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## Mickey Finn: Inebriation and Creativity in Myles na gCopaleen's 'Drink and Time in Dublin'

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Myles na gCopaleen's short story 'Drink and Time in Dublin' explores the literary role of alcohol and sedatives within a narrative framework. Examining binge drinking and blackouts in the short story that produce lacunas, complicate time, and disrupt the logical progression of events, this article explores the connection between intoxication and the deployment of anti-narrative strategies. Special attention is given to the use of sedatives in the text that, it is argued, allude to the Irish figure Mickey Finn. The story's allusion to Finn reorganises Irish mythology, as it replaces ancient traditional heroism with modern anti-heroism, resulting in the collapse of realist narrative norms and narrative structure.

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## Introduction

Myles na gCopaleen's 'Drink and Time in Dublin'<sup>1</sup> is a story about a man recounting his own drinking adventure to another man. It is, therefore, a story about storytelling. And yet, throughout the text, familiar principles of storytelling, such as the chronological unfolding of events within a recognisable timeframe, are interrupted by the same effects of alcohol and sedatives that the storyteller attempts to narrate. Instances of drinking that occur within the fictional world create gaps in the storyteller's memory that, by complicating temporality and collapsing causality, disrupt the flow of na gCopaleen's frame story.

'Drink and Time in Dublin' demonstrates a structural function of drink and intoxicating substances that remains largely overlooked in Flann O'Brien studies. The relationship between narrative structure and alcohol in the writer's poetics is not only destructive but also creatively productive in ways that go beyond the representational or the biographical. Put differently, the account of heavy drinking in na gCopaleen's short story offers more than a description of a social phenomenon in 1940s Dublin and more than an allusion to its author's personal habit, as it is well known and well documented that Brian O'Nolan suffered from the disease of alcoholism.<sup>2</sup> In the present article, I claim that 'Drink and Time in Dublin' invites us to read tales of drinking as chronicling the failure of conventional storytelling whereby intoxicating substances function as disruptive narrative strategies and techniques.

The term 'anti-narrative,' which I employ in my analysis, is used in critical studies, alongside the term 'non-narrative,' to refer to textual arrangements that resist the chronological, or the logical, arrangement of events. The present article does not inquire into the difference between anti-narrative and non-narrative, if such a difference exists, but rather draws on these established concepts in order to unveil the creative literary function of drinking in na gCopaleen's short story. Robert Scholes defines anti-narratives as antithetical to 'event-texts,' and I look to his inquiry into textual techniques that 'problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us.'<sup>3</sup> I also take on board Carla Harryman's association of non-narrative with textual and structural innovations that 'break the rules of story-telling,' create 'a crisis of

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<sup>1</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 69–75.

<sup>2</sup> For references to O'Nolan's excessive alcohol consumption, see Maebh Long's introduction to *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, which indicates that the volume provides 'a narrative of physical decline that was at times exacerbated, at times caused, by the sad reality of O'Nolan's alcohol intake.' Maebh Long, 'Introduction,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), xv.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Scholes, 'Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative,' *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 211.

understanding,' and explore 'the limits of knowledge.'<sup>4</sup> In the following pages, I will show that drinking, throughout 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' produces memory losses that, by eliminating the representation of events, trouble meaning production and advance anti-narrative strategies.

### 'Drink and Time in Dublin:' A 'damn good' Story?

Storytelling and alcohol are both at the forefront of na gCopaleen's fictional short text, which opens with two characters discussing a cinematic narrative about alcohol abuse, Billy Wilder's 1945 film *The Lost Weekend*. I will refer to the man recounting his tale of heavy drinking as the storyteller, and to his listener, who provides directive questions, as the interlocutor. The storyteller begins by evaluating the movie's plot according to the accuracy of its descriptions of heavy binge drinking: 'Hiding bottles in the jax. And there was no monkey business about that because I tried it since myself. It works but you have to use the half-pint bottles.'<sup>5</sup> All in all, however, he claims that the movie fails to provide a satisfactory representation of a familiar experience:

- Why didn't you like the rest of *The Lost Weekend*?
- Sure haven't I been through far worse weekends meself.<sup>6</sup>

The storyteller claims that his own story, of a drunken bender taking place 'last November,'<sup>7</sup> is a more authentic representation of drinking than the alcohol consumption depicted in the film. After seeing his wife to a ride out of town, the storyteller, craving a drink, hurries to the disreputable 'markets.'<sup>8</sup> One drink leads to another that leads to many more, as he finally succumbs to a drinking binge. A few days later, at a point of physical and mental fatigue, he is given a prescription for sleeping pills which knock him out for an unknown duration. Upon waking, he sets out to discover the duration of his lapse into unconsciousness. Crucially, as his account unfolds, his earlier promise to 'tell you a damn good one'<sup>9</sup> is put into question, as events are omitted, details forgotten, and causality confused. Here, the qualification of the perforated story as 'a damn good one' is counterintuitive and suggests instead a metaliterary comment on narrative conventions.

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<sup>4</sup> Carla Harryman, 'Introduction: Non/Narrative,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 1 (2011): 2.

<sup>5</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 69.

<sup>6</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 69.

<sup>7</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 69.

