

Flann O'Brien's Speculative Fiction

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The fiction of Brian O'Nolan is characterised by a sort of ontological joke, a joke that can make writing about O'Nolan's fiction a complicated task. A recurrent mode of narrative organisation in O'Nolan's 'Flann O'Brien' novels involves multiple levels of text (that which we read, those which are read, and those which are written by the characters) and the 'joke' occurs in the improper separation between these levels. In O'Brien's novels we have writers who write books about other writers writing, whether they be novels of morality or indexes of unknown philosophers. Just as a genealogical tree produces successful generations, so too do these writers each in turn produce their own characters, creating their own worlds that in turn spawn others. The curious thing about this organisation is that, unlike a genealogical tree which is bound to the progression of time, where generations proceed (or recede) as the decades go by, these different imaginative worlds are often transgressively connected. The scene in which the writer in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Dermot Trellis, fathers a son by one of his characters, and the passage in which the narrator of *The Third Policeman* hears the voice of his soul, whom he – rather banally and for convenience – names Joe, are two exemplary moments in which supposedly separate ontic fields interact. These mental lives and fictional lives ought to be materially distinct from the world that the characters or writers move in, but they are not. This metalepsis aligns O'Nolan with a stream of 20th-century writers for whom the ontic question of the character (and the status or significance of mental life removed from or participating in symbolic life, life outside of minds and texts) and the question of literary inheritance are thematic sources but also, often, sources of anxiety. These writers include Samuel Beckett and the Argentine miniaturist Jorge Luis Borges, but also, after O'Nolan's time, J.M. Coetzee, most clearly in his compilation of 'Lessons' published in *Elizabeth Costello*.

In this short essay I will show how these narrative structures contribute towards a distinctive fictional form: what I will here call speculative fiction. This speculative fiction is bound up with a certain contempt for science, most especially physics, as well as a kind of obsession with the subject matter of physics. The novels seem at once to embrace the 'stuff' of physics in their form and content – questions over multiple reference systems, the particular and the absolute, and causality – whilst simultaneously rejecting the pretences of the opposite magisterium regarding the

development of natural laws. Here, I will compare the allegory of the Irish writer in O'Nolan's essay on Joyce, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' to an allegory from physics, one written by Albert Einstein to explain the relativity of simultaneity. Although these stories come from radically different traditions of theoretical praxis, I hope to reveal a speculative necessity in both of them, in the process constructing a link between physics and O'Nolan's fiction that is not simply one of disavowal. The engagement and refutation of Einstein's analogy that we find in the form of O'Nolan's allegory of the writer crystallises the speculative task for fiction.

I use the word speculative, here, in a way that departs from the term used to describe a strand of science fiction. Rather, I ally the term with the name for an alternative philosophical tradition that began with the Pre-Socratics and which – whilst often effaced or dominated by the critical philosophy that emerged from the writings of Immanuel Kant – has maintained a presence in Western philosophy. Speculative philosophy is not a new phenomenon but an alternative philosophical tradition which stretches back to a time before Plato. It has been taken up again most successfully by Alfred North Whitehead, prior to the upsurge in speculative philosophies at the dawn of the 21st century. Whitehead's definition of speculative philosophy focuses on a kind of equality of experience:

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. Thus the philosophical scheme should be coherent, logical, and, in respect to its interpretation, applicable and adequate. Here 'applicable' means that some items of experience are thus interpretable, and 'adequate' means that there are no items incapable of such interpretation.¹

For Whitehead, the speculative task revolves around integrating all aspects of experience: this might include, for instance, the thought of 20th-century physics, which patently contradicts the habitual linear relations to time and space. It is notable that 20th-century philosophy has struggled to comprehend scientific images that contradict our quotidian experience, often ignoring the sciences outright, or reintegrating scientific knowledge into a variant of idealism. Speculative philosophy is the challenge to this: it seeks to develop a system in which both experience and discoveries that include the quantum principle and the special relativity coexist. There is a contradiction at the heart of Einstein's special relativity, which supplants Newtonian

physics as the universal model for time and space yet does so by drawing attention to the incommensurability between different reference systems and the subsequent failure of objective perception. Speculative fiction embraces this contradiction, representing an endeavour to ignore to the incommensurability between theory and phenomena and to include 'every element of experience' in the Whiteheadian sense, even when those elements defy the notion of objectivity.

