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Flann O'Brien's Vibrant Atmospheres

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This article explores how the meteorological, societal, social, and literary senses of atmosphere fertilise each other in Brian O'Nolan's writing through the theoretical frameworks and analytical toolkits of atmosphere studies, affect theory, and new materialism. It argues that O'Nolan's writing draws on a range of seventeenth to nineteenth century scientific and literary discourses concerning atmosphere and challenges their core assumptions by offering an alternative depiction of an atmosphere that is embodied, vibrant, eco-philological, affective, extensive, trans-corporeal, and distributive. Through a focus on *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, and *Thirst*, O'Nolan is spotlighted as a key figure for conceptualising the role of atmosphere in modernist deconstructions of humanist binaries (matter/mind, self/object, human/ nonhuman), as his writing transgresses these dichotomies through a poetics of the ephemeral and the in-between.

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Introduction

In 'False Colours,' the 2 February 1964 episode of Myles na Gopaleen's Telefís Éireann sitcom *O'Dea's Yer Man*, a railway signalman (Mr O) and a porter (Ignatius) discuss the merits and demerits of 'fresh air.'¹ When Mr O detects 'a touch of spring in the air,' Ignatius retorts that he 'must have a great nose on [him] to be able to smell spring in this auld box of ours,' with the trains 'blowing in smoke and soot on top of us from one end of the year to the other.' Mr O counters that it is not with his nose but in his 'bones' that he feels the 'stirring of the air'; if he were younger, his fancy would turn 'to thoughts of love,' and he would throw his leg across the bar of his bicycle to ascend the Sally Gap in the Wicklow Mountains to breathe in 'the finest fresh air in Ireland.' Unswayed, Ignatius counters that he was recently nearly 'killed' by a wind in the Phoenix Park 'that'd skin ya' and chastises Mr O: 'did ya never hear tell of pneumonia?' Changing tack, Mr O reflects that the real danger of being an indoors drinker is not the alcohol itself, but 'inhaling that awful filthy foul air in public houses.' If one is to drink, Mr O wagers, they are better doing so at the racecourse 'in a beautiful atmosphere, air.'

This breezy exchange is a minor point in Brian O'Nolan's broader body of work, yet it captures a preoccupation with the atmosphere's material qualities, cultural connotations, and physiological effects that recurs throughout his writing. Ignatius's wariness regarding the dangers of the air echoes the student narrator's self-confinement to his bedroom due to his 'disproportionate concern for pulmonary well-being' in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.² By contrast, Mr O's advocacy of 'fresh air' recalls *The Third Policeman*'s de Selby, who attributes the 'softening and degeneration of the human race' to the scourge of houses, which discourage 'the art of going out and staying there.'³ The porter's acknowledgement of the effects of train smoke on the proper functioning of human bodies evokes the 'For Steam Men' instalments of Myles's *Cruiskeen Lawn* column and the Flann O'Brien short story 'John Duffy's Brother.'⁴ More subtly, the signalman's insistence that the air is not a phenomenon external to him but something that he *feels in his bones* articulates an

¹ Myles na Gopaleen, 'False Colours,' *O'Dea's Yer Man*, Telefís Éireann, dir. James Plunkett, aired 2 February 1964. This scene is available to view at: <https://www.rte.ie/archives/2024/0119/1427469-spring-is-in-the-air/>.

² Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 40.

³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 236.

⁴ See the 'For Steam Men' section of Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 163–79; and Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 55–9. For an analysis of the 'For Steam Men' columns from a nonhuman studies perspective, see James Bacon, 'For Steam Men: Myles na Gopaleen and Irish Rail,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines*, eds. Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan, and John Greaney (Cork: Cork University Press, 2024), 216–34.

understanding, staged and interrogated across O'Nolan's work, that the atmosphere is vibrant, affective, and trans-corporeal: it literally gets under our skins and transforms us materially and psychologically in ways that we may endeavour to describe in words, but which we experience first through bodily attunement.

Twenty-first-century ecocritical readings have revealed the careful attention that O'Nolan's writing pays to the material composition of the environment writ large;⁵ in recent years, this focus has foregrounded the author's distinctive concern with climate, weather, and air. Prominent instances include Maebh Long's exploration of the role of influenza pandemics in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Dalkey Archive*;⁶ Joseph LaBine's note on the ancient Irish sources of the wind-watching scenes in *The Third Policeman*;⁷ and Julie Bates's illumination of that novel's affective atmospheres in relation to both their wartime contexts and their Dadaist affinities.⁸ Bates's chapter in particular advertises the relevance of O'Nolan's writing to atmosphere studies, and, in turn, the potential of that field's theoretical frameworks and methodologies for a greater appreciation of the material and aesthetic dimensions of O'Nolan's eco-poetics.

Building on the gains made by this recent medical humanities and ecocritical work, this article theorises, historicises, and analyses O'Nolan's striking literary representations of the atmosphere in three interrelated movements:

1. by delineating four distinct definitions and conceptualisations of atmosphere in meteorological, societal, social, and literary terms;
2. by considering how O'Nolan's writing troubles such categorisation by interrogating the competing literary and scientific narratives and discursive constructions of atmosphere that emerged and became influential from the seventeenth to the twentieth century;

⁵ For representative ecocritical readings of O'Nolan, see Richard Witt, 'Nature Denatured in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*,' *University of Bucharest Review: Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 1 (2012): 132–43; Robert Kiely, 'World-Ecological Satire: Peat, Brian O'Nolan, and the Irish Free State's Energy Regime,' *Irish University Review* 16, no. 1 (2019): 90–104; Nicholas Allen, 'At Swim O'Brien: Fictions of the Archipelago,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman*, eds. Ebury, Fagan, and Greaney, 25–40; and Jonathan Foster, "'the reassuring unmistakability of the abiding earth': Nature Writing, State Engineering, the Anthropocene in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman*, eds. Ebury, Fagan, and Greaney, 73–87.

⁶ Maebh Long, "'Not with a bang but a whimper': Uncovering Pandemic Strains in Flann O'Brien's Later Works,' *Irish Studies Review* 31, no. 4 (2023): 488–501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2023.2261390>. For a study of how modernist works 'make visible the pandemic atmosphere' of the 1918 Spanish Flu, see Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁷ Joseph LaBine, "'the curious belief': Wind Watching in *The Third Policeman*,' *Venti* (Winter 2023): <https://www.venti-journal.com/question-four>

⁸ Julie Bates, 'Writing with Air in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman*, eds. Ebury, Fagan, and Greaney, 41–55.

