

‘Erse-atz’ & ‘Gaelassenheit’

What Can We Learn from Ó Nualláin’s Use of Irish?

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1. Self-Obsessed

To say that Brian Ó Nualláin’s writing was a send up of a national neurosis with the Irish language is truism. No sacred cow was left untipped. But can his engagement with, and in, the language speak to us now? And what might it tell us? In addressing these questions, it is worth examining how Ó Nualláin located and positioned the language and comparing the findings with its location in contemporary Irish studies. One of Ó Nualláin’s strongest critiques was surely aimed at the appropriation of the language by an identity-obsessed class of cultural nationalists – ‘the most nauseating phenomenon in Europe’ – whose goal he lampooned as investing in the language as a prophylactic against the ‘filthy modern tide.’¹ Positioning the language as such trapped it in a bizarre temporal space: an encapsulated form of primordialism, existing both in and out of relation to modernity, perhaps best described in the ‘*níos Gaelaí*’ navel-gazing speech from the *feis* in *An Béal Bocht*.²

The objective of this essay is to examine Ó Nualláin’s attempts at analysing and disarming this particular type of obsessive attitude to the language and posing its appositeness to contemporary academic discourse. In diagnosing a problem such as a neurosis, it is possible that it becomes self-perpetuating, and to a certain extent this is true of Irish. It is often difficult to divorce the language from an expression of Irishness, and even in the case where it exists as a means of communication, the perception of its ‘Irishness’ remains. Ó Nualláin astutely assessed this tendency to bind the language to a conservative essentialised identity which would seek to exclude that which did not fall within the remit of such a prescribed identity. Ó Nualláin’s attitude here is neatly summarised in his snide response to *An Glór*’s attack on Anglo-Irish literature:

While we have both the Irish and English languages in Ireland, it is proper that we have literature in the two languages. Contemporary Irish-language literature is not yet worth much. England stole many good things from us – the Irish language itself. We should be mindful that we do not gift to England the one artful and modern thing we have, our Anglo-Irish literature. We would have little in its absence.³

In a final punning riposte to *An Glór's* terming Irish literary work in English as 'Ersatz Irish Literature,' Ó Nualláin suggests that the contemporary writing in Irish should be termed 'Erse-atz Irish Literature.' The 'Erse-atz' in the title of this essay, then, can be seen as his dismissal of a narrow cultural role for the language. Ó Nualláin's rejection of a division of tradition based on essentialism is repeated in his comments on the death of James Joyce: '*tá an litríocht a d'fhág sé 'na dhiaidh níos Gaedhealaighe 'ná a lán atá againn ó dhaoine nár thuig focal Béarla. [...] Nuair bhéas ughdar ion-churtha leis ag scríobhadh i nGaedhilg, beidh an teanga máthardha as baoghal agus ní bheidh go dtí sin'* [the literature he left is more Irish than a lot of what we have from people who didn't understand a word of English. ... When there exists an author of his attribute writing in Irish, the mother tongue will be out of danger and won't be until then.]⁴ Ó Nualláin displays not only a concern for the precarious situation in which the 'mother language' found itself but also sees an escape from this in a sort of Joycean linguistic dynamism. He seems prescient that the hijacking of the language stifles not only literary creativity, but also criticism in the language.

Ó Nualláin's comedic take on Irish is often most powerful when he's sending up its coimbrication with English, displaying an awareness of the role colonialism and a reactionary nationalism have had on defining the discourse surrounding the language. Louis de Paor, in an article on Ó Nualláin's writing, not only warns of a tendency in English-language criticism to misread *An Béal Bocht*, but sees in both Ó Nualláin's novel and journalism a critique which could be read as a prefiguration of Saidian orientalist theory and postcolonial theory.⁵ De Paor suggests that postcolonial theory may offer one of the most productive means of reading Ó Nualláin.⁶ Indeed, looking at some of Ó Nualláin's earlier writing in Irish gives us a good sense of his keen understanding of how the language was embedded in an ambiguous sense of post-coloniality.