<sup>8</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

<sup>9</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

The events recapped in the storyteller's drinking tale are often mediated through sentences that lack informative value: 'I don't know what happened to me, of course'; 'where we were and where we weren't I couldn't tell you.'<sup>10</sup> These gaps recur significantly throughout the short story at hand and are indicative of a common feature of O'Nolan's fiction. *The Third Policeman* provides a memorable example of a lacuna when the nameless narrator recounts: '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.'<sup>11</sup> Dieter Fuchs surmises that this may not have been an accident at all, but a form of abuse.<sup>12</sup> If so, it is a provocative narrative choice to omit such a consequential piece of information, and it points to O'Nolan's preoccupation with techniques that undermine narrative norms. A crucial difference from the novel is that in 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' gaps are the direct result of intoxicating substances. na gCopaleen's short story, therefore, provides an outlet for exploring not only how alcohol's effects are represented in O'Nolan's writing but also the way alcohol affects and challenges formal conventions of narrative and storytelling.

While I share Maebh Long's concern regarding 'the sentimentalising of O'Nolan's addiction,'<sup>13</sup> my aim is to investigate the purely formal implications of drink in this short story. Noam Schiff's discussion of alcohol-induced transformations in O'Nolan's writing is a helpful precedent. Going beyond the critical tendency to focus on the immoral aspects of drinking, Schiff argues that O'Nolan's treatment of alcohol in his fiction is 'both a challenge and an antidote to the moralising image of paralysis that underpins standard realist or biographical accounts of alcoholic consumption.'<sup>14</sup> In fact, no knowledge of O'Nolan's excessive alcohol intake is necessary for appreciating the creative use of drink in his writing that allows the author to challenge realistic forms of representation and narrative structure.

## Drink Literature

The relationship between authors, drinking, and literary output has been explored in research but, as some critics contend, not seriously enough. Often, as with the case of such famous drinkers as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald,

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<sup>10</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>11</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Dieter Fuchs, 'The Return of the Father and the Dispossessed Son: Shakespearean Rewritings of the Oedipus Myth via Synge in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Long, 'Introduction,' xv.

<sup>14</sup> Noam Schiff, "'the situation had become deplorably fluid": Alcohol, Alchemy, and Brian O'Nolan's Metamorphoses,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 119.

critical attention has been given to their personal drinking habits, and consequently to the anecdotal or the biographical value of textual representations of drink. Wojciech Klepuszewski, addressing this critical tendency, argues that scholarly studies of 'the writer-drink-literature intersection'<sup>15</sup> are in danger of becoming 'limited to aspects far-removed from literary merits.'<sup>16</sup> The inclination to disregard 'the possible implications [of drink] for the creative process'<sup>17</sup> has led Klepuszewski to argue that '[d]rink as a literary theme in English, Scottish, and Irish literature [...] is best represented not in scholarly studies but in anthologies.'<sup>18</sup> This anecdotal tendency, Schiff reports, prevails in O'Nolan scholarship as well: 'Despite these more nuanced reflections in his own writing, too often, still, O'Nolan's critics revert to an under-theorised rhetoric of biography when alcohol is the theme.'<sup>19</sup> Indeed, O'Nolan partakes in a long and infamous tradition not only of authors and poets who drink, but of authors and poets who write about drink. And while representations of alcohol in na gCopaleen's short story run the risk of succumbing to biographical or anecdotal readings, an attentive look into the arrangement of the text shows that drink and inebriation perform a genuinely creative function. In other words, the unconventional, or postmodern features used in delivering the drinking tale – such as the story's qualification as 'A Recorded Statement,' the Q&A structure that reinforces its generic ambiguity, and the consistent discarding of actions and events – offer a momentous opportunity for exploring a productive relationship between intoxication and O'Nolan's literary output.

Sandra M. Gilbert, looking into authors who represent their excessive drinking habits in their writings, outlines a shift from the praise of inebriation in Romantic poetics to a condemnation of the paralysing features of excessive drinking later in the twentieth century. Keats had a 'thirst for oblivion,' she argues, and Byron and A. E. Housman insisted on the 'superior beneficence of alcohol.'<sup>20</sup> In turn, later writers like Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, and Delmore Schwartz, to name but a few, 'tend not to glamorize alcohol'<sup>21</sup> and even recognise a contradiction between drinking and artistic production. 'Drink and Time in Dublin' cannot easily be placed within the shift that Gilbert delineates, since the story neither glamorizes nor condemns excessive drinking.

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<sup>15</sup> Wojciech Klepuszewski, 'Drink and Alcohol Literature,' *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 24, no. 2 (2018), 375.

<sup>16</sup> Klepuszewski, 'Drink and Alcohol Literature,' 375.

<sup>17</sup> Klepuszewski, 'Drink and Alcohol Literature,' 379.

<sup>18</sup> Klepuszewski, 'Drink and Alcohol Literature,' 377.

<sup>19</sup> Schiff, 'Alcohol, Alchemy, and Brian O'Nolan's Metamorphoses,' 117.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Inebriation: The Poetics of Drink,' in *Food and Literature*, ed. Gitanjali G. Shahani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 255.

<sup>21</sup> Gilbert, 'Inebriation,' 259.

The story engages only indirectly with the morality of drinking and with its destructive consequences upon one's physical health. It is my contention that 'Drink and Time in Dublin' troubles Gilbert's thesis that twentieth-century drink literature depicts the excessive consumption of alcohol as generating 'despair, personal struggle, and moral decline.'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the storyteller in na gCopaleen's story admits that his alcohol consumption has brought about unwelcome experiences in the social sphere ('after the last row I was for keeping off the beer for a year'),<sup>23</sup> and that it threatens his present physical condition ('next thing I wake up perished with the cold and as sick as I ever was in my life')<sup>24</sup> as well as his future health ('I was afraid the heart might give out').<sup>25</sup> And yet, the storyteller's qualification of the story as 'a damn good one'<sup>26</sup> overshadows any abhorrent features of excessive drinking that he may have experienced during his blackout.