3. by demonstrating how *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, and *Thirst* redirect these discursive constructions towards a modernist conceptualisation of atmosphere as an embodied, vibrant, affective, trans-corporeal, and distributive force that troubles anthropocentric understandings of 'the human' as an external and separate interpreter of its environment.

Through these steps, I spotlight O'Nolan as a key figure for grasping the role of the atmosphere in modernist deconstructions of the humanist binaries of matter and mind, self and object, human and nonhuman, as his writing tests and transgresses these categorical limits through a poetics of the ephemeral and the in-between.

Theorising Atmosphere

Like O'Nolan's writing itself, the atmosphere possesses strange qualities that make it difficult to pin down: it is at once vaporous, volatile, ephemeral. Yet, experience tells us that an atmosphere's effects upon body, emotion, and mood are real and tangible. Ben Anderson outlines the difficulty of arriving at a single definition, given that 'the referent for the term atmosphere is multiple; epochs, societies, rooms, landscapes, couples, art works, and much more, are all said to possess atmospheres (or be possessed by them).'⁹ Evidently, to talk of the atmospheres of O'Nolan's writing – and his writing of atmospheres – it is necessary to consider the concept in several divergent and overlapping senses.

(1) *A meteorological and material sense*: atmosphere as the gaseous envelope of a planetary body. The material atmosphere becomes strikingly, even absurdly visible in O'Nolan's writing when evoked in the service of comic images and plots, such as old Mathers's theory of the coloured wind gowns and the policemen's 'gift of seeing the winds' in *The Third Policeman*,¹⁰ or De Selby's creation, in *The Dalkey Archive*, of 'a chemical compound which totally eliminates oxygen from any given atmosphere' and thus 'confronts us with true time.'¹¹ However, the atmosphere's materiality, and its effects upon bodies, is also registered in more subtle moments across O'Nolan's writing, as in the perpetual rain of *An Béal Bocht*, or the student narrator's description in *At Swim-Two-Birds* of the climate of 'the late summer' as 'a humid breathless season that is inimical to comfort and personal freshness.'¹²

⁹ Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 137.

¹⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 249.

¹¹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 624. This article follows O'Nolan's own convention in using the lowercase 'de Selby' to refer to the character in *The Third Policeman*, and the uppercase 'De Selby' to refer to the character in *The Dalkey Archive*.

¹² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 41.

(2) *An epochal or societal sense*: atmosphere as a synonym for the *Zeitgeist*, such as in references to a revolutionary or apocalyptic atmosphere. It is this sense of atmosphere as the 'Spirit of the Age' that commentators have in mind when they describe *Cruiskeen Lawn* as a 'barometer' of mid-century Irish culture and politics,¹³ or when they perceive Flann O'Brien's novels to be permeated with the atmospheres of post-civil war Ireland, the Second World War, or nuclear anxiety.¹⁴ Myles himself writes that he 'often thought' Goethe's *Faust* 'would make a damn good play if one' were to 'give it a sort of Irish atmosphere'¹⁵ (by which, Myles's play *Faustus Kelly* makes clear, he means the atmosphere of mid-century Irish politics), while in *The Hard Life*, Fr Fahrt reflects on the impenetrability of the 'events and opinions' of previous eras, despite historical records, given that '[i]t is difficult, even impossible, for the people of today to assess' the societal atmospheres that shaped them.¹⁶

(3) *A social or situated sense*: atmosphere not as the planetary climate or the socio-political tensions of the imagined community, but as the affective experience of collective emotion or mood – immediate, local, embodied, extra-linguistic – that forms in the charged air of a *specific location at a precise moment in time*.¹⁷ Perhaps the quintessential example of the spirit of place in O'Nolan's writing is the atmosphere of the pub, from the raucous performativity and competitive wit of the boozing male students in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to the unspoken but understood conspiracies of after-hours drinkers in *Thirst*.

(4) *A literary sense*: atmosphere as the impression of a certain mood, ambience, or affect upon the reader (euphoric, comic, melancholic) through the tools of the author's craft (voice, metre, tone). O'Nolan's appreciation of literary atmosphere is a theme of his non-fiction writing, as when he praises Standish Hayes O'Grady's English

¹³ See the blurb to Terence Brown, *The Irish Times: 150 Years of Influence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), which describes *The Irish Times*, the home of na gCopaleen's column from 1940–66, as 'the weather vane, the barometer of Irish life and society.'

¹⁴ See, for instance, Keelan Harkin's reading of the oppressive 'environment' and 'atmosphere of the authoritative courtroom' of Trellis's trial in *At Swim-Two-Birds* 'alongside the political atmosphere of the 1930s'; Bates's contention that the prevalence of visible air in *The Third Policeman* is informed by 'widespread fear in Europe of air attacks to drop gas on civilians'; and the 'air of nuclear age resignation' that Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt perceive in *The Dalkey Archive*. Keelan Harkin, 'Emergency Powers, Habeas Corpus, and Nonhuman Witnesses in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman*, eds. Ebury, Fagan, and Greaney, 168, 174; Bates, 'Writing with Air in *The Third Policeman*,' 47; Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt, 'Editors' Introduction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds., Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 6.

¹⁵ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (28 November 1944): 3.

¹⁶ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 547.

¹⁷ 'Similar to mood lighting or perfume, atmosphere charges the air with a certain attitude that inhabits and shapes our experience. It describes the feeling that forms between subjects and objects in a specific place at a specific time.' Kate Moger, 'Picturing Atmosphere,' *Venti* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 11.

translations of Irish folklore for relaying ‘not only the exact meaning of the Irish but the atmosphere and emotional content.’¹⁸ This appreciation is also ironised in an exchange cut from the typescript of *At Swim–Two–Birds* in which the narrator admits that the Finn Mac Cool material ‘is all irrelevant – it’s just for atmosphere.’¹⁹ In this sense of the text’s ‘own atmosphere that does not necessarily point referentially to a specific time or singular setting,’²⁰ we speak of the riotous comic energy of *At Swim–Two–Birds*; the eerie, uncanny ambience of *The Third Policeman*; the darkly comic death-in-life mood of *An Béal Bocht*.²¹ But we can also think about how specific aesthetic attitudes to writing atmosphere distinguish literary movements (romantic, gothic, realist, modernist) and O’Nolan’s place within these historical movements and genres.

