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Playing the Game: Brian O'Nolan's Broadcast Media Positions

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This essay seeks to enrich and complicate the evermore detailed picture which we have of O'Nolan as a cross-media writer. In particular, this essay attends to the conversation between O'Nolan's efforts to get work on the radio and Myles na gCopaleen's unfavourable reflections on the developments of radio as a popular medium in Cruiskeen Lawn. In focusing on this conversation, the essay suggests that one is able make out a tension between O'Nolan, the writer that makes professional decisions to secure jobs within the broadcast media world and Myles, the perfect vehicle with which to air grievances about that same broadcast media world. This essay submits that contained in and between these two voices is a complex picture of the experience of being a writer in the changing landscape of mass communication and entertainment in postwar Dublin.

Introduction

Christopher Morash and Robert J. Savage suggest that although key legislation shows the political administration of the Irish Free State's early years to have been aimed at the exclusion or containment of the media, 'there is a counterargument to be made,' namely that 'from the very outset the Irish state was being transformed by broadcasting.'[1] Something similar can be said of Brian O'Nolan and broadcast media: O'Nolan's literary personae were shaped by that same broadcasting landscape which he so often heavily criticised. Although only a relatively small proportion of his proposals made it to the airwaves or the screen, this wastage is the normal state of play for any writer working in broadcast media, then as now. P. P. Eckersley's point that 'so much of the story of broadcasting is bound up with the nature and limitations of its mechanism' is salient.[2]

This article illustrates how Brian O'Nolan reckoned with the shifting media landscape of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Following the work of critics such as Joseph LaBine, Tobias W. Harris, and Joseph Brooker, I examine the points of overlap and friction between O'Nolan's efforts to get work on the radio and Myles na gCopaleen's reflections on the medium in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, as well as Flann O'Brien's coded representations of radio broadcasting in *The Dalkey Archive*.[3] I suggest that these varied positions encapsulate the experience of being a writer within the paradoxes and tensions of the changing media landscape of postwar Dublin. Carole Taaffe describes how 'Flann O'Brien declined to take the business of literature as anything other than plain business.'[4] With this idea in mind in the context of O'Nolan's radio work, I argue that O'Nolan developed a commercially directed, auto-critical aesthetic, which self-corrects into the auto-critical whenever the direction too fondly embraces the commercial.

In what follows, I trace O'Nolan's conceptualisation of the place of radio in Irish society through his fictional engagements with the captivating qualities of audio and visual transmission, before drawing out some of the conflicts which played out through broadcast media at the time, particularly with respect to the technology's transnational

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[1] Christopher Morash and Robert J. Savage, 'Should de Valera Have Been Afraid?: Broadcasting in Ireland' *Éire-Ireland* 50, no. 1–2 (2015): 7.

[2] P. P. Eckersley, *The Power Behind the Microphone* (Jonathan Cape, 1941), 242.

[3] As well as guest editing the present special issue with Tobias W. Harris, Joseph LaBine explores O'Nolan's collaborative radio work in '"Information, Please": Brian O'Nolan and the Radio,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 2 (2023): 1–17. More attention to O'Nolan as a writer outside the novel was called for early on by Joseph Brooker in *Flann O'Brien* (Northcote House Publishers, 2005).

[4] Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork University Press, 2008), 29.

modalities and the state's aim of cultural consolidation. I then analyse how O'Nolan's journalistic writing as Myles na gCopaleen charts a movement from the utopianism of early radio pioneers to a less romantic depiction and understanding of the place of radio in mid-century Dublin. Myles's expressed annoyance at this transition will then be enriched and complicated with reference to O'Nolan's simultaneous creation of radio scripts and formats throughout this period, even those formats towards which he explicitly expressed a robust aversion when writing as Myles.

Addressing the mid-twentieth-century media landscape in Ireland, Damien Keane suggests that many forms of mediation 'were misrecognized [...] as distinctly non- or extraliterary.'[5] And yet, forms such as the radio play or news broadcast transformed 'the contours and coordinates of the late modernist field into those recognized in today's "information age."'[6] Similarly, much of O'Nolan's writing for broadcast media has been considered extra- or non-literary, despite the fact that it is interwoven with his other writings, including his novels. When placed in the media context sketched out by Keane, O'Nolan's fractious yet consistent connection to Irish state radio can be reconsidered for its insight into the problematics of mediation as it develops over the early to mid-twentieth century, a period which O'Nolan's writings and personae actively interrogate.

O'Nolan's body of work is one of imperfect mediations, as his writings shift and take different shapes across multiple media. This was the case from early on in his writing career, with *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s promotion being mediated through the radio.[7] And yet, despite his continued involvement, O'Nolan gives frequent voice to the damaging effects of broadcast media. Myles na gCopaleen writes of television sets in 1957:

> I have banned and barred several hotels, restaurants and pubs because they have those machines in their public rooms and people going there to sustain life through food and drink simply MUST look at the little screen, getting dangerous eye-trouble as well as being in danger of a fit through infuriation.[8]

Myles' hyperbolic register, which ironically mimics an overly moralistic stance on the dangerous influence of television in the home, is a comic exaggeration of O'Nolan's earnestly held dislike for the new supremacy of the little screen. This is evidenced

[5] Damien Keane, *Ireland and the Problem of Information: Irish Writing, Radio, Late Modernist Communication* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 8.

[6] Keane, 8.

[7] On 27 August 1939 O'Nolan was on Radio Éireann for a special programme listed in newspapers as '"At Swim-Two-Birds"—Readings by the Author, Flann O'Brien.' 'On the Air,' *Bray Tribune and East Coast Express*, 26 August 1939, 11.

[8] 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' *Irish Times*, 14 November 1957, 8. Henceforth CL.

by repeated reference to his hatred for television in letters. On 10 September 1959 to Leslie Daiken, O'Nolan writes: 'I loathe TV (though I've done some work for the BBC) and am convinced that everybody connected with the diabolical little box is ex officio a cunt.'[9] Again, on 28 January 1964, O'Nolan writes to Vincent Finn, who would later become Director General of RTÉ: 'I dislike TV so much that I do not have a set in my own house;' he goes on to explain how this means that of the new *O'Dea's Yer Man* series, 'I do not see the programmes.'[10] It should be noted that each of these references to disliking broadcast media come in hand with a statement from O'Nolan about the writing which he has done for the medium that he dislikes. O'Nolan was not the only figure in the mid-twentieth-century Irish literary sphere who worked within and distrusted broadcast media. Hilton Edwards became the inaugural Head of Drama at Telefís Éireann in 1961.[11] However, in 1958, when Edwards was still working primarily as joint head of Gate Theatre Productions, he was fearful about the growth of radio and television, suggesting that

> new and formidable rivals have appeared, usurping our function, our actors and our public: the Film, the Radio and now Television. [...] In Ireland, the Cinema is a considerable force far exceeding the scope of Radio, while Television is, as yet, little more than a foreign novelty, but this must not lure us into a disregard of its inevitable invasion.[12]

It is not, then, that O'Nolan is unique in his contradictory positions on broadcast media. However, O'Nolan's case is noteworthy for the vexed, creative inspiration that he drew from these shifting positions.