The poetics of drinking that Gilbert attempts to codify presumes that artistic potential is carried by 'consciousness-altering substances.'<sup>27</sup> Again, na gCopaleen's story of a man recounting his experience with intoxication is at odds with this view: consciousness is not so much altered in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' as it is annihilated. And yet, it is not a cautionary tale. It does not conclude with any judgement of the dangers of blacking out. Instead, the story confronts the reader with the paradox of a first-person narrative (of a personal recollection) premised on the obliteration of consciousness and invites us to reflect on the possibility of experience that generates from the absence of consciousness.

### Challenging Narrative Conventions

In 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' temporary losses of memory caused by drinking and sleeping pills, a.k.a. blackouts, break the rules of storytelling and create a crisis of understanding. Instances of narrative gaps, marked by various expressions indicating the lack of knowledge, take precedence over the representation of events. Within six and a half pages we get six such indicators: 'I couldn't tell you what age he was or how bad he was;'<sup>28</sup> 'Of course, I don't remember what happened;'<sup>29</sup> 'I don't know what happened

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<sup>22</sup> Dieter Fuchs, Wojciech Klepuszewski, and Matthew Leroy, 'Introduction,' in *Booze as a Muse: Literary and Cultural Studies of Drink*, eds. Dieter Fuchs, Wojciech Klepuszewski, and Matthew Leroy (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 4.

<sup>23</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

<sup>24</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>25</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>26</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, 'Inebriation,' 254.

<sup>28</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

<sup>29</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

to me, of course;<sup>30</sup> 'I couldn't tell you;<sup>31</sup> 'How long this goes on I don't know;<sup>32</sup> 'I don't remember.'<sup>33</sup> Each time such an expression is uttered, a gap opens up in the story, a missing piece of information is forever lost. Signalling a split between knowledge and language, these expressions demonstrate na gCopaleen's experimentation with a narrative that is not event-driven.

This crisis of understanding in na gCopaleen's story is experienced by the storyteller himself precisely because alcohol functions as a 'plot device,' a term I borrow from Matthew Leroy's examination of the role of alcohol in literature.<sup>34</sup> It means that the instances of blackout are part of the fictional world, and it is due to these instances that the storyteller is incapable of recapping what happened, where it happened, or when. His crisis culminates with his inability to tell the day when he wakes from a sleeping-pills-induced slumber, as he is forced to wander throughout the space of actuality while being disengaged from time. Crucially, however, the storyteller's disengagement from time produces gaps not only in his anecdotal narrative, but also on the level of the frame device within which it is embedded: lapses of memory experienced by the storyteller effect the arrangement of na gCopaleen's narrative. Both the interlocutor who hears the storyteller's tale and the reader of na gCopaleen's text receive fragments of information that are too few to be pieced together into a coherent narrative, and both remain in a state of uncertainty.

Thierry Robin highlights O'Nolan's preoccupation with the theme of uncertainty in his exploration of ambivalent spaces in *The Third Policeman*. Robin argues that 'the apparent scepticism which pervades the whole novel' is 'intent on transgressing narrative norms and space.'<sup>35</sup> I take on Robin's observation that O'Nolan intentionally transgresses 'narrative norms' in my inquiry into the function of alcohol and other intoxicating substances in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' as a means of undermining narrative conventions. To Robin's claim that 'this ambivalence is inherent to O'Nolan's prose and the postmodern canon,'<sup>36</sup> I add that ambivalence in the short story, that demonstrates O'Nolan's postmodern inclination, is a direct consequence of drinking

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<sup>30</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>31</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>32</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>33</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Leroy, 'Harnessing the Spirit: An Examination of Alcohol's Inspirational Role in Creative Writing,' in *Booze as a Muse: Literary and Cultural Studies of Drink*, eds. Dieter Fuchs, Wojciech Klepuszewski, and Matthew Leroy (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Thierry Robin, 'Noman's Land or the Art of Spatial Transgressions and Haunting Strangeness in *The Third Policeman*,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3046>.

<sup>36</sup> Robin, 'Noman's Land,' 36.



and sleeping pills – substances that allow na gCopaleen to explore the limits of literary representation. To wit, how can literature, or any linguistic construct, represent events experienced under the influence of consciousness-annihilating substances? The absence of consciousness during the storyteller's blackout, which forecloses a representation of whatever he was going through, turns the relationship between experience and consciousness on its head. The inability of speech and storytelling in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' to narrate events occurring on a phenomenological level, produces a break between narrative and mimesis and drives home the point that na gCopaleen's story is out to frustrate readerly expectations by privileging formal elements over the representation of events.