All four categories of atmosphere are relevant to an appreciation of O’Nolan’s writing and are key aspects of his poetics. Yet, even as they grant us guiderails for analysis and debate, such clear distinctions between categories of atmosphere are ultimately untenable when historicised in their scientific and literary discursive traditions.

Historicising Atmosphere

In the most common genealogy, ‘atmosphere’ emerged in the seventeenth century as a scientific concept. It was first used in John Wilkins’s 1638 study *Discovery of a World in the Moone* to describe his observation of ‘an orbe of grosse vaporous aire, immediately encompassing the body of the Moone.’²² While Wilkins’s use of the term ‘Atmosphæra’ to describe the moon as a ‘habitable world’ might strike a twenty-first-century reader as closer to science fiction than to science, it marked a discursive shift

¹⁸ Flann O’Brien, ‘Standish Hayes O’Grady,’ *The Irish Times* (16 October 1940): 3.

¹⁹ Samuel Kauffman Anderson, ‘Pink Paper and the Composition of Flann O’Brien’s *At-Swim-Two-Birds*,’ LSU Master’s Theses (2002): 15. Available at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3989.

²⁰ Anna Jones Abramson, ‘Joseph Conrad’s Atmospheric Modernism: Enveloping Fog, Narrative Frames, and Affective Attunement,’ *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 355, n. 4.

²¹ For instance, Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan perceive a ‘vague note of atmospheric evil’ in *The Third Policeman*’s after-world parish, in which a ‘general malaise seems to infect the air itself,’ while Jeffrey Mathewes claims that ‘Manichæan fatalism shrouds the text [of *The Third Policeman*] like a fog of de Selby’s black air, dense and inflammable to any phosphate-induced flicker of hope.’ Elsewhere, Ian Ó Caoimh notes ‘the fateful atmosphere of Corca Dhorcha.’ Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan, ‘Editors’ Introduction,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds., Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 15; Jeffrey Mathewes, ‘The Manichæan Body in *The Third Policeman*: or Why Joe’s Skin Is Scaly,’ *The Scriptorium: Flann O’Brien* (2005): 10; Ian Ó Caoimh, ‘The Ideal and the Ironic: Incongruous Irelands in *An Béal Bocht*, *No Laughing Matter*, and Ciarán Ó Nualláin’s *Óige an Dearthár*,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds., Borg, Fagan, and McCourt, 152–68.

²² John Wilkins, *The Discovery of a World in the Moone; Or, A Discourse Tending To Prove That ‘Tis Probable There May Be Another Habitable World In That Planet* (London: Michael Sparl and Edward Forrest, 1638), proposition 10. See Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Air’s Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660–1794* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

from previous concepts of 'periechon,' 'aether,' and 'aire,' which in turn empowered natural philosophers from Robert Boyle to Joseph Priestley to make air visible as an object of knowledge by describing its 'effects on a rusting hinge or darkening flesh.'²³

In a complementary but distinct critical narrative, atmosphere became visible as a feature of romantic and gothic imaginative literature. Specifically, it was manifested in the clouds, vapours, fogs, and winds of anti-Enlightenment Romanticism²⁴ – in William Wordsworth's identification of poetry with an 'atmosphere of sensation,' or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comparison of the effects of metre upon the reader to those of a 'medicated atmosphere'²⁵ – and in 'the gothic craze of the 1790s' which 'seemed to absorb many of the occult powers, despotic and inscrutable,' that the century's scientific rhetoric had laboured to dispel.²⁶ Working from these assumptions, critics often treat literary atmosphere as a wholly metaphorical phenomenon which is secondary and supplementary to a prior and originating Enlightenment scientific discourse.

However, the critical narrative of two separate and opposing cultures of air – between *the* atmosphere and *an* atmosphere – has been significantly challenged by twenty-first-century atmosphere studies, which combines phenomenology, geography, aesthetics, architecture, and anthropology with the study of the close associations between literary works and natural philosophy writing.²⁷ This historicising work has demonstrated that, in fact, these scientific and literary atmospheres were co-emergent and inter-dependant. The natural philosophers who 'discovered' the atmosphere were, as Jayne Elizabeth Lewis shows, 'also compulsive writers and self-conscious literary stylists,' tasked with making air appear through language.²⁸ As early pneumatic chemists searched 'for the words to distinguish each invisible and immaterial aspect of the air,'²⁹ they turned to the literary tools of figuration, analogy, metaphor, and rhetoric, as well as to the emerging discursive and connotative constructions of 'air' that were increasingly being used to describe 'the elevation of distinctively modern forms of sociability.'³⁰ Indeed, Rowan Rose Boyson insists that a familiarity with, and

²³ Morgan Vanek, 'Review of *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794*, by Jayne Elizabeth Lewis,' *Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe and His Contemporaries* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 111.

²⁴ For an early, influential account of the recurrent Romantic motif of the 'air-in-motion' as a metaphorical figure for changes in the poet's mind, see M.H. Abrams, 'The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor,' *Kenyon Review* 19, no. 1 (1957): 113–30.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth: Volume 1*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 141; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: J.M. Dent, 1997), 220.

²⁶ Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 1.

²⁷ See Boyson, 'Air and Atmosphere Studies,' n.p.

²⁸ Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 3.

²⁹ Vanek, 'Review,' 112.

³⁰ Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 1–2.

a proficiency in, 'the poet's craft' was, from the outset, a core component of empirical practice and writing.³¹ Complementarily, 'the rise of atmosphere as an aesthetic program' in eighteenth-century poetry and fiction was empowered by 'contemporary conceptions of the air as they were articulated in the interpenetrating spheres of natural philosophy, supernaturalism, and sociability.'³² As Morgan Vanek summarises, 'all of these characters' from the scientific and literary spheres 'are engaged in the same activity: from laboratory to library, these are stories about putting the air into words.'³³

O'Nolan's novels explicitly foreground such a long-view perspective on writing atmosphere in modernity, as they map and interrogate the interwoven scientific and literary discursive histories that Lewis, Boyson, Vanek, and others would later trace.³⁴ The historical narrative of a scientific, epistemological discovery of atmosphere through Boyle's air experiments of the 1650s–1680s is registered in the 'second opening' of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which informs us that Furriskey, at the moment of his literary creation, possessed a 'knowledge of physics' that extended to Boyle's law regarding the relationship between pressure and volume in gases.³⁵ The supposed eighteenth-century emergence of a separate, secondary, and metaphorical literary concern with atmosphere is registered later in the same novel, when, mining the *Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences* for materials to interpolate into his manuscript, the student narrator quotes at length from 'The Shipwreck,' a 1762 poem by Scottish sailor poet William Falconer:

The dim horizon lowering vapours shroud,
And blot the sun yet struggling in the cloud;
Thro' the wide atmosphere condensed with haze,
His glaring orb emits a sanguine blaze.³⁶

Despite its implicit presentation as a selection from the 'Arts' rather than the 'Natural Sciences' section of the *Conspectus*, the excerpt complicates the theoretical distinction between empirical and metaphorical atmospheres, given that Falconer's poetical cantos

³¹ Boyson, 'Air and Atmosphere Studies,' n.p.