The two short stories, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!' and 'The Arrival and Departure of John Bull' give a productive account of this understanding.⁷ 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!' is constructed as occurring in a dream-like state caused by over-indulgence. Ó Nualláin leads us to believe initially that the narrator has transported 100 years into the future where Ireland is totally Irish speaking. He is issued a receipt with the date 12-2-2032, which he says amazes him. The illusion of futurity is quickly shattered, however: "'I thought," I said to myself, "that it was the 11th."' With that, the date becomes mundane. The narrator has disembarked from a ship and encounters an Englishman in distress: "'well I'm in a bit of a hole," he said worriedly. "You see, not speaking your beastly language, here I am rather at sea".' The Englishman is looking for an English-speaking hotel in Dublin and the protagonist gives him his conversation book to help him out. The language in the book is obtuse, giving simultaneous versions from all three Irish dialects, and he notices that upon opening the book it is 'not softly that Irish is coming to the

Englishman,' who is also using all three dialects at once in his attempts to practise. The narrator issues the advice not to attempt pronouncing the 'ch': 'you will only end up bursting your throat or choking yourself.' Feeling initially pleased with the neighbourly assistance he is giving, suddenly all of the associations of the word 'English' start flooding his mind: the insults, the destruction, and immigration of the Gaels from Dermot McMurrugh onwards; the English Lords killing the Gaels and stealing their land; the broken treaty of Limerick; laws against religion; the death and hard painful rebirth of the Irish language. He is overcome with anger and pretends to the stranger that there is an English-speaking hotel in the city. He then teaches him the most profane insults instead of directions to use with the taxi driver, who will inevitably not react kindly. The story ends with the narrator saying if Dermot McMurrugh played a 'dirty trick' on the Gael, the Gael would never be too slow in giving a little beating to Dermot's friends should the opportunity arise. That the fantasy of revenge is the result of over-indulgence here is significant, and finally the narrator, in his somnolence, is transported neither to a heaven or hell as before, but to a sort of no-place, a purgatory perhaps, with no direction.

The second story continues this ambivalent relationship with both England and English. 'The Arrival and Departure of John Bull' appeared in June 1932. It is subtitled 'The Relic of English: Let it be Put on Record Discs.' The story begins in Dublin where the strange tale is found under a building that is being knocked. The author states that it seems that the tale is to do with the future rather than the past and that not everything in the story is believable. The basic premise of the story is that a great and ugly giant in the form of John Bull comes ashore to an Irish-speaking Ireland to attack Seán Mac Cumhaill, chief of the Gaels and the nobles of Ireland. After introducing himself, Mac Cumhaill says it is best and right for John Bull to return to the ends of the world from whence he came. John Bull replies that in his travels over the world he has never left an island without imposing his tariffs and customs and that such is his will for this island. He decrees that he will only return home if they can prove that there is excellent literature in the Irish, and if not that, prove that the ancient and noble tongue of the Saxon is alive in some parts of Ireland. The Gaels retort that they have great literature, issuing forth such binary titles as 'Yesterday and Today,' 'Heavy and Light,' 'Old and New,' 'Night and Day,' 'Love and Gloom.'⁸ John Bull replies that these are all the same and they will have to prove that English is alive or they will be a people without a kingdom. The Gaels eventually return with four old men who can speak English. A Dubliner who speaks a sort of hybrid Irish-English, a Cork man who essentially recites a train timetable, a Belfast man whose only phrases are: 'Not an inch. Used as a pawn in the game. Up the twelfth. To aitch with the Pee,' while the Limerick man's only English is '*Sprechen sie Deutsch.*' John Bull is happy with these remnants and has his servant put them on record discs with the help of '*Connradh an Bhéarla,*' the English-language League, and thus contentedly returns home. The title of this story is

most likely a take on Proinnsias Airmeas's *Teacht agus Imtheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair Oig*, itself 'a play on the title of a Fenian tale,' in which Belfast 'is a train stop for two Dublin nationalists on their way to crash and confront a meeting of Ulster Orangmen.'⁹