The problem of the absent foundations of physics generates a distinct form of speculative joy for several characters in O'Nolan's work, exemplified by the frequent contempt of physics in the O'Brien novels. De Selby's rants against philosophies of time and special relativity are exemplary of this. In a conversation between Mick Shaughnessy, Hackett, and De Selby in *The Dalkey Archive*, the topic turns to time:

- Time is still passing with me, [Mick] croaked.
- The passage of time, De Selby continued, is calculated with reference to the movements of the heavenly bodies. These are fallacious as determinants of the nature of time. Time has been studied and pronounced upon by many apparently sober men – Newton, Spinoza, Bergson, even Descartes. The postulates of the Relativity nonsense of Einstein are mendacious, not to say bogus. He tried to say that time and space had no real existence separately but were to be apprehended only in unison. Such pursuits as astronomy and geodesy have simply befuddled man. You understand?²

According to De Selby, not only are the theories of temporal relativity variously despicable, so is the very habit of engaging with them: 'Consideration of time, he said, from intellectual, philosophic or even mathematical criteria is fatuity, and the pre-occupation of slovens. In such unseemly brawls some priestly fop is bound to induce a sort of cerebral catalepsy by bringing forward terms such as infinity and eternity.'³ It seems that this habit is condemnable by virtue of the contradiction between theoretical physics and individual experience. As Jurgen Meyer points out, this contempt for the sciences is a frequent feature of O'Nolan's work, and extends out of novels and into the columns of Myles na gCopaleen collected under the title of the 'Research Bureau,' which take rarefied scientific knowledge as their comedic starting point.⁴ This disdain, as De Selby indicates in his tirade against 'apparently sober men,' can be read two ways: it is precisely the forms of science that defy experience that are to be condemned, but equally worthy of disgust is the development of laws of time which can never be experientially verified. The last point at once posits a speculative core in 19th and 20th-century thought on time, but equally upbraids this thought for not being quite speculative enough: 'intellectual, philosophic or even mathematical criteria' applied to

time is foolish, in part because notions of infinity tend to refute easy empirical criteria, but also because the engagement with these theories inevitably produces 'cerebral catalepsy' by virtue of their phenomenal impossibility.⁵

The fact that theoretical physics comes to exceed our phenomenal world, and the destabilising problem of multiple and mutually exclusive reference systems in physics, are persistently engaged with in the form and concepts of O'Nolan's tales. Causality is an important topic in O'Nolan's fiction; indeed, there is even a novel concept of causality featured in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: aestho-autogamy, the surprising process of birth of a fully functioning adult human, avoiding conception and gestation and skipping all infancy. The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a student at Trinity College, writing a novel about a writer – Dermot Trellis – who is also writing a novel, but whose creation of characters is somewhat more literal than our narrator's. Trellis is the proprietor of – and resides in – the Red Swan hotel and keeps his characters there in order to keep them in check. It is at the Red Swan Hotel that John Furriskey is born, described at birth as 'about five feet eight inches in height, well built, dark, and clean-shaven. [...] His voice is light and pleasant, although from his fingers it is obvious that he is a heavy smoker.'⁶ Trellis controls his characters while he is awake but rescinds this control whilst asleep. In a covert mutiny, his characters drug him whilst he is sleeping so that they might go about their lives without the intervention of the puppet master. The literalisation of products of the imagination (exemplified in the combination of the biological and the philosophical in the term 'aestho-autogamy') represents a persistent ontological transgression that appears throughout O'Nolan's work: lives are literally created out of the mind, although it is never quite specified how Trellis brings his 'aestho-autogamy' about. Minds create matter (as Trellis does as a writer, as the physicist does through their authorship of theories), yet the matter turns against the mind (characters mutinying, the 'cerebral catalepsy' of physics – natural laws which refute the concept of law itself).

As Rolf Breuer notes, the strange thing about these universes is precisely the absence of clear barriers between them, the fact that authors and characters 'live in the same universe, on the same ontological plane.'⁷ There are separate levels between writers and their products, but without exclusion from each other, creating an easily disintegrating hierarchy. This ontic transgression means that characters have a selfhood that exceeds the intentions of their author, as well as possessing personal agency as substantial as that of any human who might not consider themselves a character. The ontic transgression inevitably involves a commingling between creator and created that is also a commingling between the mortal and the absolute or divine, for instance in the existence and lives of mythical figures and the presence of good or evil characters (the good fairy, or the supposedly evil Furriskey) in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,

the interaction between the afterlife and the mortal world in *The Third Policeman*, and the comparison between Satan and Joyce at the opening of 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' which I will discuss below. The death of the narrator in *The Third Policeman* is a strikingly similar experience to birth via 'aestho-autogamy,' precisely in that an ontic and metaphysical transformation occurs without impact or legibility in experience. The narrator's experience of death is one of bewilderment, but not at any astounding visible or physical change. Indeed, the shift between life and death (and he does not even realise that he is dead) is the most subtle possible:

It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye; perhaps all of these and other things happened together for all my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation.⁸

Furriskey's birth too comes without explanation, for him or for the novel's readers; without drama or physical process he appears in the world. This is precisely the speculative problem staged: there is no necessity behind the natural laws (the narrator has no sense that a bomb has gone off, or of any real disruption to his surroundings), here within the narrative, rather than in terms of a directly metaphysical analysis. We also encounter the interaction and coexistence of supposedly incommensurable reference systems, again in terms of the comedic juxtaposition of the banal and the extraordinary: creation *ab ovo et initio* and the particular, seemingly outmoded style of suit that the new man then dressed in.

