables the reader to connect written and oral modalities. From this perspective, 'Eachtra an Fhir Ólta' is simply a subheading announcing the form of the story. 'Eachtra,' which also translates as 'adventure' or 'adventurous journey,' was originally the generic label for 'an overseas or otherworld adventure' with a 'quest theme,' however, according to Alan Bruford, it became such a popular framing for a story that it took on the status of a generic title for folk tales and medieval romances.⁵ Every tale was framed as an 'adventure,' and thus in everyday speech the term came to stand for any story or experience the teller had to relate.⁶ We note that Brian Ua Nualláin's brother Ciarán Ó Nualláin also plays with the 'eachtra' convention in the title of his 1944 collection of short fiction, *Eachtraí Phartaláin Mhic Mhórna*.⁷

The existence of an oral storytelling tradition in Ireland up to the fifteenth century, when many of its romantic 'Eachtraí' were taken down by scribes, and beyond, provides an important cue for our argument that the title of '!CEÓL!' is interfusional in the sense Thomas King theorises in his 1990 essay, 'Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial.' For King, the interfusional blends the textual with the oral: similarly, '!CEÓL!' refers to past and contemporary oral storytelling cultures and blends the oral/audial modes of modern radio broadcasting with the textual modes of Old Irish literature. The adventure in '!CEÓL!' is otherworldly but also drastically mediated by modern technology. The drunk man who relays the tale is surrounded by what he interprets as terrifying

⁴ See also Flann O'Brien, 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 35–7.

⁵ Alan Bruford, 'Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediæval Romances: A Study of the Early Modern Irish "Romantic Tales" and Their Oral Derivatives,' *Béaloideas* 34 (1966), i–v, 1–165, 167–285 (8). Ua Nualláin plays with Irish forms of English words for the genre – 'diversions' and 'adventures' – in the opening to *An Béal Bocht*: 'na dibheairseans* agus na haidbhintiurs** [...] *scléip **eachtraí.' Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Corcaigh: Preas Mercier, 1992), 9.

⁶ See definition in Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, ed. Tomás De Bhaldraithe (Baile Átha Cliath: An Gúm, 1977), <https://www.teanglann.ie/ga/fgb/eachtra>.

⁷ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *Eachtraí Phartaláin Mhic Mhórna* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair 1944).

apparitions which the reader recognises to be gramophone records or radio broadcasts.⁸ Driven half-mad, his quest is to go to Dublin to understand when this torment of technologically disembodied voices will end. When he is told by the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs that the government will solve the problem with more ‘Talks,’ he gives up on negotiations and murders the ‘two men who were so fond of the radio.’⁹ This adventure is therefore simultaneously an apparent experience of haunting via modern broadcasting, a tale of drunkenness, and a parodic quest which fuses modernist literary wordplay and the Irish oral tradition in a single illustration.

The main title, ‘!CEÓL!’ motivates our argument. The word in **Figure 1** places ‘ól,’ the Irish word for drink, inside the word for music, ‘ceol.’ The word is printed beside an illustration showing four singers with gaping, oversized mouths that visually echo the elongated sound of the *o-fada* that places the word ‘drink’ within the word ‘music.’ Modern spellings in Dinneen’s dictionary and Rev. L. McKenna’s *English Irish Phrase Dictionary* do not list ‘ceól’ as a pre-standardisation spelling.¹⁰ However, Ua Nualláin’s use of this word is not quite a portmanteau as the spelling does appear in early modern Irish texts. For example, it is used in the fourteenth-century prose version of ‘The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn and the Death of Finn’ from the Finn Cycle, collected in Kuno Meyer’s edition, *Fianaigecht* (1910),¹¹ which Ua Nualláin may have read given his interest in Finn both in his early stories and *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The early modern Irish version of the text is:

*Ocus ina dhiaidh-sin do chúalamair in ceól soinemhuil sírechtach síde da chantain inar
fochuir adubairt Cáilti re hOisín: ‘Éirig súas,’ ar sé, ‘déntar airechus acoin nach mella in
ceól sídi sinn.’*

⁸ Special thanks to Ian Ó Caoimh for proposing that something be said about the exclamation marks in the title. The part-similarity to Spanish language convention is there, but the image seems to imply something ‘circular,’ almost like a gramophone record spinning. Ó Caoimh has also noted that the man addressing the lamppost at the outset of the story could be an echo of the drunk in the ‘Hades’ episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

⁹ O’Brien, ‘The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC,’ 37.

¹⁰ We are, again, deeply grateful to Ian Ó Caoimh for corresponding with us about the ‘!CEÓL!’ spelling. Ó Caoimh noted <https://dil.ie> does have some examples of *ceól* and even *céol*, so the visual pun may have been a semi-private joke or comforting reminder to Ua Nualláin of his own scholarship. See Rev. L. McKenna, *English Irish Phrase Dictionary* (Dublin: M.H. Gill, 1911).