Ó Nualláin introduces a sort of hybridised temporality in both stories, whereby the narratives are set in a future characterised by the past, and language issues remain intricately bound up in the 'former' colonial situation. In both, the traditional binary of Irish-English language relations is mockingly reversed, with English assuming the more precarious state. Ó Nualláin imagines an alternate state for the language but the thrust of the satire is in a critique of certain nationalist arguments which blame England for any perceived fault in Irish society. The decolonised Ireland is clearly haunted by its colonial past. In *Teacht agus Imtheacht* this is quite literally so, by the ghost-like figure of John Bull, who haunts an imaginary future postcolonial Ireland that has seemingly regressed to its Gaelic golden age. By presenting a simple binary opposition and representations of a mythical past as the only alternative to the coloniser's mode of being, the parodic title of *Teacht agus Imtheacht* and the inane titles of the stories the Gael recover for John Bull can be seen here as a critique of a Gaelic revival 'erse-atz' literature and a reactionary colonial mentality. *Dioghaltas ar Ghallaibh* shows up the absurdity of a never-ending mentality of *ressentiment*, which itself becomes a type of imprisonment.

This trope of imprisonment is picked up in the various trapped figures of *An Béal Bocht*. Ó Conaire's exegesis of Ó Nualláin's Irish writing draws our attention to the postcolonial underpinning of much of this, where in '*An Fíor-Ghael agus an tÉireannach Pléiseamach*' he highlights the genesis of Ó Nualláin's satirical interpolation of the stage Irishman.¹⁰ *An Béal Bocht* is not, however, a wake to the language as per Richard Kearney's analysis, though it does perhaps signal the death of a certain type of 'romantic Ireland of the Gael.'¹¹ Ó Nualláin, through his cutting satire, uncovers how the past contextualisations and deployments of the language reinforce a sort of paralysis: that same unquestioned predestination that locks the Gaels into a cycle of their own misery, where death is not permissible as it is part of their lot that they must accept their fate. He shows up an insular and parochial worldview as strengthening this cycle. The Gaelic Leaguers ultimately only serve to lock them into the cycle, where they, with the language, serve to act as a repository of identity for the modern Anglophone world while representation and identity in the language itself are not possible. Think of the effacing of identity in the Anglicising of names, the questioning of whether the Gael are really human. The language in this schema is not so much dead or dying as stuck and paralysed.

Postcolonial readings of the Irish situation have become an important aspect of Irish studies but how have they dealt with the language? Declan Kiberd first made the call for a language-integrated Irish studies in his 1979 paper 'Writers in Quarantine? The Case for Irish Studies,' criticising 'the artificial division between writing in English

and Irish.¹² Kiberd sees this 'partition' as existing from primary school through to post-graduate level and labels it absurd with regard to writers such as Ó Nualláin who wrote in both languages. This is particularly the case with Ó Nualláin, whose writing conveys a keen sense for the linguistic nuances of the Irish language by putting it into interlinguistic play with other languages, mostly a macaronic interplay with English. In a letter to Timothy O'Keeffe, Ó Nualláin comments on the untranslatability of *An Béal Bocht* correctly to English: 'The significance of most of it is verbal or linguistic or tied up with a pseudo-Gaelic mystique and this would be quite lost in translation.'¹³ Power's translation is certainly a close approximation but those who have read *An Béal Bocht* in the original will appreciate Ó Nualláin's sentiments here. Kiberd gives further evidence of how this linguistic division is regarded in Thomas Kinsella's essay *The Divided Mind* and in John Montague's poem *A Lost Tradition*. This echoes still in Colm Breathnach's poem *Trén bhFearann Breac*, where he is, as he sees it, '*ar mo thalamh féin is fás coimhthíoch mé*' [in my own land as a stranger viewed].¹⁴ Jerry White adeptly explores this issue again in a 2006 article pointing to the relevance of Kiberd's call.¹⁵

Irish studies perhaps has its strongest voice in the postcolonially inclined Field Day group. In exploring the rationale behind the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Deane writes of colonialism at its most powerful as an act of dispossession. For him, the 'recovery from the lost Irish language has taken the form of an almost vengeful virtuosity in the English language, an attempt to make Irish English a language in its own right rather than an adjunct to English itself.'¹⁶ The linguistic question became secondary to the question of repossession, however. The view that the 'lost Irish language' operates as a substrate in English is not uncommon but it marginalises a dynamic contemporary role for the language itself. For Deane, however, the goal then was the 'repossession' of an array of authors, beginning with Yeats and Joyce, for a reading which 'was designed to restore them to the culture in which they were still alive as presences, to interpret the interpretations that mediated them for us, to repossess their revolutionary and authoritative force for the here and now of the present in Ireland.'¹⁷ This particular approach to Irish studies was not without its detractors.