'Beside the pulpit we may now place the microphone'

In *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), Father Cobble informs De Selby of the new ways of disseminating ideas in modern society:

> This globe of ours has shrunk pathetically. Modern achievements in radio and television, tape recording and all the magic of the cinema have so radically improved

[9] Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 237.

[10] O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 386.

[11] Edwards was enthusiastic about O'Nolan writing for the television. The pair first officially worked together in 1942 for Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir's Christmas variety show at the Gate Theatre, which featured a performance of the short play *Thirst*. Paul Fagan, 'Productions and Adaptations of Brian O'Nolan's Works,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, ed. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork University Press, 2022), 322.

[12] Hilton Edwards, *The Mantle of Harlequin* (Progress House, 1958), 8.

> communication – *communication*, I repeat – that the old-fashioned preacher going into the wilds is now almost obsolete. Beside the pulpit we may now place the microphone. I mean, Mr De Selby, that these organs of communication are equally open to yourself.[13]

Father Cobble's rhetoric of the 'modern achievements in radio and television' and of 'radically improved communication' ape the utopianism of radio pioneers. The book *Broadcast Over Britain* (1924) by John Reith, first Director-General of the BBC, illustrates a firm belief in the power of broadcasting. Writing of the 'romance of pioneering,' Reith's metaphorical description of his work becomes that of the colonialist:

> It is glorious to blaze a trail through virgin forests, over-coming the obstacles of Nature, combating disease, avoiding the dangers of marsh and flood, procuring food as may be possible, opening up and developing for commercial purposes that which was barren and desolate before.[14]

Todd Avery notes that Reith sees radio not just as 'a mere utility nor as a simple conveyor of culture, but rather as a religious and moral benefit to the nation first, then to humanity in general.'[15] A similar idea comes through in Rudolph Arnheim's description in 1936 of the radio producer 'at the loudspeaker where, a god or a Gulliver, you make countries tumble over each other by a twist of your hand.'[16]

In contrast, O'Nolan's views on radio reflect an ennui which could only come after this utopian phase had passed, but which also coincides with the medium's sharp rise in popularity. O'Nolan's recognition of the radio's expansion and understanding of its limits is folded into Father Cobble's words. Father Cobble states that the leaps forward in technology 'have so radically improved communication – *communication*, I repeat.'[17] In the repetition of 'communication' as '*communication*,' the emphasis on the act of communication through the noun itself implies not the value but the limits of this medium. The short-circuited syntax – emphasising communication above what is being communicated – suggests that the tools of communication are more impactful than the broadcasted content. Father Cobble's use of the organs of communication for religious ends is problematic when the technology makes more of an impression than the message.

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[13] Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, in *The Complete Novels of Flann O'Brien* (Everyman's Library, 2007), 706–707.

[14] J. C. W Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (Faber and Faber, 1924), 28.

[15] Todd Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC: 1922–1938* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 20.

[16] Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio*, trans. Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read (Ayer Company, 1986), 20.

[17] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 706–707.

This theme runs through *The Dalkey Archive*, as the unconventional scientist De Selby, who plans to destroy the world, develops his own high-powered organ of communication through his discovery that:

> a deoxygenated atmosphere cancels the apparently serial nature of time and confronts us with true time and simultaneously with all the things and creatures which time has ever contained or will contain, provided we evoke them.[18]

De Selby creates this deoxygenated atmosphere in an underwater cave. Again, the quality of the 'things and creatures' which are broadcast in this cave are not as important as the sheer fact of communication. Hackett and Mick are brought down into the cave by De Selby to listen to a figure that is later described to them as Saint Augustine of Hippo. It is De Selby who claims, after the fact, that they had heard and witnessed St Augustine, asking the two men. 'don't tell me you didn't recognise Augustine?'[19] Before that, all the narrator offers is that Mick 'felt numb, confused' while Hackett is amazed at having been able to hear the sounds and watch the unexpected appearance of something: ''That was ... an astonishing apparition, he stammered. And I heard every word.'[20] The narrator's interjections in the dialogue between De Selby and the apparition also does little to reinforce De Selby's argument that St Augustine was truly present, focusing instead on audio-visual details of the 'remote glow' and the 'luminescent' qualities of what Mick and Hackett see, as well as the clarity of what they hear: 'the voice that came back was low, from far away but perfectly clear.'[21] As such, at least initially, the fact that an encounter occurred, in particular the men's experience of its audio-visual qualities, is more important than who they have encountered. The clarity of the voice in De Selby's underwater cell is emphasised with good reason, contrasting this ideal form of transmission with the quality of radio in Ireland in its early phase through the 1930s, during which, as Yuta Imazeki notes, radio channels bled into each other because 'there was no efficient device to stabilise the frequency.'[22]

The Augustinian figure even speaks to his audience with local intonations: 'The Dublin accent was unmistakable.'[23] In this underwater cell, O'Nolan offers an oblique representation of two central features of the radio: first, the content of the transmission

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[18] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 624.

[19] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 644.

[20] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 644.

[21] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 635.

[22] Yuta Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming', in *Flann O'Brien and the Nonhuman: Environments, Animals, Machines*, ed. Katherine Ebury, Paul Fagan, and John Greaney (Cork University Press, 2024), 243.

[23] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 635.

is not necessarily as important as the fact that transmission is taking place; second, the medium can reshape the person whose words it transmits. Even when the transmission, in this idealised version of radio technology, is crystal clear, the technology does not communicate its source material clearly. Mick and Hackett are therefore given the Platonic ideal of radio through the clear transmission of words which are emitted from Saint Augustine's shadow flitting across the cavern wall. De Selby later works out how to domesticate these underwater conditions, so that 'he has a cell in his house sealed as tight as the sea ever sealed the underwater chamber.' This domestic setting reinforces that De Selby's semi-hallucinatory communication contraption is analogous to – and in critical dialogue with – the radio.

The Reithian perspective that broadcasting 'had emerged from the first flush of scientific wonder [and] had to be accepted as part of the permanent and essential machinery of civilisation' might have been dulled by the mid-century.[24] However, O'Nolan was alive to the ongoing capacity for the state to use this medium to promote triumphalist narratives of national progress. The 5 March 1947 instalment of *Cruiskeen Lawn* responds to the proposals for Radio Éireann's expansion in Ireland. Myles asks: 'Again, is this scheme to send "Ireland's story spoken with her own voice" to the ends of the earth *morally* admissible, seeing that there is no evidence of an invitation to do so from those inhabiting the ends of the earth?' He frames the expansion in militaristic terms, suggesting that the plans are 'quite definitely an aggression' and posing the questions: 'Is it lawful aggression? Is the war a holy war?'[25] The recently independent state is – in Myles's understanding – transformed into the uninvited invader of other territories, eager to spread her story.