¹¹ The title is Meyer’s (there is no commonly used Irish title for the episode) and could be translated further as ‘The Chase of the Fairy Hill of the Fair Women and the Death of Finn,’ although Gerard Murphy preferred the title ‘The Slaying of the Pig of Formaoil and the Death of Fionn,’ in Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, vol. 3 (London: Irish Texts Society, 1953), 136. Our thanks to Natasha Sumner for her correspondence on the issue of the text’s title.

Meyer renders this passage into English as:

And thereupon we heard an exquisite, wistful fairy-music being chanted near us, and Cailte said to Oisín: 'Arise' said he, 'and let us be on our guard lest the fairy-music beguile us.'¹²

This motif resonates with Ua Nualláin's story. Cailte and Oisín must guard against musical enchantment whereas Ua Nualláin replaces 'fairy-music' with the beguiling and mystifying effects of gramophone recordings and radio. Meyer's translation continues:

And in the early morning we went to the same hunting-mound and found a black, misshapen, enormous, huge churl sitting on the mound before us, who rose up before us and greeted us. And putting his hand into his bosom he brought out two golden pipes and played a tuneful, harmonious strain of melody for us [...]. And when he had ceased with the music he took a drinking-horn adorned with gold out of the hidden shelter of his dress and put it into my hand, and it full of intoxicating mead pleasant to drink.¹³

This passage from 'The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn' pairs music and drinking, whereas Ua Nualláin's 'CEÓL!' relays a drunk man's story of how radio and gramophone music torment him. But Ua Nualláin's inclusion of the older variant spelling of 'ceól' and the designation of the story as an 'eachtra' prompts us, not for the first time, to consider the significance of early modern Irish writing in his fiction.

Ua Nualláin's 'CEÓL!' is significant in that it is 'interfusalional': a blending of oral and textual forms. The word is elongated and distorted by the *o-fada* to evoke the telling of the tale by an inebriated man, a practice which forms a significant part of the surviving oral culture of Ua Nualláin's time and our own. Joseph LaBine's article on Ua Nualláin's 'interfusalional' language play, published in this journal in 2016, unpacks Thomas King's concept of synthesising oral and written literature in Ua Nualláin's

¹² 'The Chase of Síd na mBan Finn and the Death of Finn,' in *Fianaigeacht*, ed. Kuno Meyer (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1910), 52–99. Cathal Ó Háinle has done extensive work on Ua Nualláin's reading for his university courses, examining the University College, Dublin *Calendar* for the following years: '(1929–30), 171–172; (1930–31), 187–190; (1931–32), 191–194.' See Cathal G. Ó Háinle, 'Fionn and Suibhne in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 1997), 169, n. 8. Ó Háinle does not list Meyer's edition of *Fianaigeacht*, but Adrian Naughton notes that the poems in the anthology accompanying Ua Nualláin's MA Thesis 'can be traced to such predictable sources as J. G. O'Keeffe, Kuno Meyer, Standish O'Grady, and Whitley Stokes.' Adrian Naughton, "'Nádúir-fhiliocht na Gaedhilge" and Flann O'Brien's Fiction,' in 'Is it about a bicycle?' *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 84.

¹³ Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, 59.

short fiction, which forms a ‘hybrid literary mode wherein arises a new direction for Irish literary expression, both written and oral.’¹⁴ Discussing Harry Robinson’s *Write It On Your Heart*, King argues that Robinson’s prose restores something that is nearly always lost in the transition of oral literature into the written form: ‘the voice of the storyteller, the gestures, the music, and the interaction between storyteller and audience.’¹⁵ Ua Nualláin’s insertion of the ‘ól’ into ‘!CEÓL!’ and its setting in the newspaper as part of an image of four men singing, achieves the return of an oral dimension to the words on the printed page in precisely these terms. The meta-textual story the drunkard tells the narrator also emphasises this oral dimension. By evoking drunkenness and music in the same word, the sense of the musicality and interactivity of the story’s original telling is restored to the text. The word in Ua Nualláin’s drawing (**Figure 1**) has drink taken much like the imbibing narrator of the story has drink inside of him. The capitalisation, the emphasis of the *fada*, and the exclamation marks, all make the word sound drunken, a brashly compressed emblem for the blend of music and drinking in the ‘The Chase of Síd na mBan and the Death of Finn’ from which Ua Nualláin may have drawn the word ‘*ceól*.’

Having argued that the spelling and accompanying illustration is ‘interfusional,’ we also suggest that the use of early modern Irish in this manner produces an affinity between ‘!CEÓL!’ and Ua Nualláin’s ‘Pisa bec oc Parnabus: Extractum O Bhark I bPrágrais le Briain O Nuallain,’ which Tobias W. Harris has read in the context of James Joyce’s experimental neologisms in *Finnegans Wake*.¹⁶ The blending of word variants to create a polysemantically suggestive portmanteau is a Joycean technique and even a direct allusion to early interpretations of that technique, namely Samuel Beckett’s remark in 1929 that in Joyce’s *Work in Progress* ‘[t]he language is drunk.’¹⁷ The word ‘!CEÓL!’ produces, variously, a metaphoric comparison between music and drinking, specifically between the gramophone horn and the drinking horn, and conjures up a miniature vignette of drinking and music within itself. This vignette, in turn, may refer back to the Finn passage in which the morphological formation had appeared before.