2. Sealbh-Obsessed

Where Deane and Field Day seem content to recognise both the important contribution of the language to an Irish literature and the symbolism of the language in an anticolonial role, they seem equally content to jettison contemporary language to a role as inscribed substrate to the manner in which English is written and spoken in Ireland. Biddy Jenkinson, in her 'A Letter to an Editor,' writes of the question of 'recognition and writing in Irish: I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small

rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland.¹⁸

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill focuses on a similar point regarding a television interview with poet and translator of the early Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, Thomas Kinsella. Kinsella mentions that history has been recorded in Irish from the fifth to the nineteenth centuries. Ní Dhomhnaill notes here that 'by an antiquarian sleight of hand it is implied that Irish writers in English are now the natural heirs to a millennium and a half of writing in Irish. The subtext of the film is that Irish is dead.'¹⁹ Kinsella has written about being on the other side of an immense ravine with regard to the language. 'So what does this make me,' Ní Dhomhnaill asks, '[a] walking ghost? A linguistic spectre?'²⁰ This is a theme not dissimilar to the pivotal question of the narrator of *An Béal Bocht*, 'Are the Gaels human?' Both Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson in their articles are recalcitrant to a cultural identity of Irishness 'procured at the expense of [their] existence, or of that of [their language]. Ní Dhomhnaill's view is that for some people 'the sooner the language dies, the better, so they can cannibalise it with greater equanimity, peddling their "ethnic chic" with nice little translations "from the Irish".'²¹ She is directly critical of what she calls the disgraceful underrepresentation of Irish in the *Field Day Anthology*. Inveighing against Daniel O'Connell's use of English to overwhelmingly Irish-speaking crowds as the result of a desire to speak directly to reporters and readers of the *Times of London*, Ní Dhomhnaill aligns Field Day's underrepresentation of the language with a desire not to speak to an Irish-speaking populace but only back to the centre.²²

3. Gaelassenheit

What of 'Gaelassenheit' then? Inserting Gael into the Heideggerian term '*Gelassenheit*' [releasement] may seem neither very Heideggerian nor appropriate. Perhaps in an appropriately Mylesian manner though, Heidegger's sense of the original term is best explored in a dialogue between a scientist, a scholar, and a teacher in his *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking*.²³ The term explored here is somewhat cryptic and never strictly defined. To grossly under-represent the concept, which develops over the whole text, it is perhaps best understood for the purposes of this essay as an openness (to Being). Again, punning on a Heideggerian metaphysical term may seem out of place here (aside from the rather delicious Mylesian homophonous resonances). But we can identify a critique in *scríbhneoireacht an Nuallánaigh* which resonates with that of Dipesh Chakrabarty in his Heideggerian-influenced *Provincialising Europe*, where he argues that 'Historicism – and even the modern, European idea of history – one might say, came to non-European peoples in the 19th century as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else [... consigning] "rude" nations to an imaginary waiting room of history.'²⁴ This is not the 'waiting' or 'rest' which Heidegger discusses

in relation to 'releasement' but one involving a power dynamic. This 'waiting room of history' describes with a reasonable degree of accuracy the comic positions of the Gael in Ó Nualláin's writing along with the more contemporary sentiment expressed by Ní Dhomhnaill and Jenkinson.