³² Lewis, *Air's Appearance*, 1.

³³ Vanek, 'Review,' 112.

³⁴ See also Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010).

³⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 5.

³⁶ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 210.

claim a certain authority and verisimilitude from his own experiences and observations as a midshipman and purser on merchant vessels and warships.³⁷

Describing his plot for 'the annihilation of the atmosphere' in *The Dalkey Archive*, De Selby evokes the rhetoric of scientific specificity:

The atmosphere of the earth, meaning what in practice we breathe as distinct from rarified atmosphere at great heights, is composed of roughly 78 per cent nitrogen, 21 oxygen, tiny quantities of argon and carbon dioxide, and microscopic quantities of other gases such as helium and ozone. Our preoccupation is with nitrogen, atomic weight 14.008, atomic number 7.³⁸

However, such classificatory rhetoric is blended with societal, social, and literary meanings throughout the novel's general atmosphere of apocalypse. Mick Shaughnessy, introducing himself to De Selby as 'a lowly civil servant,' declares that he 'detest[s]' the job's 'low atmosphere,' while James Joyce describes his escape from wartime France thus: 'I got to London first. The atmosphere of nerves there was terrible. I didn't feel safe.'³⁹ The modern scientific and literary task of rendering the atmosphere discursively visible is also a key motif of *The Third Policeman's* footnoted scholarly debates concerning the writings of the eminent 'physicist, ballistician, philosopher and psychologist' de Selby.⁴⁰ We may think here of de Selby's theory 'that darkness was [...] an accretion of "black air",'⁴¹ or of the savant's attribution of 'the sharp sound of percussion to the bursting of "atmosphere balls,"' evidently envisaging the air as being composed of minute balloons.'⁴²

O'Nolan's handling of the porous boundary between scientific and literary atmospheres is exemplified in *The Third Policeman's* account of the parishioner 'that had himself let up into the sky in a balloon to make observations.' The Sergeant relates the strange incident in detail:

³⁷ These discourses intersect most conspicuously in the hybrid scientific-literary genre of seventeenth-century travel writing, such as William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*, which blends a scientific register and an empirical claim to 'truth' with a taste for romance in its descriptions of diverse weathers, airs, and climates at sea. Indeed, Jonathan Swift's parodies of Dampier in *Gulliver's Travels* are intended exactly to travesty the genre's rhetorical claims to empirical truth by playing up their unspoken literary character.

³⁸ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 623.

³⁹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 616, 760.

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 373.

⁴¹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 325, n. 1.

⁴² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 325, n. 1.

They played out the rope till he was disappeared completely from all appearances, telescopes or no telescopes, and then they played out another ten miles of rope to make sure of first-class observations. When the time-limit for the observations was over they pulled down the balloon again but lo and behold there was no man in the basket and his dead body was never found afterwards lying dead or alive in any parish ever afterwards. [...] But they were clever enough to think of sending up the balloon again a fortnight later and when they brought it down the second time lo and behold the man was sitting in the basket without a feather out of him if any of my information can be believed at all.⁴³

If *The Third Policeman*'s scene of the disappearing and then impossibly re-appearing balloonist is both absurd and sublime, it also maps onto the eighteenth and nineteenth-century history of atmospheric discovery, in which key scientific findings were made by perilous observations in manned balloons rising through the atmosphere, and rendered into information through dramatic, literary prose.

The public interest inspired by early ballooning excursions, beginning with the Montgolfier brothers' first launch in 1783, introduced the scientific atmosphere to the popular cultural imaginary alongside the literary atmospheres made popular by romantic and gothic texts.⁴⁴ The literary flourish of the scientific genre of the excursion into the sky is exemplified in James Glaisher's written account of his 1862 balloon expedition on which, ascending to a height of 37,000 feet and beyond, he recorded never before observed changes in atmospheric temperature before passing out and almost perishing: 'A flood of strong sunlight burst upon us with a beautiful blue sky without a cloud, and below us lay a magnificent sea of clouds, its surface varied with endless hillocks, and mountain chains, and with many snow-white tufts rising from it.'⁴⁵ Later, as Glaisher starts to feel the rarer atmosphere's effects upon his body, his predicament is communicated to the reader with a dash of adventure: 'I thought I had been seized with asphyxia, and that I should experience no more, as death would come, unless we

⁴³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 365.

⁴⁴ Siobhan Carroll argues that the Montgolfier brothers' 1783 balloon launch transformed the British attitude to the atmosphere from a state of uninterest to the feverish imagination of a 'new era of unrestricted global mobility and limitless empire.' Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination 1750-1850* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 121. Several recent studies explore the imaginative impact of early ballooning, including Richard Holmes, *Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air* (New York: Pantheon, 2013); and Clare Brant, *Balloon Madness: Flights of Imagination in Britain, 1783-1786* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017).

⁴⁵ James Glaisher, *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 48.

speedily descended.'⁴⁶ This tight discursive connection between observational and literary renderings of the atmosphere's natures and effects is indexed in *The Third Policeman* through the Sergeant's description of the parish's vanishing balloonist as 'a devil for reading books.'⁴⁷

The ballooning sequence is a particularly showy example of the ways in which *The Third Policeman*'s action is described throughout with careful attention to the climates in which events occur. Consider how the atmosphere is rendered visible in the scene upon the scaffold:

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.⁴⁸

Bates emphasises the 'flourish of something very like authorial pride in the workmanship required to contrive the air of' *The Third Policeman*,⁴⁹ and I would add that such passages illuminate that the histories and shifting borders of scientific and literary atmospheric discourse are key concerns for O'Nolan. Yet, the theories of air and accounts of air exploration that are detailed in *The Third Policeman* seem strangely superannated for a book written in the late 1930s. Even acknowledging the atemporal nature of *The Third Policeman*'s afterworld, Gustave Hermite's invention of the weather balloon had provided scientists with a way to explore the atmosphere without risking their lives since the 1890s. And, despite Sergeant Pluck's assertion that '[p]eople have no gift for looking up, they seldom examine the lofty altitudes,'⁵⁰ the de Selby scholar's 'idea [...] that the breezes high above the ground are separate from those which play on the same level as men's faces' had been a scientific consensus, confirmed by manned

⁴⁶ Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*, 48.