Myles's critique shows an awareness of the overlap between media networks and governance. This overlap, however, is obscured by what Eve Patten suggests has been the dominant narrative of Ireland as a Free State which 'supposedly turned in on itself [...] wrestling [...] with deforming provincialism [arising from] the deep-seamed fractures of partition and a prevailing sense of its own political belatedness.'[26] Whilst not denying the provincialism, Myles's media-attuned ear notes that the paradoxical corollary of the inward turn is the wish to wield as international cultural capital newly minted narratives of national sovereignty. Radio licences see a sharp rise in Ireland from 1947 to 1948, within which period this article was written. Myles's commentary takes cognisance of this change both as a driver of calcification – i.e. Ireland's

[24] J. C. W. Reith, *Into the Winds* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), 272.

[25] CL 5 March 1947, 4.

[26] Eve Patten, 'Introduction,' in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940–1980*, ed. Eve Patten (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

government-approved single, not plural, 'story' – and as a driver of the transnational promotion of that story.[27]

In the 1940s and 1950s, the Irish media sphere was arguably one step ahead of the economic sphere.[28] Dermot Keogh labels the establishment of 2RN a 'modernising image of the new state in the 1920s,' during a decade in which he finds little else in government projects of a modernising tenor aside from the Shannon hydro-electric scheme.[29] This image of the new state was not accompanied by the kind of industrial or trade legislation that might have modernised Ireland's economy more swiftly. However, Keogh's point still problematises the conventional marker of 'before and after Whitaker' which is used to denote the 'epoch making' shift into Lemass era Ireland.[30]

The radio, then, especially during the protectionist years, offers a way of 'promoting national sovereignty and cultural [and] religious identity.'[31] However, the means of this tool of communication is at odds with protectionism. As Morash summarises, 'While there is a sense in which the establishment of a state broadcaster could be seen as yet another strategy of containment, once the genie was out of the wireless bottle, there was no putting it back.'[32] Radios already picked up British programming near the northern border or to the east of Ireland before Irish state programming.[33] Likewise, though Irish state television began on New Year's Eve 1961, those with television sets in the east of the country or in proximity to the border had picked up BBC programmes since the 1950s.[34] In addition, as Emily C. Bloom points out, a 'reciprocal relationship between the BBC and RÉ [...] would make radio a fertile site for cross-cultural exchange in the postwar period.'[35] Savage sketches a wider map of radio listening, as 'Advances in radio receivers meant that by 1945 many Irish listeners were tuning into [...] American Armed Forces Radio and Radio Luxemburg,' heightening the popularity of American

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[27] S.J. Connolly ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 471. This data does not take into account those evading licences, and so the number of those listening in at home would have been higher.

[28] Political and cultural changes of this period are traced in Eve Patten, ed., *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940–1980*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[29] Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Revolution and State Building* (Gill Books, 2005), 37.

[30] Patrick Walsh, '"Something important had changed": Modernisation and Irish Fiction since 1960,' in *Irish Fiction Since the 1960s: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Colin Smythe, 2006), 27.

[31] Perry Share, Hilary Tovey, and Mary P. Corcoran, *A Sociology of Ireland* (Gill and Macmillan, 2003), 437.

[32] Morash and Savage, 8.

[33] O'Nolan lived with his family in Glasgow as a child; he then lived in Strabane and Tullamore until his family moved down to Dublin when he was in adolescence. His time in Strabane was before the area became a part of Northern Ireland after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. O'Nolan therefore would have been accustomed to a concept of Ireland and Irishness which accounted for movement and change.

[34] Share, Tovey, and Corcoran, 438; Keogh, 496.

[35] Emily C. Bloom, 'Channel Paddlers: 1950s Irish Drama on the British Airwaves,' *Éire-Ireland* 50, no. 1–2 (2015): 48. Television ownership at that time amounted to around 30,000 homes (Rouse, 'Popular Culture in Ireland,' 592).

music.[36] The institution of state radio in Ireland may have had the intention of unifying a population behind an established monoculture. However, the conditions through which this institution grew are legible as an emergent cross-cultural and transnational media ecosystem.[37]

Paul Fagan's recent discovery of Myles na gCopaleen's article 'Cultural Affairs,' published in *The Statist* in 1953, suggests that O'Nolan was aware that cultural isolationism was not a sustainable position when it was paired with the 'packaging [of Irish culture] for export to foreign markets.'[38] Fagan finds that O'Nolan is uncharacteristically direct about his belief in that Ireland should be 'opening Irish culture to foreign influence' whilst establishing 'meaningful government subsidies for Irish cultural regeneration.'[39] A similar argument is more obliquely constructed in Myles's scrutiny of the 'scheme' of sending 'Ireland's story spoken with her own voice' across the globe. Emigration to Britain was soaring by 1950.[40] This huge outflux of population across the Irish Sea meant that the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs was asked whether he would 'consider instituting special radio programmes of interest to Irish emigrants at present living in many parts of Great Britain.'[41] The story of the nation was already at mid-century being reconfigured along relational lines.[42]

Across developing radio networks, a nation's 'story' cannot be controlled from within; it is formed both in Irish programming and in programming about Ireland made from outside the country. Multiple Irish stories were also developed for a British audience through the BBC. The prevalence of radio programmes about Ireland in Britain suggests satirical intent in Myles's phrase 'in her own voice.' In the same year that this column was published, BBC programmes such as the Home Service's 'Merry Ireland' and the high-brow Third Programme's 'Contemporary Thought in Ireland' indicate

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[36] Robert J. Savage, 'Broadcasting on the Island of Ireland, 1916–2016,' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland, Vol. 4: 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 562.

[37] Michael Mays also categorises the accessibility of BBC programming in Ireland as 'one of the less strictly economic developments' which 'helped foster the country's shift away from de Valerian protectionism.' (Michael Mays, 'Irish Identity in an Age of Globalisation,' *Irish Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2005): 7).

[38] Paul Fagan, '"Cultural Affairs": A Newly Discovered Myles na Gopaleen Article,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 8, no. 2 (2025): 1.

[39] Fagan, 'Cultural Affairs,' 1.

[40] Mary E. Daly, 'Migration since 1914,' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland, Vol. 4: 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 529, 531.

[41] 'Clann na Poblachta TD Michael Fitzpatrick in Dáil Éireann debate – Thursday, 23 Nov 1950,' accessed 17 October 2024, Ceisteanna—Questions. Oral Answers. – Special Radio Programmes. – Dáil Éireann (13th Dáil) – Thursday, 23 Nov 1950 – Houses of the Oireachtas.

[42] As Bartlett notes, there were signs – for instance in the setting up in 1948 of the Industrial Development Authority – that by the late 1940s, 'the 1930s' goal of self-sufficient Ireland was coming to an end.' Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 483.

how Irish stories were being formulated and marketed to a mass and targeted audience abroad.[43] Overlapping with these forms of national mediation, as we see in the next section, O'Nolan also underwent similar processes of repositioning and renegotiation.