Ó Nualláin sought in most aspects of his Irish-language writing to free this perception of the language. Ó Conaire notes '[go raibh] *an-bhród ar Bhrian Ó Nualláin as an saothar a bhí déanta aige i nGaeilge, as an tsaoirse a bhí bainte amach aige, dar leis, don scríbhneoir Gaeilge*' [that Brian Ó Nualláin was very proud of the work he had done in Irish, of the freedom he had opened, he thought, for the Irish-language writer].²⁵ He opened up this 'freedom' in a number of different ways, through his satire, but also through a host of interlinguistic devices. Commenting on the gradual disappearance of Irish articles from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Ó Conaire notes one from December 1952 written in the Greek alphabet with fragments of Latin, Greek, German, and English throughout.²⁶ Some of his articles were also written in English with Irish language orthography and indeed the short stories referred to in this essay have an interesting play between '*an cló Gaelach*' and '*an cló Rómhanach*.'

His desire then, in his linguistic games, in his critique and cutting satire was to open up a space for the language: an 'urban realism' for the language, a taste of the city, a modern taste 'not under the eternal lordship of the country.'²⁷ The irony in the satirising and parodying is that in doing this in the language itself, Ó Nualláin is injecting into it a disguised cosmopolitanism which has the propensity to be effective in producing change, and, as noted by Richard Kearney '[wiping] the domestic slate clean [...] cutting through the lush vegetation of tradition to clear spaces where new voices might be heard.'²⁸

Chakrabarty in *Provincialising Europe* uses Heidegger to think beyond the historicising of minority or subaltern groups. Similarly, what may be best for removing the language from the waiting room/quarantine metaphor is a space akin to *The Crane Bag's* 'fifth province'; free from demarcations and naming to a certain extent, free from an overtly political rhetoric of dispossession and repossession. In punning on '*Gelassenheit*,' the point is to move ourselves from our historical conditioning and encourage a 'meditative thinking' on our relationship to Irish. We will never be free to understand or partake in the language if we don't allow it the openness or the space to be understood.

Notes & references

¹ Brian Ó Nualláin to Seán O'Casey, as quoted in Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian O Nualláin* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Tta, 1986), 71.

² Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1999), 47.

³ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection of 'Cruiskeen Lawn'* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 269. All translations are my own.

⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 25 January 1941, as quoted in Ó Conaire, 61.

⁵ Louis De Paor, 'Myles na gCopaleen agus Drochshampla na nDealeabhar,' *The Irish Review* 23 (1 December 1998): 24–32.

⁶ Sarah McKibben offers two fine examples of such a reading in Sarah McKibben, 'The Poor Mouth: A Parody of (Post) Colonial Irish Manhood,' *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 96–114, and Sarah E. McKibben, 'An Béal Bocht: Mouthing Off at National Identity,' *Éire-Ireland* 38, no. 1/2 (2003): 37–53.

⁷ Originally published as Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Teacht agus Imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe,' *The Irish Press* (13 June 1932): 4; and Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Dioghaltas ar Ghallaibh 'sa bhliadhain 2032!,' *The Irish Press* (18 January 1932): 4–5. I am grateful to Jack Fennell for furnishing me with copies of these. Having only recently acquired Jack's translations the translations in this essay are my own.

⁸ As noted by Jack Fennell in his translation, these titles are all directly taken from real stories. Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 10.

⁹ Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2004), 414.

¹⁰ Ó Conaire, 222–5.

¹¹ Richard Kearney, *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays, 1976–2006* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2006), 203.

¹² Declan Kiberd, 'Writers in Quarantine? The Case for Irish Studies,' *The Crane Bag* 3, no. 1 (1979): 10.

¹³ Brian Ó Nualláin quoted in Ó Conaire, 71.

¹⁴ Colm Breathnach, *An Fearann Breac* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1992).

¹⁵ Jerry White, 'Irish Literature is Not Comparative Literature,' *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 32, no. 2 (2006): 115–40.

¹⁶ Seamus Deane, 'Introduction,' in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bidy Jenkinson, 'A Letter to an Editor,' *Irish University Review* 21, no. 1 (1991): 27–34.

¹⁹ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Why I Choose to Write in Irish, the Corpse That Sits Up and Talks Back," in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²² It should be noted that the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* sought to redress this with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill editing the section on 'Contemporary Poetry' and including Jenkinson's work.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8.

²⁵ Ó Conaire, ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁸ Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 126.