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 365. O'Nolan's sustained interest in ballooning is demonstrated in a 1948 instalment of *Cruiskeen Lawn* dedicated to the history of '[t]he conquest of the air by man.' The column traces an arc from the Montgolfier brothers' early experiments 'aimed at establishing whether earth-born creatures would die when elevated into the heavens' to the increasingly militaristic applications of ballooning following the Napoleonic wars. Myles's eye is caught by an 1824 quote by Cork philosopher Joseph MacSweeney, who speculated that the innovations of military aviation would soon 'banish wars for ever from this earth as being too devastating for man to endure.' There is no doubt that Myles expects his reader to perceive the poignant irony of MacSweeney's prognostication in light of the recent atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (8 September 1948): 4, citing Joseph MacSweeney, *An Essay on Aerial Navigation* (Cork: King and Company, 1824).

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 364.

⁴⁹ Bates, 'Writing with Air in *The Third Policeman*,' 43.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 331.

balloon expeditions, since decades before that.⁵¹ To account for the gap between the twentieth-century atmospherics of O'Nolan's novels and the conspicuously seventeenth to nineteenth-century discourses of atmosphere that they evoke, it is vital to note the ways in which the representation of atmosphere was transformed through early modernist literary practices.

Characteristically, nineteenth-century gothic, realist, sensation, and detective genres foreground modes in which reduced visibility between subject and object produces effects of fear, mystery, suspense. We may think here of Ann Radcliffe's gothic mists, Charles Dickens's 'thick, miasmatic' London fog, the 'shrouding, obscuring hazes' of Wilkie Collins's novels, the mysterious fogs of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, and so on.⁵² In her 2016 study of 'atmospheric modernism,' Anna Abramson identifies the emergence of a specifically modernist approach to writing atmosphere at the turn of the twentieth century which declines this model of 'atmospheric *interference*' in favour of an aesthetics of 'atmospheric *envelopment*'⁵³ that represents 'air as an all-encompassing environment rather than [as a] perceptual object or image.'⁵⁴ Abramson foregrounds Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a significant and influential instance of such 'atmospheric modernism' in its depictions of an 'affective and multisensory' fog that 'cannot be conceived of as an atmospheric condition intervening *between* a subject and object, for subjects are themselves *inside* the fog' and 'the atmosphere also gets into bodies.'⁵⁵ In so far as the blinding fog of *Heart of Darkness* 'dissolves the boundary between subject and object' that is crucial to nineteenth-century genres,⁵⁶ it gestures at a modernist understanding that atmosphere 'inflects human life but is always in excess of it.'⁵⁷

Elsewhere, in her 2020 monograph *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel*, Dora Zhang pinpoints Henry James's 'ethereal preoccupations' with the role that atmospheres 'play in the production of knowledge about social life' as initiating a discrete strand of modernist atmospherics.⁵⁸ In contrast to Conrad's work, in which

⁵¹ Similarly superannuated are the recurrent assertions in *At Swim-Two-Birds* that the 'weather was inimical to the well-being of invalids,' which appear to follow the miasma theory that held, until the advent of germ theory in the 1880s, that diseases are caused by a noxious form of 'bad air,' also known as night air. The association is bolstered by the Pooka's assertion that 'people who suffer from consumption complain most and frequently die when there is fog in the air,' as an 'unhealthy fog' was widely believed in the nineteenth century to indicate the presence of miasma. O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 19, 106.

⁵² Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 66–7.

⁵³ Abramson, 'Joseph Conrad's Atmospheric Modernism,' 337.

⁵⁴ Anna Jones Abramson, *The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley (2016), 1.

⁵⁵ Abramson, 'Joseph Conrad's Atmospheric Modernism,' 337, 340.

⁵⁶ Abramson, 'Joseph Conrad's Atmospheric Modernism,' 337.

⁵⁷ Abramson, *The Age of Atmosphere*, 2.

⁵⁸ Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 63–4.

'fog, mist, and haze work persistently to impede visibility and to obstruct knowledge,' James's atmosphere, Zhang insists, 'is not the site of mystery or confusion but of disclosure' about the class-coded 'social climates swirling among groups of people indoors.'⁵⁹ The 'coloured and scented' air that hangs 'over the proceedings' of James's late novels thus shifts 'the realist novel's social hermeneutic descriptive project [...] from solid objects' and bodies to 'things in the air.'⁶⁰ In their points of similarity and divergence, the Conradian and Jamesian paradigms provide useful coordinates for evaluating the atmospherics of subsequent modernist writers, as when Abrahamson considers London's 'immersive environment' and the overwhelming heatwave in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in terms of Conradian 'absorption,' or when she reads James Joyce's 'The Dead' in a Jamesian sense as a study of failed attunements to various public and social moods.⁶¹

The nineteenth-century model of 'atmospheric *interference*' – the creation of an affect through reduced visibility – certainly appears in O'Nolan's work, often in the form of comic pastiche, as in the scene in *The Third Policeman* in which the de Selby scholar's view of Finnucane becomes increasingly obscured as he disappears 'behind a little grey wall [of smoke] he had built for himself by means of his pipe.'⁶² However, in its actual conceptualisation and representation of atmosphere, I suggest that O'Nolan's writing draws more substantially on these Conradian and Jamesian paradigms of modernist atmosphere, in each case torquing them towards more explicitly comic and uncanny affects through a greater focus on the air's vibrant and agentic trans-corporeality within and beyond the human. To unpack and understand his specific twist on the modernist tropes of atmospheric envelopment, absorption and social affect, I consider O'Nolan's writing through a network of twenty-first-century theoretical frameworks provided by atmosphere studies, affect theory, and new materialism, specifically drawing on the concepts of vibrant matter, eco-philology, affective atmospheres, and trans-corporeality.

O'Nolan's Atmospheres

Perhaps the paradigmatic O'Nolan work in which meteorological, societal, social, and literary atmospheres cohere is the play *Thirst*, which premiered as part of Hilton Edwards

⁵⁹ Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 66–7. Consider this representative passage from James's *The Golden Bowl*: 'Mr Verver [...] had been inscrutably monotonous behind an iridescent cloud. The cloud was his native envelope – the soft looseness, so to say, of his temper and tone, [...] of a quality unmistakable for sensitive feelers.' Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, intro. Nicola Bradbury (London: Wordsworth, 2000), 75.