In fact, formal elements cannot be disengaged from the unfolding of events in 'Drink and Time in Dublin.' Strikingly, na gCopaleen's arrangement of the text in a question-and-answer format mimics a newspaper interview or a recorded conversation between two acquaintances. This dialogue format is precisely what produces the text's joke-like structure. According to the storyteller's account, the mission of discovering the extent of his blackout requires the tracing down of two dates: the day he woke up and the exact time he fell asleep. He claims to have solved the mystery: seeing that his face upon waking was still quite shaven, he deduces he was asleep for no more than a day and a half. His story thus concludes with a victory. na gCopaleen's frame story, however, continues just long enough to deliver a blow to the storyteller's victorious conclusion. To the storyteller's frustration, his interlocutor contends that the shaven face is not reliable evidence: '*I have no guarantee that a person in your condition would not get up and shave in his sleep.*'<sup>37</sup> The interlocutor then delivers the poignant conclusion that the storyteller had the answer right under his nose on the label of the prescription pills, a punchline that classifies the story within O'Nolan's comic oeuvre.

The playlet *Thirst* is an enlightening point of comparison for 'Drink and Time in Dublin' as another O'Nolan text that embeds a tale of alcohol consumption within a punchline structure. Joseph Brooker observes that the play, which unfolds a late-night conversation in a bar, delivers a drinking tale in a 'compact [...] narrative with satisfying economy.'<sup>38</sup> Like 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 'Thirst' is a short narrative that concludes with a punchline. And yet, "'Thirst' is richer than such an abstract description suggests.'<sup>39</sup> Brooker's insight suggests that the set-up-and-punchline structure often distracts from the hermeneutic opportunities conveyed by O'Nolan's texts. Schiff also

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<sup>37</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 75, italics in origin.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Brooker, 'Dreaming After in the Dark Night: *Thirst* and the Power of Performance,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 143.

<sup>39</sup> Brooker, 'Dreaming After in the Dark Night,' 143.



addresses the lack of critical seriousness employed in analysing O'Nolan's comic works, arguing that several short texts by O'Nolan have 'been unjustly categorised as funny but not intellectually or thematically interesting.'<sup>40</sup> In 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' the significance of the 'tight structure of a joke'<sup>41</sup> is twofold: it diverts readers' and critics' attention away from its ingenuity, and it creates an experimental generic ambivalence. Sam Dickson identifies the story's punchline with the embarrassing realisation that the storyteller's 'temporal confusion [...] could have been quickly solved with a quick glance at the date on his sleeping pill prescription'<sup>42</sup>; however, it seems to me that the ending of the story emphasises, more than anything else, a lack of a proper climax. Inasmuch as the phrase '*If I were in your place I would have looked at the date on the prescription*'<sup>43</sup> concludes the story without disclosing this sought-after information, it is deliberately anticlimactic. Omitting this crucial detail, the story collapses readers' expectations that rely on realist conventions that promote the sequencing of events according to a start, middle, and finish.

While the ending of the story suggests, to Dickson, the form of a joke, generic ambiguity is suggested by the story's subtitle that qualifies it as 'A Recorded Statement.' This description implies a non-fictional account, and yet the story was published first in *Irish Writing: The Magazine of Contemporary Irish Literature*, and later reprinted in a short story collection titled *1000 Years of Irish Prose*.<sup>44</sup> Both sources label the text as a fictional literary narrative. The Q&A format further complicates the generic purity of the text,<sup>45</sup> as well as the explicit acknowledgement of the readers – '(Before continuing, readers may wish to accept the sufferer's challenge)'<sup>46</sup> – that recalls Myles's habit of addressing or acknowledging his readership in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Noam Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr: Theatricality, Spectacle, and O'Nolan's Carnavalesque,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 123.

<sup>41</sup> Brooker, 'Dreaming After in the Dark Night,' 143.

<sup>42</sup> Sam Dickson, "'No unauthorized boozing': Flann O'Brien and the Thirsty Muse,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Ronan McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 166.

<sup>43</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 75.

<sup>44</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' *Irish Writing: The Magazine of Contemporary Irish Literature*, no. 1 (1946): 71–7; reprinted in *1000 Years of Irish Prose*, eds. Vivian Mercier and David H. Greene (New York: Devin-Adair, 1952), 509–15. See Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, 'A Note on the Texts,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), xi–xiv.

<sup>45</sup> When presenting an earlier version of this article at *Strange Atmospheres: The Seventh International Flann O'Brien Conference* in Cluj, Joseph LaBine observed that another genre thrown into the mix in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' is film criticism. Indeed, the short story begins by analysing and evaluating Billy Wilder's 1945 film *The Lost Weekend*, a discussion that rehearses the journalistic form of evaluating the merits, or lack thereof, of particular films.

<sup>46</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 74.

<sup>47</sup> 'Drink and Time in Dublin' is reminiscent of a particular *Cruiskeen Lawn* column from November 1945, the very month in which the plot of the short story takes place (the storyteller reports the newspaper is dated 'Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> November'). The column is structured as a Q&A between two unnamed persons. One is leading the conversation with questions

The cluster of genres associates the common practice of drinking stories with the undermining of storytelling conventions. Robin drives this point home when he claims that O’Nolan’s ‘comical, palimpsestic literary ventures [are] characterised by a hybridisation of genres that has little regard for “proper” linear history.’<sup>48</sup> Indeed, readers’ understanding of the events unfolding in the text suffer greatly from the confusion of genres in na gCopaleen’s story.