A compromised position

Similar to contemporaries such as Patrick Kavanagh, O'Nolan finds an uncomfortable seat within the wider mass media landscape as his career develops.[44] While Myles critiques programmes such as 'Merry Ireland,' which sought to amplify and project a stereotypical version of Ireland in a predetermined collective voice, O'Nolan went on to work with the star voice actor of 'Merry Ireland,' Jimmy O'Dea, in his capacity as writer for the television show *O'Dea's Yer Man* in 1963–64.[45] Myles freely critiqued broadcast-mediated stereotypes, while O'Nolan worked within this same genre of broader popular comedy, and in this respect he is artistically compromised. Although O'Nolan showed readiness to participate in radio work early in his writing career, the end of his career in the Custom House on 5 February 1953 was an important factor in intensifying his engagement with broadcast media. Illustrative of this precarity post-1953, O'Nolan writes in a letter on 31 March 1957 that he has 'no income at present outside the precarious calling of freelance writer, and it's more free than lance.'[46] This play on words suggests that the end of his job at the Custom House did not equate to freedom in terms of literary opportunities. Rather, the freelance position presented the less appealing sides of freedom such as a life free from steady work and free from assured wages. Serving as an explanation for his need to engage with the radio for his career, this letter comes a day after his request for application forms for the roles of Station Supervisor, Programme Assistant, and Balance and Control Officer at Radio Éireann in Cork.[47]

Getting work at Radio Éireann was not a golden ticket to high rates of pay, especially for contributing writers. After an exchange of letters about payment for his scripts 'Thirst' and 'Flight,' O'Nolan writes to Radio Éireann on 19 December 1958 that:

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[43] *Radio Times*, 29 August 1947, 26; *Radio Times*, 29 August 1947, 4.

[44] Kavanagh argues that efforts to represent himself in a television programme are doomed to fail. He puts this case forward within a television programme about himself, aired on Telefís Éireann on 30 October 1962 and published later as *Patrick Kavanagh: Self-Portrait* (The Dolmen Press, 1964).

[45] Jimmy O'Dea also featured in the film *Cruiskeen Lawn* (1924), revolving around the story of racehorse winning against the odds after drinking a special medicine. See: Brian McIlroy, *World Cinema 4: Ireland* (Flick Books, 1989), 21.

[46] Letter to 'Mr Whelan,' whom Long suggests is 'perhaps William J. Whelan,' a trade union leader and Secretary of the Dublin Typographical Provident Society. O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 221.

[47] RTÉ Document Archives, HIST/1950s/015.

'I do not expect BBC rates, but £10 is contemptible.'[48] However, these unfavourable conditions of pay were still worth fighting for, with O'Nolan now a freelance writer without any fixed income aside from a modest pension. Relevant to this situation, Kate Whitehead points out that:

> enthusiasm for the medium of radio frequently tended to depend on [a writer's] current financial state or literary reputation. Once they could do without the fall-back of the broadcast medium, they often rejected it as trivial or even damaging to their careers.[49]

Accordingly, as a full-time Private Secretary on 12 November 1946, O'Nolan writes, rather flippantly: 'Radio Eireann asked me, in repeated letters, to do a radio feature based on [*Cruiskeen Lawn*]. I refused because I could not find the time but I eventually agreed to hand over a mass of my existing material so that they could get somebody else to work on it.'[50] By 12 June 1960, it is Radio Éireann who rejects O'Nolan's requests, as they 'could not fit in a weekly humorous comment on current happenings,' explaining that '[we have] more series than we can cope with.'[51]

It is perhaps, then, not surprising that O'Nolan – whilst proposing new ideas – also sharpened his opposition to the radio. On 30 March 1954, Myles labels the radio as an 'instrument of agitation,' suggesting that BBC Radio, more than Radio Éireann, is 'aware of its capacity for disseminating opinion, and blowing up to almost intimidating proportions the view of minor politicians.'[52] Like Jacques Derrida's later thinking on dissemination as a category of instability and incomplete signification, the radio's act of dissemination explodes the hermeneutic horizon of the minor politician's statement, triggering conversation beyond the statement's initial context.[53]

Going back to *The Dalkey Archive*, Mick challenges Father Cobble's recommendation of broadcast media by arguing that the radio, as a new organ of communication, will not help De Selby because he is not interested in 'disseminating an idea' but instead 'disseminating a thing,' an apocalyptically explosive new substance called D.M.P.[54] Despite Mick's attempted distinction, the contrary message is nevertheless allowed

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[48] UCD Special Collections, P261/3204.

[49] Kate Whitehead, *The Third Programme: A Literary History* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 69.

[50] O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 151.

[51] UCD SC, P261/3204.

[52] CL 30 March 1954, 4.

[53] See Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context,' in *Limited Inc*, trans. Alan Bass (Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9, 20–21.

[54] O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, 707.

space to breathe: that radio broadcasting and explosive weaponry correspond, reflecting the prominent use of the medium by many countries in the Second World War. In Britain, as Asa Briggs writes, wartime broadcasting established for the BBC 'a remarkable international reputation.'[55] Myles's sceptical view of radio as a tool for propaganda, as well as potentially containing O'Nolan's personal outlook on Radio Éireann, is likely informed more generally by a different experience within neutral Ireland. The critique, nevertheless, speaks to the post-war media conditions in Britain and Ireland, in its suggestion that after a time of global conflict the radio now applies a histrionic intensity to smaller matters.

From the ideal to the actual

2RN was launched on 1 January 1926, so when O'Nolan was writing his first novel Irish radio programming had been running for just over a decade.[56] The idealistic and pluralised revolutionary spirit in Ireland had already resolved itself into the grainy reality of everyday politics.[57] Likewise, what Charles A. Siepmann recalls as the 'breathtaking possibilities' of early radio has become for Myles in the 1950s just an irritating distraction.[58] Suggesting a similar turn, Debra Rae Cohen argues that the second generation of modernists embodied a creative voice

> in which exactly those aspects of the wireless that had seemed most potentially liberatory manifest themselves metaphorically as their dark opposites. The freedom of "voices in the air" becomes an unsettling separation of sound from visual referent; accessibility becomes inescapability; education, indoctrination; radio's phatic power an almost Marinettian destructive force; and its peculiar intimacy, intrusion, seduction, violation.[59]

The idea of the 'potentially liberatory' aspects of a medium manifesting themselves 'as their dark opposites' is at play in some of O'Nolan's broad dismissals of a utopian mode of thinking. However, Cohen's terms for this shift – 'unsettling,' 'inescapability,'

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[55] Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume II: The War of Words* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 11.

[56] Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (The Talbot Press, 1967), 2.

[57] For a sense of the wide variety of ideals encompassed within the revolutionary period, see Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (Penguin Books, 2015); Roy Foster, 'The Irish Literary Revival,' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland, Vol. 4: 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 168–195.

[58] Charles A. Siepmann, *Radio, Television, and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1957), 41.

[59] Debra Rae Cohen, 'Annexing the Oracular Voice: Form, Ideology and the BBC,' in *Broadcasting Modernism*, ed. Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty (University of Florida Press, 2013), 145.