⁶⁰ Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 63, 69.

⁶¹ Abramson, *The Age of Atmosphere*, 78–104, 105–33.

⁶² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 258.

and Micheál mac Liammóir's Christmas variety show at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, on 26 December 1942. When a Sergeant catches Mr Coulahan serving alcohol after last call, the publican conspires to have the charges dropped by acting out an intense dry heat that he supposedly experienced during his deployment in the Middle Eastern theatre of World War I as part of the British Mesopotamian campaign. Coulahan's purpose is to perform this overpowering, transformative dehydration in such a way as to produce a real thirst in the body of the indicting officer, thus compelling him to imbibe an after-hours pint. While its plot follows a relatively straightforward comic set-up and pay-off – the parched Sergeant finally relents and downs three drinks in quick succession⁶³ – the play manifests an expansive atmospheric aesthetic in so far as Coulahan, the drinkers, the Sergeant, and the audience at the Gate all absorb and are absorbed by a series of co-mingling immersive atmospheres. These are, at once:

1. *meteorological* (the Mesopotamian heat)
2. *societal* (the First World War, characterised by the use of lethal gases which assaulted the atmosphere rather than human bodies directly, including the alleged British use of chemical weapons in Mesopotamia⁶⁴)
3. *social* (the pub setting), and
4. *literary* (Coulahan's 'play within a play'; *Thirst*'s performance at the Gate).

By working with these categories but attending to how their boundaries are blurred and transgressed in his writing, we can advance a more detailed understanding of O'Nolan's atmospheres not only categorically (what they *are*) but also qualitatively (what they *do*, and *how*).

Coulahan offers a detailed description of the effects of the 'hot,' 'thin,' and 'dry'⁶⁵ Mesopotamian air upon his breath ('We couldn't draw breath for five minutes with this heat pumping out of the ground'⁶⁶), tongue, mouth, neck, and insides:

Every bit of me began to get dried up and withered [...]. My tongue began to get dry and cracked. And it began to get bigger. It swelled out till it nearly choked me and got

⁶³ Flann O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 135.

⁶⁴ On the alleged British use of poison gas in Mesopotamia during the Iraqi revolt which began in Baghdad during the summer of 1920, see Charles Townshend, 'Civilisation and "Frightfulness": Air Control in the Middle East Between the Wars,' in *Warfare, Diplomacy and Politics: Essays in Honour of A.J.P. Taylor*, ed. Chris Wrigley (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 148. For work on twentieth-century 'atmoterrorism,' in which weapons increasingly target the enemy's environment, rather than their body, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 128.

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, 146.

as hard and dry as a big cinder. [...] The whole inside of me mouth got dry and cracked the same way and so did me neck and all inside me.⁶⁷

The scene draws on the Conradian model of atmospheric envelopment and absorption, in so far as Coulahan is thrust into a Mesopotamian climate which, in turn, gets inside him (and ultimately, through a process of transferal, inside the Sergeant). At the same time, the atmosphere inside the coinciding social spaces of the pub and the theatre resonates obliquely with the Jamesian model, as the publican's scheme depends upon his fellow drinkers and the Gate's audience picking up on unspoken but understood social meanings that hang in the air of the performance space itself, as it 'thickens with intimations, pulses with vibrations, reverberates with tones, and sounds with notes.'⁶⁸ Yet, I would argue that *Thirst* moves beyond both models in its sustained comic attention to the *aliveness* of the material environment itself, and its capacity to enact material, even metamorphic bodily change. In this aspect, the play anticipates Jane Bennett's twenty-first-century theory of vibrant matter's capacity to act with 'trajectories, propensities or tendencies' of its own to 'make things happen.'⁶⁹ The atmosphere in O'Nolan's novels, too, is vital, animated, and seemingly agentic, as when Sweeny laments, in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: 'the pure air has pierced my body.'⁷⁰

Even as these passages focus primarily on human bodily changes and effects, their endeavours to represent atmospheric vibrancy exhibit a keen awareness of non-anthropocentric perspectives and agencies. This perception is foregrounded in *The Third Policeman* initially through the de Selby scholar's acknowledgement of the 'powerful presence' of the 'keen, clear, abundant and intoxicating' air, which 'could be discerned everywhere, shaking up the green things jauntily, conferring greater dignity and definition on the stones and boulders, forever arranging and re-arranging the clouds and breathing life into the world.'⁷¹ As his certainty wanes regarding the mechanics of the parish's strange environment, the narrator's accounts of its atmosphere become less explicitly anthropomorphic, particularly in his exchanges with his infernal persecutors: 'I had heard the Sergeant's words and understood them thoroughly but they were no more significant than the clear sounds that infest the air at all times – the far cry of gulls, the disturbance a breeze will make in its blowing.'⁷²

⁶⁷ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, 151.

⁶⁸ Zhang, *Strange Likeness*, 63.

⁶⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii, 5.

⁷⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 82.

⁷¹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 252.

⁷² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 365.

While in *Thirst* O'Nolan is interested in air as a carrier of temperature, in *The Third Policeman* he focuses on its import as a carrier of human and nonhuman sound. Standing on the scaffold that has been constructed to orchestrate his death, the de Selby scholar reflects on the fact of spoken language's material embodiment in, and transportation through, the air itself. He notices that the policeman's 'words, now in the air and out of the doors' – thus, outside of the socially and symbolically charged Jamesian atmospheres of rooms – 'had another warm breathless roundness in them as if his tongue was lined with furry burrs and they came lightly from him like a string of bubbles or like tiny things borne to me on thistledown in very gentle air.'⁷³ Indeed, throughout his writing, we discern that words and material atmospheres are not distinct entities in O'Nolan's imagination but are rather cooperative and reciprocal. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Orlick, thanking the assembled crowd as he emerges from the 'soft apparently-supernatural radiance' of the room of his birth, 'searche[s] for a word with his red hand as if to pull one from the air,'⁷⁴ while Finn Mac Cool, when he is asked to recount 'the Tale of the Enchanted Fort of the Sally Tree or [...] of the Little Brawl at Allen,' describes such stories in atmospheric terms: 'They go above me and around and through me, [...] I cannot make them.'⁷⁵ These passages render visible, in literary language, the fact that 'the air is not just an element we interact with,' but 'the very medium that makes interaction possible.'⁷⁶

In his 2018 monograph on 'atmospheric romanticism,' Thomas H. Ford develops what he terms an 'ecophilological' approach to Wordsworth's poetics of air. The ecophilologist, in Ford's conception, collapses the false binary of literal and literary atmospheres by showing that the poet's symbolic investment in figures of climate, air, and breath turns upon an awareness of the actual, non-metaphorical grounding of these textual atmospheres in material ecologies and environments.⁷⁷ As Caroline M. Heller reflects, Ford thus advances 'a method that recognises how an atmospheric textuality can be at once tangible and disparate, literal and metaphoric.'⁷⁸ In the novels' careful renderings of such atmospheric textualities – and in *Thirst*'s aesthetic conceit that literary atmospheres can produce real bodily effects – O'Nolan emerges also as something of an

⁷³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 364.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 144.