In his essay ‘The Law of Genre,’ Jacques Derrida addresses the reciprocity between knowledge and generic conventions. Exploring the strict rules of generic categorisation, from which he infers a cultural taboo on the intermixing of genres, Derrida says that ‘as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm.’<sup>49</sup> Under the reign of genre, a text is ‘supposed to be what it is destined to be by virtue of its *telos*.’<sup>50</sup> Keeping with Derrida’s observation that genre preconditions understanding, it seems to me that the retroactive classification of the story as a joke ignores the uncertainty and sense of frustration at having the most significant piece of information for the characters within the text – how long was the storyteller unconscious – defiantly denied. That the reader’s lack of understanding, or crisis of knowledge, outlives the punchline, suggests that na gCopaleen’s short story is interested less in following generic classifications than in complicating them.

As Ruben Borg has shown, the comic effect in O’Nolan’s texts often rests on ‘the manner in which one genre comes to be mistaken for the other.’<sup>51</sup> This generic ambiguity, which promotes a ‘tension between tragedy and comedy,’<sup>52</sup> illuminates the connection between the experimental formal elements and the theme of alcohol consumption in ‘Drink and Time in Dublin.’ The story’s ending invites a comic reading, but the darker events, not explicitly represented, remain indicative. Blackouts eliminate self-destructive and possibly immoral features of heavy drinking not only from the storyteller’s consciousness but also from na gCopaleen’s text. That is, from a textual perspective, the act of heavy binge drinking annihilates the possibility of representation.

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that, like in ‘Drink and Time in Dublin,’ are rendered in italics; the other is recounting a past incident involving drinking, a trip to the chemist, and a recommendation to go to sleep (‘the place for you is bed’). Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (27 November 1945): 2.

<sup>48</sup> Thierry Robin, ‘Tall Tales or “Petite Histoires”: History and the Void in “The Martyr’s Crown” and *Thirst*,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 76.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre,’ trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1, *On Narrative* (1980): 57.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre,’ 57.

<sup>51</sup> Ruben Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning: Modernism, the Posthuman, and the Finite* (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), 158.

<sup>52</sup> Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning*, 158.

The events eliminated by such blackouts may have been useful in determining whether the story recounted by storyteller is comic or, in fact, tragic.

Furthermore, the lacunas in his story are operative on an affective level. Consider the following, where the narrator attempts to recount some happenings during his drinking bender: 'I met a few pals and there is some business about a greyhound out in Cloghran. It was either being bought or being sold and I go along in the taxi and where we were and where we weren't I couldn't tell you.'<sup>53</sup> The narrator's inability to recount events, evidenced by the vague mention of a 'a few pals' and of 'some business' regarding a dog in Cloghran, is accompanied by a lack of emotion. Any indicators of feelings may have been useful in interpreting the comic or tragic quality of the events and, by extension, of the genre of na gCopaleen's text. The ellipses in the story (in the form of incomplete information and sentences that communicate lack of knowledge) may conceal horrible events; alternatively, they may substitute for amusing or convivial experiences. It can go either way with a greyhound from Cloghran. What prevents us from classifying the story as a pure comedy are the blackouts that make some experiences unrepresentable. This inability to represent events, and the prevalence of inaccessible knowledge, produces a 'tension between tragedy and comedy'<sup>54</sup> that connects alcohol consumption in na gCopaleen's short story with literary experimentation. This joining together of formal elements – the title and subtitle, the Q&A format, and the set-up-and-punchline structure – with alcohol-related memory loss executes the anti-narrative aesthetic of the story. Moreover, it highlights the author's engagement with narrative possibilities that emerge from the lack of representation.

### Drink and Time

A central element in the short story that connects anti-narrative techniques with alcohol consumption is time. The storyteller's inability to tell the time is detrimental to the representation of events in his narrative. In this sense, the story's title is oxymoronic since, as we realise halfway through the tale, drink negates time understood as a chronological sequence of events within a measurable period. Crucially, heavy drinking negates the possibility of representing the linear progression of time and, consequently, of producing a narrative instituted upon causality. Many of the references to inaccessible knowledge in the short story relate to time, as when the storyteller confesses his inability to trace the exact time of the recounted events, guessing instead that '[t]his was about nine o'clock, I suppose.'<sup>55</sup> As the tale of the drinking bender unfolds, time

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<sup>53</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>54</sup> Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning*, 158.

<sup>55</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

becomes more and more evasive for the storyteller as well as for na gCopaleen's readers. This increasing elusiveness culminates with the storyteller's inability to tell the time when he wakes up from a substance-induced slumber.

The storyteller's narrative takes a turn after his reported consumption of several prescription sleeping pills: upon waking up, he cannot tell what day or hour it is and finds himself, effectively, out of time. The events that occurred during the drunken bender and while under the influence of the sedatives remain undisclosed or fragmented. Instead, the reader is taken along for a search after lost time that is much more literal than Proust's. The short story itself explicitly addresses the subversiveness of the literal search for time and its anti-narrative potential. When the storyteller wakes up from his stupor and sets out desperately to learn what time it is, he detects a man reading a newspaper and seizes the opportunity to scan the date printed on it. Instead of focusing on the events reported in the paper, the storyteller is interested in the folio, or the meta information that provides the date – 'I suppose it was the first time the date was the big news on the paper'<sup>56</sup> – just as the attention of na gCopaleen's reader is directed toward the timeframe of the events rather than to the events themselves.