'destructive,' 'violation' –describe what was still a deep fascination with the radio on the part of Irish writers. In its way, the dystopian phase was just as idealised as its utopian precursor.

In contrast to Cohen's second generation of literary modernists, Myles describes the inescapability of the radio with a more everyday palette of mid-twentieth-century Dublin life. In a column on 12 July 1956, Myles is in a hospital bed, subjected to the disruptive force of sound as 'two radios nearby were going full blast.'[60] This feature of Dublin hospitals is said to make them 'the most barbarous institutions since the lazar-houses which Dickens denounced.'[61] The right for each patient to listen to a radio creates a disorienting effect:

> Irrespective of who else is dying, who is in great pain, who would like to chat quietly to a neighbour in the next bed, any lout-patient is conceded an absolute right to import a powerful radio set and have it at full roar all day long. If there be another lout-patient in the same small, 10-bed ward, he can do just the same, and mat-teradamn if he prefers a different station.[62]

Myles's description of the radio returns to a similar territory to that of O'Nolan's 1932 short story '!CEÓL!: Eachtra an Fhir Ólta' (translated by Jack Fennell as 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC') in which a drunk man is tormented by radio broadcasts.[63] What LaBine and Harris call the story's 'technologically disembodied voices,' which drive the protagonist 'half-mad,' has a similar effect on the bed-bound Myles.[64] The right to bear radios in hospital – and the growing prominence of radios in public settings more widely – creates new forms of aggravation in shared space. Where Maurice Gorham described radio in Ireland as an 'entrancing new diversion,' the column sees the medium as now an unavoidable intrusion.[65] The end result is at odds with the edifying potential with which the radio was imbued by its pioneers.

As Imazeki has argued of the 'garrulous' multi-vocal techniques used within *Blather* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the radio sets in this column 'connote mutual

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[60] CL 12 July 1956, 8.

[61] CL 12 July 1956, 8.

[62] CL 12 July 1956, 8.

[63] Flann O'Brien, 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 35–7.

[64] Tobias W. Harris and Joseph LaBine, 'Drink Music: The ól' in Brian Ua Nualláin's '!CEÓL!' (1932),' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 3.

[65] Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 38.

discordance,' even if each programme is itself coherent.[66] The transformation of a space of recuperation into one of discord suggests Myles's critical view of broadcast media's imposition on daily life. Imazeki argues that O'Nolan's fiction in the 1930s sees him incorporate the radio's qualities aesthetically into his literary craft.[67] Myles's later approach in *Cruiskeen Lawn* leans more towards social critique. The underlying message is that the radio promises new forms of distraction and entertainment while simultaneously lessening civility and empathy across society.

Myles's depiction of radios competing for space in the air has similarities with critical commentaries on the medium in the early 1950s. Siepmann, for example, reflecting on mid-century radio, describes the American broadcasting landscape as so 'pervasive and powerful' because it puts listeners into the position of kings in the royal box, who feel it is their right to 'command performance' at their will. However, where Siepmann proposes that 'mass communication' causes a 'sudden and convulsive upheaval of our culture,' Myles's column offers a more nuanced picture.[68] The radio in this case is not the only sonic disturbance; writing is painted in a similar light, as the column begins: 'Have you ever tried typing in bed, using a heavy table machine? I am typing this in bed.'[69] An 'Irate reader' then asks whether Myles has any consideration for those around him. Myles assures them that the clattering keys do not pose a problem because this sound is itself interrupted by the sound of the radio sets. This sequence is such that Myles interrupts the peace of others with the sound of his writing tool, before an angry reader interrupts him, after which he reveals that he is being interrupted by the radios. A time before interruption does not figure within Myles's imaginative conceptualisation of the media environment. It is merely that interruption has been interrupted by a new form of interruption.

Painting on the underside of clouds

Cruiskeen Lawn was adapted for radio programming a handful of times, for instance on the BBC's Third Programme as part of an occasional fifteen-minute programme titled 'A letter from Dublin' on 12 and 15 of August 1952,[70] and on Radio Éireann as 'A Drink from the Cruiskeen Lawn' on 21 and 24 December 1946.[71] It appears that recordings of these programmes were not saved, if they were recorded in the first place. A small

[66] Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' 250.
[67] Imazeki, 'Flann O'Brien's Radio Jamming,' 236.
[68] Siepmann, *Radio, Television, and Society*, 265–266.
[69] CL 12 July 1956, 8.
[70] *Radio Times*, 8 August, 1952: 29, *Radio Times*, 6 April, 1956, 45.
[71] *Connacht Tribune*, 21 December 1946, 12; *Irish Press*, 24 December 1946, p. 4.

and tantalising reference is made by the Acting Controller of the Third Programme to 'the Myles na gCopaleen fiasco' in a letter to Christopher Holme on 22 August 1952.[72] This comment, which comes only a week after the second instalment of the 'A letter from Dublin' broadcasts, suggests that the process of acquiring the contribution from O'Nolan caused friction with the producers at the Third Programme. A letter written a day earlier by W. R. Rodgers to Holme provides a list of Irish writers whom he considers to be of interest for their 'Letter from Dublin' project. This list includes Seán O'Faoláin, Larry Morrow, R. M. Smyllie, and Niall Sheridan.[73] The list points to O'Nolan's proximity to the BBC's field of vision, but also indicates that after his 'A letter from Dublin' contribution, for some reason he was not favoured in comparison to contemporaries and friends.[74] That said, accepting the fiasco of failures was clearly part of the bargain. Hinting at O'Nolan's familiarity with radio script rejections, Myles writes on 13 August 1948 that the

> proposal to demolish the present Abbey Theatre and replace it by a vast building taking up the whole present block has nothing to do with the inadequacy of the present auditorium, which is rarely full: it is to provide warehouse accommodation for the odd million manuscripts received [by Radio Éireann] annually.[75]

Myles explains, perhaps indirectly sharing some of O'Nolan's personal experiences with submissions and responses, that the 'manuscripts have to be kept for a minimum period of five years to give the impression that they have been carefully read and studied by many experts.'[76]

As Cohen, Coyle, and Lewty suggest, 'radio was, at the outset and by definition, an especially ephemeral medium, incapable of inscription.'[77] Furthermore, 'even once the technology existed [...] little effort was made to preserve the content of broadcasts.'[78] In the middle of the twentieth century many writers were uneasy with the proposition of writing for a fleeting medium; they developed a 'hostility and suspicion' towards

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[72] BBC WAC, R51/722. The letter states that news of this fiasco was passed on by W. R. Rodgers, the Northern Irish poet who then would have been working as a script writer for the Third Programme.

[73] Larry Morrow went on to facilitate the process through which O'Nolan turned his play *Thirst* into 'After Hours' for BBC television in 1959, and *Thirst* (1958) and *Faustus Kelly* (1960) for Radio Éireann. Sheridan is described by Rodgers in the letter as 'Sharp, witty and informed.'

[74] BBC WAC, R51/722.

[75] CL 13 August 1948, 4.

[76] CL 13 August 1948, 4.