⁷⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 14.

⁷⁶ Tim Ingold, 'The Atmosphere,' *Chiasmi International* 14 (2012): 77.

⁷⁷ See 'Introduction: An Ecophilology of Atmosphere,' in Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–16.

⁷⁸ Caroline M. Heller, 'Thomas H. Ford's *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*,' *European Romantic Review* 31, no. 3 (2021): 379. <https://doi-org.may.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10509585.2020.1747706>.

'ecophilologist' who is concerned with how words 'become entangled, both literally and metaphorically, with living and dead forms' in the very air we breathe.⁷⁹

Such an appreciation of O'Nolan's vibrant, eco-philological atmospheres enhances our understanding of the function of affect in his work. The twenty-first-century study of 'affective atmospheres' endeavours to understand how material and social 'atmospheres shape humans' emotions and capacities' through a focus on phenomenological embodiment.⁸⁰ Anderson theorises 'affective atmospheres' as 'the transpersonal or pre-personal intensities that emerge as bodies affect one another'⁸¹ and blur the boundaries between individual subjects and collective emotions.⁸² In her 2004 study of what is happening, exactly, when one walks into a room and 'feels the atmosphere,' Teresa Brennan writes:

The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes [...]. [T]he transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual.⁸³

Joseph Brooker has compellingly read *Thirst* through J.L. Austin's theory of perlocutionary utterance to explore 'the capacity of spoken language' in O'Nolan's play to 'produc[e] bodily effects (such as actual thirst) from thin air.'⁸⁴ I don't propose any disagreement with Brooker's reading of O'Nolan's 'use of language to bring about altered states,'⁸⁵ yet I suggest that there is more to be said about the interaction of words and atmospheres in actively shaping embodied moods and emotions – both in this play and in O'Nolan's broader work – and that the air out of which O'Nolan produces these affects is less thin than Brooker's phrasing suggests. The author's consciousness of the material

⁷⁹ Heller, 'Thomas H. Ford's *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*,' 379.

⁸⁰ James Ash, 'Rethinking Affective Atmospheres: Technology, Perturbation and Space Times of the Non-Human,' *Geoforum* 49 (2013): 21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.05.006>.

⁸¹ Ben Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres,' *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.08.005>.

⁸² Anderson's argument is influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's contention that 'affects are becomings' ('experienced in a lived duration that involves the difference between two states') or 'beings' which exceed 'feelings or affections' in so far as 'they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), 256; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 49; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 164.

⁸³ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

⁸⁴ 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), 145.

⁸⁵ Brooker, 'Dreaming After in the Dark Night,' 146.

atmosphere's role in transmitting affect is demonstrated in *Thirst*'s stage directions: 'The bar is lit (very badly) by two candles which are set on the counter.'⁸⁶ Upon the sound of the Guard outside, both candles are blown out: 'There is complete silence. [...] Thirty seconds pass. [...] [N]othing [is] visible save the window that is lit by the street-lamp.'⁸⁷ Ambient darkness, silence, the slowing down of time – mingled with the same dense air as an audience eagerly awaiting St Stephen's Day refreshments after Edwards and mac Liammóir's long variety show at the Gate – are part of the immediate, material atmosphere which transmits the hot, bright Mesopotamian air into the pub/theatre and allows its climate to literally get into the Sergeant and make him yield to his mounting thirst. Together, these atmospheres are not only vibrant and eco-philological, but also absorbent and affective.

While *Thirst* provides us with a particularly showy example, O'Nolan's attunement to the function of atmosphere in the transmission of affect is elsewhere more subtly woven into the fabric of his texts. When the de Selby scholar first arrives at the Police barracks, we read the following exchange:

'I came here to inform you officially about the theft of my American gold watch.'
 He looked at me through an atmosphere of great surprise and incredulity [...].
 'That is an astonishing statement,' he said at last. [...] 'Why should anybody steal a watch when they can steal a bicycle?'⁸⁸

O'Nolan's phrasing here is remarkable. Why does the narrator not simply tell us that Sergeant Pluck looked at him with great surprise and incredulity? Why *through* an atmosphere? What is 'an atmosphere of great surprise and incredulity'? I do not think it is simply a case of projection, that the air is anthropomorphised, briefly, to take on the character of the sergeant's surprise and incredulity, as if by analogy or metaphor. Rather, there is a subtle relocation of agency from the humanist subject to a more diffuse and distributed subjectivity that includes the air itself. The mood, the emotion, the tone, the interaction is not reducible to the subjects involved – the de Selby scholar and the Sergeant – but something that belongs in part to both the subjects and that which is in-between them. The surprise is part of the air itself, the air itself is part of the incredulity. These atmospheres and affects, in O'Nolan's imagination, are inseparable.

In his writing on atmosphere, Tim Ingold contends that, historically, meteorology and aesthetics share a presumption that 'the material world [...] has already crystallised

⁸⁶ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, 121.

⁸⁷ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, 124.

⁸⁸ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 273.

out from the fluxes of the aerial medium, leaving the latter effectively dematerialised.⁸⁹ Such an understanding, in which '[a]ir becomes an abstraction, a material absence,⁹⁰ underpins the modern Western ontology which, Tonino Griffero observes:

puts substances, things in themselves, before relations, and the dualism subject/object before the in-between preceding them [...]. Similarly, it puts being before becoming, solid bodies [...] before what is vague, ephemeral, and peripheric. [...] Unfortunately, these parameters end up exiling everything that is vague, flowing, atmospheric.⁹¹

In stark contrast to such an ontology, O'Nolan's vibrant atmospheres proceed on the understanding that bodies, whether human or nonhuman, are not discrete objects, but are rather always already a fluid, agentic *assemblage* that includes both organic and rare matter: aerosols, odours, microbes, smoke, chemicals, word-sounds, vibrations, and so on. His atmospheres both anticipate and are newly accessible through the findings of twenty-first-century atmosphere studies, whether Anderson's insistence that atmospheres 'interrupt, perturb and haunt fixed persons, places or things,'⁹² or Brennan's observation that in so far as 'we are not self-contained in terms of our energies,' there is 'no secure distinction between the "individual" and the "environment".'⁹³ O'Nolan's writing thus brings the air back into presence through careful scrutiny not only of its historical discursive formations and material effects, but also of its circulations and exchanges, its gathering and dissipating assemblages, within, between, and beyond bodies.