The storyteller's inability to trace and measure time is perhaps the main event, or non-event, in the short story. Paul Fagan observes that 'Drink and Time in Dublin' demonstrates O'Nolan's general interest in the 'thematic dislocation of time,'<sup>57</sup> acknowledging the significance of time-bending plotlines for his literary output. Taking Fagan's claim on board, I would like to add that the 'dislocation of time,' effected by alcohol and pills consumption, is not only a thematic but also a structural concern. Statements that relate to the inability to trace time abound in the narrative and, coming in the place of the representation of events, create irreparable gaps in a story that claims to be 'a damn good one.'<sup>58</sup> When the narrator states that the 'watch is stopped,'<sup>59</sup> when he declares 'I don't know what time it is,'<sup>60</sup> and when he desperately asks '*What day is it?*'<sup>61</sup> his disengagement from time functions, as Fagan observes, as a thematic concern: it is a story about a man who does not know what day or time it is. As a 'plot device,'<sup>62</sup> intoxicating substances provide the explanation for the lost time in the storyteller's drinking tale, but in na gCopaleen's text this feature of plot enforces

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<sup>56</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 74.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Fagan, 'Voices Off: Brian O'Nolan, Posthumanism, and Cinematic Disembodiment,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 220.

<sup>58</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 70.

<sup>59</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72.

<sup>60</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72.

<sup>61</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72.

<sup>62</sup> Leroy, 'Harnessing the Spirit,' 105.

formal functions that subvert structural norms of realistic literature. The formal implications of the theme of time challenge the function of a narrative to recount the unfolding in time of recognisable events. In other words, while the gaps puncturing the storyteller's account provide a realistic description of excessive drinking, these same gaps create a subversive, postmodern challenge to reality and to the literary means of representing it.

The connection between the unmeasurable periods of time and intoxication is acknowledged by Dickson, who claims that the short story demonstrates na gCopaleen's interest in inebriation as 'a particular mode of spatio-temporal evasion.'<sup>63</sup> I subscribe to his claim that alcohol brings about a 'particular mode' of escaping time, because while strategies of concealment are not restricted to 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' alcohol is the particular tool in the story that substantiates these strategies. The plot of 'John Duffy's Brother,' for instance, revolves around things unsaid, or things that cannot be said. The 1940 story does not disclose the real name of 'John Duffy's Brother' or the 'queer, momentous and magical [event] taking place inside his brain'<sup>64</sup> that made him think he was the 9:20 train into Dublin and later turned him back into his regular self. And yet, nothing in the plot of 'John Duffy's Brother' suggests that the curious transformation and counter-transformation have anything to do with alcohol or other chemical substances. Neither are the gaps in the narrative, that the text itself acknowledges (consider such statements as '[w]e will refrain from mentioning him by his complete name'),<sup>65</sup> associated with inebriation. The recurrence of gaps and unrepresented experiences throughout O'Nolan's oeuvre speaks to a more general interest in exploring a paradoxical relation to the world founded on non-knowledge: a phenomenology that stems from the unconscious.<sup>66</sup> 'Drink and Time in Dublin' speaks specifically to the narrative possibilities that emerge from heavy, consciousness-annihilating drinking. While alcohol and drugs in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' describe the condition, known to hard drinkers, of experiencing actuality while being detached from consciousness, they also perform the narrative potential of eliminated events and inaccessible knowledge or – in other words – the possibility of representing the unrepresentable.

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<sup>63</sup> Dickson, 'Flann O'Brien and the Thirsty Muse,' 165.

<sup>64</sup> Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 58.

<sup>65</sup> O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' 54.

<sup>66</sup> As Borg writes, 'one of the mainstays of modern phenomenology, [is] the presupposition that reality is rational and that its reason is revealed historically.' Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning*, 12. In 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' events and causality are eliminated by alcohol and therefore cannot possibly be 'revealed historically.'

## Mickey Finn

The consumption of sleeping pills provides the dramatic explanation for the unrepresentable in both na gCopaleen's and the storyteller's narratives. The pills, however, are not interchangeable with alcohol, as they are in Dickson's analysis of 'spatio temporal evasion'<sup>67</sup> in the short story. First, the pills are taken with the intention of doing away with the aftereffects of excessive drinking. Secondly, it is my contention that the consumed drugs are Mickey Finn pills.

Both claims are supported by a close reading of the scene describing the prescription of the pills: after a period of unknown time, or of time beyond measure, the storyteller fears the dire consequence of drinking: 'I was afraid the heart might give out, that was the only thing I was afraid of.'<sup>68</sup> A friend, who happens to be a doctor, then advises him: 'There's only one man for you, he says, and that's sleep. Will you go home and go to bed if I get you something that'll make you sleep?'<sup>69</sup> The personification of sleep in the doctor's assertion as the 'only one man for you' may be relatively common in Hiberno-English, but the doctor's turn of phrase invites us to read literally. The man called sleep, in the doctor's expression, alludes to none other than Mickey Finn, the son of Irish immigrants and a saloon proprietor in Chicago, who infamously popularised the use of knock-out pills. In *Gem of the Prairie: An Informal History of the Chicago Underworld* published in 1940, Herbert Asbury introduces this notorious bar owner:

[T]he bullet-headed proprietor of the Lone Star Saloon and Palm Garden [1896–1903], who was the lowliest and by far the toughest of all the denizens of the [Whisky] Row, has become a legendary character – he is immortalized in the American language and is probably mentioned somewhere in the United States every hour of the day. For this terrible little man – he was only five feet and five inches tall and weighed about a hundred and forty pounds – was the veritable Mickey Finn whose name is used everywhere as a synonym for a knockout drink.<sup>70</sup>

Asbury goes on reporting that Finn met a 'voodoo doctor'<sup>71</sup> who acquainted him with a potion that was most likely chloral hydrate. Finn used the substance to sedate the customers he wanted to rob and went as far as to put up 'a sign behind the bar which read: "Try a Mickey Finn Special"'<sup>72</sup> to allure them into oblivion. Besides chloral

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<sup>67</sup> Dickson, 'Flann O'Brien and the Thirsty Muse,' 165.