[77] Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty, 'Introduction: Signing On,' in *Broadcasting Modernism*, ed. Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty (University of Florida Press, 2013), 2.

[78] Cohen, Coyle, and Lewty, 'Introduction,' 2.

radio.[79] As Whitehead explains, 'the enduringly suspicious attitude of writers towards the medium of radio' was rooted in 'the constant problem of ephemerality' in opposition to the perceived permanence of print. This problem meant that by 1947 the BBC's Third Programme was still consulting writers such as Seán Ó Faoláin to better understand writers' distrust towards radio.[80]

Louis MacNeice captures this discomfort in his suggestion that, while it reaches a wider audience than most printed writing, creative writing for radio achieves less publicity because the words are 'heard once and no one has a chance to get back to them.'[81] This assessment is echoed by radio producers. Lance Sieveking recounts the thrill of producing his first BBC radio programme, only for this thrill to be vanquished:

> My great experience was over. There was nothing left of it. I realised at that moment the terribly fleeting nature of the medium in which I worked. [...] So terribly fleeting [...] the whole of my complex lovely picture with its voices, its castles, its landscapes, its musics, its men and women, had been painted on the underside of a cloud with a brushful of iridescent vapour. It melted as you looked and listened, and, like so much moonshine, disappeared for ever.[82]

Sieveking sums up this quality as 'the ghastly impermanence of the medium.'[83] Similar metaphors are used by producers in the Irish radio context, such as in Louis Redmond's *Written on the Wind: Personal Memories of Irish Radio, 1926–76*.[84] A description of vigorous presence and sudden absence can also be seen in Arnheim's wonder at events on the radio coming across with 'sound as earthly as if you had them in your own room, and yet as impossible and far-away as if they had never been.'[85] Arnheim theorises this sense of absence as a form of Brechtian alienation *avant la lettre*, as he writes that it is 'not so much the function of wireless to give the listener the vivid *illusion* of a real event, but rather to keep always a certain distance that will lead to an observant, critical attitude, a participation from a distance.'[86] This point is supported by Eckersley in his observation that the 'studio routine' of

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[79] Whitehead, *The Third Programme*, 67.
[80] Whitehead, *The Third Programme*, 79.
[81] Louis MacNeice, *Christopher Columbus: A Radio Play* (Faber and Faber, 1944), 7.
[82] Lance Sieveking, *The Stuff of Radio* (Cassell and Company Limited, 1934), 24.
[83] Sieveking, *The Stuff of Radio*,' 15.
[84] Louis Redmond, *Written on the Wind Personal Memories of Irish Radio, 1926–76* (Gill and Macmillan, 1976).
[85] Arnheim, *Radio*, 20.
[86] Arnheim, *Radio*, 199.

> Constant 'hullos', the repetition of the station call sign and the obvious itemization of programmes were designed, so it seemed, more to illustrate the 'Wonders of Wireless' [...] It made the listener think more about the technical means by which he heard the programmes than the programmes themselves.[87]

There are similarities between broadcast media's efforts to induce in the listener an awareness of the medium and Myles's self-referential style. However, where this tactic is employed in the radio to heighten the stability of the newer medium, it is done in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to bring into view the older medium's instability.

In O'Nolan's radio scripts, there is evidence of an attempt to scrutinise elements of the medium from within. This strategy is worked into the adaptation of *Faustus Kelly*, which O'Nolan worked on with Larry Morrow both for the BBC and for Radio Éireann, in which the announcer begins: 'We present Faustus Kelly, a modern morality play by Myles na gCopaleen, conjured up for radio by Larry Morrow. The production is by ..... Faustus Kelly.'[88] That the control of production is granted to a character who has done a deal with the devil plays with the uneasiness many writers held for the medium. This discomfort is more pertinent given O'Nolan's private opinions of Larry Morrow. In a letter to Hilton Edwards on 22 November 1959, O'Nolan describes Morrow's role in the re-writing of *Thirst* as 'After Hours' for the BBC. He notes that, 'though Larry Morrow's name is mentioned with my own, he had nothing to do with the enterprise other than contacting TV people. He thinks he owns the BBC, also that he invented television.'[89]

The radio quiz: 'the insufferable bane of our age'

Increasingly, tension developed between O'Nolan, the writer that made professional decisions to secure jobs within the broadcast media world, and Myles, the vehicle through which to air grievances about broadcast media. In *Cruiskeen Lawn* on 24 October 1953, Myles gives his uncharitable view on a feature growing in popularity, writing: 'I will not attempt to define the detestation in which I hold these quizzes which have become the insufferable bane of our age.'[90] By 4 May 1959 in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, quizzes are no longer on the receiving end of a sharp attack; they have instead become part of the furniture. Myles begins a column, 'I was alone once in the back of a pub listening reluctantly to a radio quiz programme.'[91] Instead of highlighting radio as an unwanted

[87] Eckersley, *Power Behind the Microphone*, 45.
[88] UCD SC, P261/3201.
[89] National Library of Ireland, MS 50 650/1/2.
[90] CL 24 October 1953, 5.
[91] CL 4 May 1959, 8.

intrusion, Myles now sits through a radio quiz, albeit reluctantly. The proliferation of radios in public and domestic spaces means that repeated features such as radio quizzes more often interrupt the sonic texture of daily life, but so common is the format that Myles no longer rails against it.

The radio quiz – in its frequency and its formulaic standardization – is open to what Tobias W. Harris suggests is Myles's 'critique of the culture industry and the influence of the cliché in the era of mass communications.'[92] Feeding into the quality of the critique is the sense that, as Jack Fennell puts it, O'Nolan 'was a conscientious satirist, never making fun of anything without doing some homework on it.'[93] O'Nolan's 'homework' was not just external observation; it was in this case a matter of active involvement. Yet while Myles expressed 'detestation' for the radio quiz, O'Nolan was busily sending proposals to Radio Éireann for a quiz format based on *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s long-running feature, the Catechism of Cliché. Seamus Kavanagh, Assistant Productions Director of Radio Éireann, replied on 3 November 1953 regarding O'Nolan's idea for a quiz called 'Cluiche Cliche' [sic], just over a week after Myles let off some steam on the subject in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Kavanagh writes: 'I like very much "Cluiche Cliché" but, like yourself, I am at a loss to know how it should be presented.'[94]

As Maebh Long notes, 'The cliché material would turn into a radio quiz on Radio Éireann with Joe Linnane on New Year's Day 1954. The quiz, called 'A Drop From the Cruiskeen Lawn,' featured contestants from the press trying to find the clichéd answer to questions set by O'Nolan.'[95] Though it appears that the material was used within two months of Seamus Kavanagh's initial reply, it is notable that O'Nolan had already written his anti-radio quiz material as Myles while he was drafting the proposal. On 24 October 1953 Myles is calling radio quizzes the 'bane of our age' and on 3 November O'Nolan receives his response back from Kavanagh. This timeline suggests that Myles's anger was not a result of O'Nolan's dealings with Radio Éireann; he was already in that state of irritation as he was creating the proposal. The Third Programme's coinage of 'the Myles na gCopaleen fiasco' might be reimagined as a more private creative matter: Myles in combat with O'Nolan.