In her 2010 monograph *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo coins the term 'trans-corporeality' to describe the principles of passage and exchange that characterise the porous and permeable material interfaces and radical 'flows of substances' between bodies and their environments.⁹⁴ Similarly, O'Nolan's work figures matter's movement across human and nonhuman bodies as trans-corporeal and distributive. Of course, the example *par excellence* is Sergeant Pluck's Atomic Theory, which advances a trans-corporeal principle of constant exchange and transference between the atomic matter of people, bicycles, horses, the earth itself.⁹⁵ But we may also note how, in the oppressive heat of *Thirst*, the limits of

⁸⁹ Ingold, 'The Atmosphere,' 76.

⁹⁰ Ingold, 'The Atmosphere,' 76.

⁹¹ Tonino Griffero, 'It Blows Where It Wishes: The Wind as a Quasi-Thingly Atmosphere,' *Venti* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 31. <https://www.venti-journal.com/tonino-griffero>.

⁹² Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres,' 78.

⁹³ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 6.

⁹⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2010), 2, 9.

⁹⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 293–99.

Coulahan's body start to blur and blend with his material surroundings, as the sun melts the tropical rubber on the soles of his shoes, fusing his feet to the desert ground. As the integrity of the parched soldiers' humanity starts to come under stress, they are likened to sheep, lambs, dogs, fish, prunes, mummies, furnaces, bricks, corpses, cooked meat, and 'flies on a fly-paper.'⁹⁶ The scene captures the quality of O'Nolan's trans-corporeal imaginary, in which the limits between human, animal, environmental, and atmospheric bodies are troubled and transgressed. Significantly, O'Nolan's vibrant, affective, and trans-corporeal vision of atmosphere requires a new 'understanding [of] the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment,' which, in turn, 'marks a profound shift in subjectivity.'⁹⁷

Conclusion

If the transformative scene of *Thirst* is intended to be comically horrifying, three key moments in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* explore potentially liberatory images of trans-corporeal death in which the subject aspires to return to the atmosphere. In the standard reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the characters' rebellion is crushed when Teresa, a servant employed at the Red Swan Hotel, 'revived the fire' in Trellis's room with the pages 'of the master's novel [...] which made and sustained' his characters' existence.⁹⁸ Yet, Elliott Mills draws our attention to O'Nolan's pointed choice of the word 'revived' (from the Latin *revivere*) in the passage to emphasise that the fire enables both the pulped trees which had been turned into paper, and the characters created on these pages, to *live again*, 're-entering the atmosphere in a different form' as an active and agentic smoke,⁹⁹ 'taking flight as if to heaven through the chimney, a flight of light things red-flecked and wrinkled hurrying to the sky.'¹⁰⁰

In a complementary image of an atmospheric limit-experience that approaches the limits of possible experience, the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, feeling himself 'united with the bed' in the police barracks, temporarily embraces the sensation of becoming 'momentous and planetary.'¹⁰¹ Reflecting on the night air's 'distinctive and unaccustomed [...] individuality,' the de Selby scholar starts to feel himself dissolving. Briefly, he encounters trans-corporeality as a liberating emancipation from the confines of the humanist self through a sensation of dispersal out into a living atmosphere:

⁹⁶ O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, 148.

⁹⁷ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 20.

⁹⁸ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 214-5.

⁹⁹ Elliott Mills, 'Paper Environments: Crisis and Control in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in Ebury, Fagan, and Greaney (eds), *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman*, 65, 68.

¹⁰⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 215.

¹⁰¹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 325.

Robbing me of the reassurance of my eyesight, [the night] 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. [...] The feeling was so pleasurable and profound that I sighed again a long sound of happiness.¹⁰²

Later, standing on the scaffold anticipating his death, the de Selby scholar contemplates becoming an undifferentiated part of the air itself: '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.'¹⁰³ In both scenes, the character yields, in Bates's words, 'at the moment of anticipated death, to an acceptance of dispersal, of the materials of life being suspended indistinguishably, as in the tiny material components of the air.'¹⁰⁴

Reflecting on the significance of these scenes in the schemes of the novels in which they appear, I suggest that we can observe, in both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, a conscious trajectory from a rational humanist distinction between literal and literary atmospheres towards a vitalistic, eco-philological, and affective understanding of atmosphere as a trans-corporeal phenomenon that surpasses empirical observation and rhetoric. Each novel begins by foregrounding an empirical approach to decoding atmosphere as an external object of knowledge (in Furriskey's inborn understanding of Boyle's Law, in de Selby's atmospheric experiments) but concludes with a different, vitalistic conceptualisation of atmosphere that troubles Enlightenment distinctions between the literal and the literary, subject and object, mind and matter, human and environment, self and other (in the fire that consumes the material basis of literary life and returns it to the atmosphere, in the de Selby scholar's 'acceptance of dispersal'). Through this narrative arc, these novels assert 'that the variable and the ephemeral, the fluid and the vague, are no less "real" phenomena than the permanent.'¹⁰⁵

In O'Nolan's hands, then, the core assumptions of seventeenth to nineteenth-century discourses concerning atmosphere are challenged through an alternative account that 'invites a framework of porosity and contagion against a classical subject-object divide.'¹⁰⁶ His atmospheres are vibrant, agentic phenomena that overwhelm the human subject and return it to its place in a distributed assemblage of bodies and airs from which it was never really apart.

¹⁰² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 327.

¹⁰³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 365.

¹⁰⁴ Bates, 'Writing with Air in *The Third Policeman*,' 54.

¹⁰⁵ Griffero, 'The Wind as a Quasi-Thingly Atmosphere,' 32.

¹⁰⁶ Boyson, 'Air and Atmosphere Studies,' n.p.

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The author is a general editor of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* but had no involvement with the peer review or acceptance process of this article.

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