<sup>68</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>69</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>70</sup> Herbert Asbury, *Gem of the Prairie: An Informal History of the Chicago Underworld* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940), 171–2.

<sup>71</sup> Asbury, *Gem of the Prairie*, 173.

<sup>72</sup> Asbury, *Gem of the Prairie*, 173.



hydrate, Croton Oil also soon came to be known as Mickey Finn, and later the name was used to describe any substance that causes severe inebriation.

Interestingly, a similar unlawful conduct of a salon proprietor with sedatives is represented in *The Third Policeman*, with John Divney's manipulation of his customers using a mysterious porter, 'The Wrastler':

The customers praised it highly and when they had it inside them they sang and shouted and sometimes lay down on the floor or on the roadway outside in a great stupor. Some of them complained afterwards that they had been robbed while in this state.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the lack of explicit mention, reading Divney's serving of 'The Wrastler' as an allusion to Mickey Finn sedatives is irresistible. In 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' the sleeping pills are likewise not explicitly identified as Mickey Finns, and, in fact, their function as sleeping aids is only inferred. In the first instance, the prescription drugs are referred to as 'one man,'<sup>74</sup> in the second as 'something,'<sup>75</sup> and in the third as 'a box of long-shaped green pills.'<sup>76</sup> In the following description of consuming the pills, they are referred to simply as 'that stuff.'<sup>77</sup> Not naming the sedatives perfectly fits a story riddled with gaps and unrepresented events. The consistent vagueness in the narrator's tone teasingly alludes to the furtiveness implicit in the act of lacing someone's drink for the purpose of thievery. At the same time, the decision not to name the pills speaks to the Irish bar owner's widespread notoriety and to the steady position he occupied in the imagination of O'Nolan's contemporaries.

O'Nolan's own knowledge of the Mickey Finn legend is unquestionable, considering the explicit reference to the numbing and incapacitating effects of Mickey Finn pills and to their role in devious schemes in *The Dalkey Archive*. In the late-career novel, Hackett suggests to Mick the use of sedatives for completing their plot of breaking and entering the lodging of the conniving philosopher, De Selby: 'You needn't be afraid he'll walk in on you when you've broken into his house. As a matter of fact I'll slip him

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<sup>73</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 12. While, in the novel, the narrative reports on the loss of consciousness from the outside, in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' the narrative is reported from the point of view of the person consuming the sedatives.

<sup>74</sup> 'There's only one man for you.' na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>75</sup> 'Will you go home and go to bed if I get you something that'll make you sleep?' na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 71.

<sup>76</sup> na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72.

<sup>77</sup> The following citations are all from na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' 72: 'You'll want to be careful with that stuff, the doctor says, that stuff's very dangerous'; 'that stuff's very dangerous'; 'that stuff acts very quickly'; and 'I begin to get afraid that the stuff is too weak.'



a Mickey Finn if necessary.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, by 1946, the publication year of ‘Drink and Time in Dublin,’ the cultural significance of Mickey Finn and his knock-out pills had been cemented through allusions in several popular cultural texts.<sup>79</sup> Inasmuch as the reference to Billy Wilder’s *The Lost Weekend* at the beginning of the story establishes O’Nolan’s interest in popular culture, it is likely that he was aware of the scope of the mythicisation of the Irish saloon owner. The dominant presence of Mickey Finn, a man turned sedative, in popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century, taken together with Finn’s Irishness and his association with drink and sedatives, suggests that his below-the-surface presence in ‘Drink and Time in Dublin’ is consequential.

Seeing that Mickey Finn’s misdeeds had already been mythologised in popular culture, it is my contention that ‘Drink and Time in Dublin’ – a text that testifies to na gCopaleen’s intentional deviations from literary norms – embraces Mickey Finn as a figure through which to recreate Irish mythology. The Irish-American ruffian substitutes for the legendary Finn Mac Cool who appears in O’Nolan’s novels and other texts. Compellingly, the names of these two figures are made of the same linguistic material, the same letters, only differently arranged. Through a rearrangement of literary (i.e., linguistic) material, the mythology surrounding the Irish figure Mickey Finn expands or recreates the mythological heroism symbolised by Finn Mac Cool. Of course, the legend of Mickey Finn is nowhere near as exalted as that of Finn Mac Cool who features extensively in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a paragon of Irish heroic virtue: ‘Finn Mac Cool was a legendary hero of old Ireland. Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development.’<sup>80</sup> The storyteller in ‘Drink and Time in Dublin,’ on the other hand, takes advantage of his wife’s absence to spend his days drinking and sedating himself.

Mickey Finn, as an Irishman whose misdeeds have a greater bearing on O’Nolan’s contemporaries’ perception of Irish identity, challenges the heroism of Finn Mac Cool as the epitome of Irishness. It is no surprise that Mickey Finn would replace Finn Mac Cool in a short story so dedicated to subversive narrative arrangement, since the undermining of old Ireland mythical heroism preoccupies O’Nolan throughout his work. As Alana Gillespie observes, in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, ‘Finn Mac Cool’s epic proportions and authoritative standing in Irish letters and legend are set up early, but

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<sup>78</sup> Flann O’Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), 121.