This interplay of stances is further developed in the same column in 1959, as Myles discusses the power of the printers over the columnist: 'Do you know, printers

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[92] Tobias W. Harris, 'The Catastrophe of Cliché: Karl Kraus, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and the Culture Industry,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 7.

[93] Jack Fennell, 'Guest Editor's Note – The Flannkfurt School: Brian O'Nolan and the Culture Industry,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien* Studies 3, no. 2 (2016): 1.

[94] UCD SC, P261/3204.

[95] O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 182.

and other persons concerned with public lettering are a most sinister and malicious crowd, holding the human race in deadly contempt and making DEBILERATE mistakes to show that they are still there and in charge of man's destiny.'[96] Here, the author himself enacts the tension between his own agency and the agency of another through the 'DEBILERATE,' or deliberate, 'mistakes.' However, it is the small, undramatic moment of Myles sitting in the pub with a radio quiz playing in the background that points to a different and perhaps more pressing loss of control. It is not just that Myles has 'reluctantly' to sit through the ever-present radio quizzes; Myles's position also reflects how O'Nolan must reluctantly repackage features of his article for this style of broadcast entertainment which the column has opposed.

The problems which arose in O'Nolan's radio quiz idea show how an altered concept of audience took shape with the advent of broadcast media. After 'A Drop From the Cruiskeen Lawn' on New Year's Day 1954, there is evidence of further discussion of 'Cluiche Cliché' within Radio Éireann correspondence. O'Nolan's proposal for a longer run of the quiz was to be based on linguistic ignorance, or 'the meaning and misuse of words.'[97] Micheál Ó hAodha recognized the quiz to be 'a typical Mylesian idea,' but he also suggested it would be difficult to find people of note to play the quiz when the format was designed to expose participants 'as ignorant and even illiterate.'[98] In his letter on 19 March 1959, Ó hAodha continues to express his unease about how the quiz sets out to wrongfoot the contestants:

> There are those who might fall for it, once, but how many would be prepared to face the music a second time. I have no doubt that Myles has compiled, over the years, a list of words which most people use incorrectly but they and the listeners will not believe us, when we tell them they are wrong.[99]

The combative relationship between text and reader is artfully deployed throughout *Cruiskeen Lawn*, but it is not in keeping with the tone of broadcast media at the time. A culture of deference in public life is more deeply engrained in the philosophy of the state broadcaster than is apparent in independent print media. Myles had fashioned a responsive and committed audience of readers, but this dynamic could not be directly transported to the radio. Although showing a misunderstanding of the relationship that a radio quiz should cultivate between host and contestant, O'Nolan was ahead of

[96] CL 4 May 1959, 8.
[97] UCD SC, P261/3204.
[98] UCD SC, P261/3204.
[99] UCD SC, P261/3204.

the game in terms of the development of radio and television quizzes. Decades later, it would be a par for the course for a television or radio quiz to embarrass those who were willing to play.

Under the mic(roscope)

The process of determining how well O'Nolan would fit into the developing media landscape required reflections upon the difficult question of what kind of a writer O'Nolan was. In genres beyond the radio quiz, producers prevaricated on whether this many-faced writer had the right face for the radio. There was always the sense that O'Nolan, as one Third Programme producer put it, 'might have something in a drawer' that fit the purpose.[100] However, until this script or proposal was taken out of the drawer and handed to them, there was just as much caution that what he might produce would not quite fit.

O'Nolan's awkwardness as a proposition comes through an exchange initiated by R. D. Smith on 19 May 1965. Smith sent a letter to his Third Programme colleagues, including Christopher Holme, proposing the adaptation of *The Dalkey Archive* for radio. He saw the book as 'ready-made for adaption' thanks to its abundance of conversation between a small cast, conversation which is rich with 'improbable fantasy, sharp good sense, and genuine funniness.'[101] Holme's response indicates how broadcast media production generates a critical shorthand to frame the writer being considered. Holme writes in his letter that 'there is a lot of amusing conversation in it and an ideal setting for a satirical, imaginary conversation.' However, he has concerns about how it will be received by an audience with 'a London Protestant understanding.' The question for Holme is whether 'it is too much of a private Catholic and Dublin joke' for the Third Programme.[102] An idea of O'Brien/Myles, separate from O'Nolan himself, takes shape through such exchanges. Smith has O'Nolan as a fantasist whilst also suggesting that O'Nolan's writing escapes its local context through fantasy, crossing national lines due to its general smartness and sense. Holme's response, in contrast, reasserts the local and religious factors which problematise *The Dalkey Archive*'s accessibility.[103]

The other issue which this exchange brings up is one that has played out in much critical commentary on O'Nolan since his death: the question of whether O'Nolan's

[100] BC, MS.1997.027, 5/3

[101] BBC WAC, RCONT14.

[102] BBC WAC, R51/722.

[103] While *The Dalkey Archive* may not have been produced by the BBC, they did later adapt *The Third Policeman* (with Patrick Magee) in 1979.

journalistic endeavours affect his status as a writer outside the newspaper medium. This point emerges in Holme's summary:

> I do think, however, that Flann O'Brien is a writer worth our attention for an occasional comedy piece, either adapted or written for radio. Someone would have to get in touch with him and explain our needs, as his journalistic writing is not up to the same standard as his novels. But he is an original.[104]

This question of O'Nolan's journalism and its lowering of standards comes up again in a note made in pen that his '"Irish Times" pieces are very uneven,' but he 'might have something in a drawer.'[105] The allure of the unrealised work is set against a discomfort at the messier reality of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. As they wonder whether O'Nolan might have something in a drawer, the manuscript of *The Third Policeman* remained on O'Nolan's sideboard.

In this reading of his work, the Third Programme's producers conceptualised O'Nolan as a perpetually promising, yet awkward, outsider. This liminality at times worked against O'Nolan, but it also allowed him to play with his own identity more than would be possible for literary figures more prominent in British media. This playfulness comes through in O'Nolan's television appearance on the BBC Two programme *Bookstand* in 1962, in which O'Nolan provided humorous embellishments to the story of his career. In *The Listener*, Arthur Calder-Marshall writes that:

> Peter Duval Smith interviewed Flann O'Brien, hailed by Joyce and Greene as a master when he published *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1938 [sic]. Twenty years later he published a propaganda novel, advocating more public lavatories. He had worked as an Irish Civil Servant, written five Sexton Blakes, and under pseudonyms had written many books which though not exactly pornographic were not exactly not.[106]

This interview can be bracketed along with O'Nolan's notoriously mischievous performance in *Time* magazine in 1943, a display which leads Joseph Brooker to remark of 'the unreliable status of fact in this writer's life.'[107] Hugh Kenner goes further to suggest that O'Nolan 'made misinformation into an art form.'[108] In his appearance on *Bookstand*, O'Nolan provides the viewer with the combined truths and fictions that are

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[104] BBC WAC, R51/722.