¹⁴ Joseph LaBine, “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* 3, no.2 (2016): 48, <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3209>.

¹⁵ Thomas King, ‘Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,’ *World Literature Written in English* 30, no.2 (1990): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449859008589128>.

¹⁶ Tobias W. Harris, “sprakin sea Djoytsch?” Brian Ó Nualláin’s *Bhark i bPrágrais*, in *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 217–35. For the English translation of this piece, see Tobias Harris, John Wyse Jackson, and Thomas O’Donnell, ‘Translation: “Pisa Bec Oc Parnabus: Extractum O Bhark i bPrágrais le Briain O Nuallain” (1938);’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 71–4, <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3231>.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, Eugene Jolas, et al., *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1929, repr. 1961), 10.

The strategy of presenting an apparently Joycean neologism or portmanteau that can in fact be traced to some early modern or middle Irish texts represents a prototype for the more extensively realised version of a Wakean medieval Irish in Ua Nualláin's story 'Bhark i bPrágrais' (work in progress), first published in *The National Student* in 1935 and then republished in *Ireland To-day* in October 1938 with the title 'Pisa bec oc Parnabus.'¹⁸ As a response to Joyce's *Work in Progress*, this text appears to import Old Norse and Greek vocabulary, but by hunting through the variant spellings of early modern print editions, Harris (with the assistance of fellow translators John Wyse Jackson and Thomas O'Donnell) finds that the Wakean effect can also be regarded as 'misleading' because the 'overtones of Greek and Norse resolve into obscure Old and Middle Irish terms.'¹⁹ Lucas Harriman has argued that in later writings, such as *The Dalkey Archive* (in which Joyce's aspirations are limited to the Jesuit Novitiate), O'Nolan was creatively faithful to Joyce's project.²⁰ By using the heterogeneity of medieval Irish to produce a hybrid or 'interfusional' concentration of meanings within a single word – in the present case, blending music and drink in the word 'ceól' – Ua Nualláin responds simultaneously to the Joycean project underway in Paris and to the language revival process closer to home. He defends the medieval foundations of the Irish literary tradition by imputing to them a dynamic instability.

The grotesque, distorted faces of the quartet of singers in the illustration, with their mouths gaping wide as they sing (**Figure 1**), give the word 'CEÓL' visual prominence in the original publication of the story. Their black suits resemble the magazine-style lettering of the word 'CEÓL' above and behind them. The singers' mouths are depicted in a way that evokes pipes or gramophone horns: their faces, squeezed in around the huge mouths, look pained, or perhaps simply dehumanised. They embody a kind of drunken and technologically mediated music. This cartoon and the line drawings included in the body of the text have not been included in any of the republished translations of the story, although it is significant that Ó Conaire reprints the illustration even if he does not republish the Irish text.²¹ It is partly because of this visual rendering that we argue that '!CEÓL!' is both the title of Ua Nualláin's story and its central theme: '!CEÓL!' portrays the mechanical reproduction of gramophone music and radio transmission not as music, but as irksome, disturbing noise.

¹⁸ Brian Ua Nualláin, 'Pisa bec oc Parnabus,' *Ireland Today* 3, no. 2 (February 1938): 138, 165.

¹⁹ Harris, 'Brian Ó Nualláin's *Bhark i bPrágrais*,' 229.

²⁰ Lucas Harriman, 'Flann O'Brien's Creative Betrayal of Joyce,' *New Hibernia Review* 14, no. 4 (2010): 90–109, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2010.a412025>.

²¹ Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, 4. Ó Conaire republishes the cartoon but not the '!CEÓL!' story, which he alludes to as part of a grouping of O'Nolan's early Irish language stories. On the page beside the illustration, Ó Conaire writes that the sketch is '*ar dhuine a shíl go mba Napoléon Bonapart é féin*' (about a man who thought he was Napoleon Bonapart).

We note, too, that Ua Nualláin has signed the drawing with his initials, ‘bón,’ appearing in the bottom righthand corner of **Figure 1**. As Anne Clissmann has noted, an article in the August 1935 issue of *Comhthrom Féinne* discusses visual illustration as an aspect of Ua Nualláin’s credentials which informed the reception of his early work:

BRIAN UA NUALLÁIN, B.A. [...] was, under various pseudonyms, particularly that of Brother Barnabas, the most successful and popular contributor COMHTHROM FÉINNE has ever had. He is as able a writer in both Modern and Middle Irish as he is in English, and is a fine cartoonist.²²

We offer this note as a basis for scholars to re-connect Ua Nualláin’s interfusional use of the Irish language, in concert with his abilities as a visual artist, with his early essays and short stories in Irish as a kind of interfusional pairing of image, text, and sound in the case of ‘!CEÓL!’

²² Qtd in Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1975), 18.

Acknowledgements

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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