<sup>79</sup> According to [BIONITY.Com](https://www.bionity.com), Mickey Finn is alluded to in the 1930 film *Hold Everything*, in the 1930 novel and 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon* where Joel Cairo slips a mickey into Sam Spade’s whiskey, in the 1937 Laurel and Hardy film *Way Out West*, and in several *Three Stooges* shorts. ‘Mickey Finn (drugs);’ [BIONITY.com](https://www.bionity.com/en/encyclopedia/Mickey_Finn_%28drugs%29.html) (26 August 2023): [https://www.bionity.com/en/encyclopedia/Mickey\\_Finn\\_%28drugs%29.html](https://www.bionity.com/en/encyclopedia/Mickey_Finn_%28drugs%29.html).

<sup>80</sup> Flann O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 9.

chipped away by degrees as the other characters in the Red Swan Hotel usurp [his] authority and authorship.<sup>81</sup> More recently, Eglantina Rempert connects O'Nolan's demythisation of Finn Mac Cool with his critique of members of the Irish Revival. Rempert indicates that O'Nolan was familiar with Lady Gregory's work on Finn Mac Cool, *Gods and Fighting Men*, and argues that in *At Swim-Two-Birds* 'O'Nolan seems to be ridiculing the antiquarian methods of revivalist authors,<sup>82</sup> that attempted to produce a coherent narrative out of fragments of Celtic mythology. Inasmuch as any knowledge of the events occurring under the influence is irretrievable, 'Drink and Time in Dublin' frustrates precisely this revivalist inclination to produce coherent narratives out of fragments of oral storytelling. It attempts to reconstruct a narrative from pieces of memory but concludes with the inability to do so – considering that the much-anticipated answer to the question, how long was the storyteller asleep, is never revealed.

It is worth mentioning that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Finn Mac Cool is himself an interruption to the central plot of the book. Ironically, his storytelling interrupts the other characters who make no secret of their irritation: 'We're off again, said Furriskey. [...] Draw in your chairs, boys, said Shanahan, we're right for the night.'<sup>83</sup> Mickey Finn, an Irish anti-hero, is likewise an interruption, but through the negation of storytelling. The Mickey Finn pills open up numerous gaps in the retelling of events and produce a narrative that surrounds incidents that can be neither experienced nor represented. It is appropriate that Mickey Finn, and the mythology associated with him, is introduced into the narrative surreptitiously with such vague concepts as 'one man' or 'that stuff.' In a text that celebrates the failure of memory and representation, the legend of Mickey Finn fittingly remains detached from the semantic properties of language, while his below-the-surface presence advances a subversive and experimental literary arrangement.

## Conclusion

A key cultural context to na gCopaleen's use of drink in challenging literary realistic conventions and Irish mythological heroism in 'Drink and Time in Dublin' is found in *The Bell Magazine*. First printed in 1940, the magazine announced its objective to document the changing Ireland with its subtitle, 'A Survey of Irish Life.' *The Bell's*

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<sup>81</sup> Alana Gillespie, 'In Defence of "gap-worded" Stories: Brian O'Nolan on Authority, Reading, and Writing,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 206.

<sup>82</sup> Eglantina Rempert, 'Theatre and the Visual Arts: Brian O'Nolan and Lady Gregory,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 233.

<sup>83</sup> O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 64.

founding editor, Sean O’Faolain, dedicated the magazine to Irish authors and thinkers who aspired to provide an authentic portrait of contemporary Irishness. The essays, as well as O’Faolain’s editorials, resisted ‘an exclusively Catholic and Gaelic definition of Irishness’<sup>84</sup> that attached Irish experience to a mythological Gaelic past or to the rule of the Church. Particularly under the editorship of O’Faolain in 1940–46, *The Bell* invited ‘Irish readers of [diverse] traditions and creeds to participate in the creation of a new cultural community.’<sup>85</sup> Flann O’Brien contributed a piece titled ‘Going to the Dogs!’ to the very first edition of the magazine.<sup>86</sup>

In the spirit of *The Bell*’s dissent from conventional forms of Irish literature, ‘Drink and Time in Dublin’ challenges narrative conventions on thematic and formal levels, while substituting models of ancient heroic virtue with a paradigm of scandalous, modern anti-heroism. This switch is bound up with a literary manoeuvre whereby lacunas and impossible narration replace the traditional mimetic grammars that characterise event-driven narrative forms. Through alcohol and drugs, the short story celebrates new literary expressions that cast aside older forms of Irish textualities dedicated to mythological heroism and Catholic Irishness. As binge drinking and blackouts render representation impossible, ‘Drink and Time in Dublin’ becomes an experiment in the subversion of narrative conventions and the formulation of a new mode of Irish writing, releasing author and readers from outmoded narrative structures, as well as from the consecrated heroism of Irish mythology.

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<sup>84</sup> Lawrence J. McCaffrey, ‘Sean O’Faolain and Irish Identity,’ *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 9, no. 4 (2005): 145.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Kearney, ‘Between Politics and Literature: The Irish Cultural Journal,’ *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): 167.

<sup>86</sup> Flann O’Brien, ‘Going to the Dogs!’ *The Bell* 1, no. 1 (October 1940): 19–24.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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