[105] BC, MS.1997.027, 5/3.

[106] Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Listener and BBC Television Review*, 26 April, 1962, 31.

[107] Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 6.

[108] Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Allen Lane, 1983), 9.

common to *Cruiskeen Lawn*. The resultant slipperiness is heightened by the fact that this television interview survives only in a written account of the programme.

The question of why O'Nolan might have wanted to misinform can be used as one way of understanding his dichotomous approaches to the radio. If, as Steve Connor suggests, 'radio is characterised by both the intimacy of its impersonality and the impersonality of its intimacy,'[109] then one can see O'Nolan recognising this paradox from relatively early on in his writings about and for the radio. A *Cruiskeen Lawn* column on 20 June 1945 suggests how microphone-enhanced fears work their way deep into the mind. Playing on the idea that the radio offers an intimate representation of the speaker's voice, Myles discusses how some 'untried radio speakers suffer from "mike-fright".' He concedes that:

> Admittedly there is something sinister about the naked little organism, so live, so unsleeping, so meticulous in recording rustic intonation, tobaccic diapason, the skipping of lines due to phacocystitic alcoholism. It looks like a sort of eye that hears – so acutely that mere seeing – the most superficial of cognitions – is superfluous.[110]

Myles's later columns in the mid-1950s render the radio as an intrusion that disrupts peace and order in daily life (and the life of a writer). However, from much earlier on, in 1945, Myles already suspected that there was a more microscopic level of intrusion at play for the writer. When read alongside Myles's analysis, the performative embellishments in the *Bookstand* interview might be considered as a strategy to protect against the perceived power of the microphone (and its accomplice, the camera) to reveal weaknesses. The writer might be more minded, as in the case of the radio quiz, to engage with broadcast media in a way which takes ownership of the intrusion all the while keeping the more exposing elements of its power at an arm's length. The irony is that, whilst working with these more formulaic tropes within the medium of radio, the microphone, if indirectly, still wielded its diagnostic power: writing for the radio activated in O'Nolan a level of self-scrutiny about what it meant to write at a time when the job was becoming increasingly multifocal and negotiated.

Conclusion

The New Modernist Studies has placed increasing focus on the ways that early to mid-twentieth-century writers used the commercial and media landscape to construct

[109] Steven Connor, 'I Switch Off: Beckett and the Ordeal of Radio,' in *Broadcasting Modernism*, ed. Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty (University of Florida Press, 2009), 275.

[110] CL 20 June 1945, 30.

their public identity. Aaron Jaaffe notes that we 'arrive at the unthinkable formulation: modernist cultural production is, in fact, cultural production. One imagines paroxysms in the offices of the *New Criterion*.'[111] The paradigm that once considered the commercialisation of literary culture to be an impediment to creativity no longer holds. Mark Goble makes this point in relation to Gertrude Stein's enjoyment of fame, arguing that: 'What Gertrude Stein's last star turn shows is that being thoroughly mediated [...] is not always the same thing as being exploited.'[112] This idea also applies to O'Nolan's negotiations of the media sphere, and surely also to those of contemporaries such as Brendan Behan.[113]

Although O'Nolan's apparent irritation at aspects of the mass media landscape means he might not have relished a 'star turn,' although he would have appreciated the pay cheque, he spent enough time unravelling the games of mediated authorship to know how to play them if an opportunity presented itself. This resourcefulness came from a hard-headed understanding of writing as a set of negotiations with multiple power brokers; it is part of what Seamus Deane sees as O'Nolan's generation's interest not in 'the heroic consciousness of the heroic individual,' but 'the unheroic consciousness of the ordinary.'[114] It was also a period in Ireland when the ordinary was subjected to increasing institutional focus. In pitching ideas to Radio Éireann and the BBC, O'Nolan would have recognised their organisational structures from his work as civil servant. As Eckersley notes, 'The BBC was a child of bureaucracy.'[115] A similarly bureaucratic broadcasting landscape emerged in Ireland.[116] All Station Directors for the radio in Ireland 1926–53 – from 2RN to Radio Athlone and finally Radio Éireann – had worked in the civil service and until the creation of RTÉ in 1960, all permanent broadcasting staff were officially civil servants.[117] As with his civil service career, O'Nolan's experiences of developing state broadcasters brings to the fore questions of how individual agency is affected by large, rigid systems of mediation.[118]

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111 Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

112 Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 148.

113 Michael Pierse argues for the commonality between Behan and O'Nolan as regards satire in a recent keynote. Michael Pierse, 'Brendan Behan, Flann O'Brien and the satire of independent Ireland,' 'An Fód Dúchais: Home, Heritage, and Origins: The 8th International Flann O'Brien Conference,' Strabane, June 2025.

114 Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 162.

115 Eckersley, *Power Behind the Microphone*, 243. See too Whitehead, *The Third Programme*, 93.

116 Paul Rouse claims that the 'national radio service licensed by the Irish Free State [...] was a clear copy of the BBC.' Rouse, 'Popular Culture in Ireland, 1880–2016,' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland, Vol. 4: 1880 to the Present*, ed. Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 587.

117 Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 20, 57.

118 For further reading, see Amy Nejezchleb, 'O'Brien's Your Man: Myles, Modernity, and Irish National Television,' in *Is it about a bicycle: Flann O'Brien in the twenty-first century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Four Courts Press, 2011); Maebh Long, '"No more drunk, truculent, witty, celtic, dark, desperate, amorous paddies!": Brian O'Nolan and the Irish stereotype,' *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, ed. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and John McCourt (Cork University Press, 2017).

Writers working within radio broadcasting had to be coherently positioned within the guiding logic of the programming schedule. The packaged and repackaged versions of O'Nolan (as Myles na gCopaleen, as Flann O'Brien, etc.) in this respect resemble the concept of a mediated Ireland as outlined by Christopher Morash. As well as seeing Ireland as well-defined 'territory [...] state [...] economy and [...] culture,' Morash suggests that one can see it as 'the confluence of informational flows, as the modal point around which books, newspapers, signals, sounds and images circulate.' Morash points out that this concept may trouble the idea of 'a "real" Ireland, outside of (or prior to) mediation.'[119] So too can it be considered that there is no Myles or Flann before mediation. These identities are in advance formed by the print media and broadcast media structures out of which they emerge.

O'Nolan's ambivalent media position appears to have been registered by those approaching him from within the broadcasting business. In a small note written in pen below Christopher Holme's response to the idea of trying to adapt *The Dalkey Archive* for radio lies a suggestive summary of O'Nolan's relationship to this medium. The writer of the scribbled note says that he has met O'Nolan and, based on his sense of the man, he offers the doubtful promise: 'I don't think he'll play, but I'll try, shall I?'[120] The dual perception of this writer's position highlights how O'Nolan played the game enough to be of interest to the gatekeepers. At the same time, he continued (and continues) to give off an underlying sense that he was the kind of writer who might just refuse to play.

[119] Christopher Morash, *A History of the Media in Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 226–228.

[120] BBC WAC, RCONT14.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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