This comedy between experience and the real, the banal and the absolute, and the speculative foundation of fictional worlds, is implicitly theorised in O'Nolan's famous and bizarre essay on Joyce, entitled 'A Bash in the Tunnel.' O'Nolan published 'A Bash in the Tunnel' under the name 'Brian Nolan' in a special 1951 issue of *Envoy* on the work of James Joyce and uses a curious anecdote to explain the particular circumstance of the Irish writer. A man approaches Nolan in a pub and claims he is surprised to see him drinking there. When Nolan asks why, he replies that 'any time I feel like a good bash myself, I have it in the cars.'⁹ This mystifying statement is followed by a much lengthier explanation, which Nolan relates at some length: 'At one time his father had a pub and grocery business, situated near a large Dublin railway terminus. Every year the railway company invited tenders for the provisioning of its dining cars, and every year the father got the contract.'¹⁰ His father had the key to the dining cars, and the man in the pub 'made it his business [...] to have a key too.'¹¹ It

was then that he started drinking in the dining cars. The dining cars are frequently parked and – although well stocked – unused due to inefficiencies in the Irish railway:

When the 'urge' for a 'bash' came upon him, his routine was simple. Using his secret key, he secretly got into a parked and laden car very early in the morning, penetrated to the pantry, grabbed a jug of water, a glass, and a bottle of whiskey and, with this assortment of material and utensil, locked himself in the lavatory.¹²

The man usually drinks for a day and a night, and not more: 'Came the dawn – and the shunters. They espied, as doth the greyhound the hare, the lonely dining car, mute, immobile, deserted. So they couple it up and drag it to another siding at Liffey Junction. It is there for five hours but [...] it is discovered and towed over to the yards behind Westland Row Station.'¹³ The man sits, locked inside the carriages, drinking all this time, shunted around the stations. The man does not know the time, as he does not wear a watch. He relates his last (seemingly ever) 'bash' in a dining car, in which the car was eventually parked in a tunnel. Given the darkness, the drinker thought it was night, and continued to drink expecting to leave in the morning. But indeed, the night went on and on, and he was dragged – deeply ill – from the train some days later.

There are several features that ally this tale, for Nolan, to the 'image' of the Irish artist:

But surely here you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody else's whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word, ENGAGED?¹⁴

On a simple level, this may allude to the economic situation of the writer, and the nature of the publishing industry in Ireland. Equally, this may simply reflect slovenly work habits. More interestingly, however, this is about blasphemy and the imagination. The writer and the man in the tunnel are associated by virtue of sharing the 'transgressor's resentment with the nongressor.'¹⁵ He who 'goes beyond,' who trans-gresses the laws and property of the railway corporation (though paradoxically sitting in the same place, shunted he knows not where by railway workers) accrues contempt for the one that goes nowhere at all, just as the blasphemer demands the deity to contradict him and grows resentful when He does not. I take this also to be an anecdote that relays the speculative nature of the Irish writer, reflecting in particular

on the speculative fiction that O'Nolan himself produced. The writer, by virtue of being stuck in the metaphorical toilet cubicle, inside the dining car, cannot tell the dark from the tunnel; he is somewhere he is not supposed to be, speculating. There is an irreconcilable disjunction between the world he imagines and actuality, by virtue of his position in the car. And indeed, it may be those in the world outside his cubicle, outside his 'engagement,' who have an utterly anterior relation to the darkness and the light, and who may drag him out of that accidental darkness.

To make the speculative relation between the writer in the train and the world to which and through which he writes clearer we might consider another story of a train, this time from a physicist. Einstein's 1905 paper, 'On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies' produced the theories of time and space at light-speed that would come to be known as his 'special theory of relativity.' Another paper produced in this year – the year now known as Einstein's '*annus mirabilis*' – was titled 'Definition of Simultaneity' and deals with the possibility of two events occurring objectively at the same moment. If two events occur at the same time, but at different points in space, the observation of their simultaneity will be dependent on viewpoint. This is no small statement regarding subjective perception but rather a theory that proves an absence of an objective assertion of distant simultaneity. Despite no possibility of an objective verification of distant simultaneity, this concept still plays a part in the wider theory of relativity and is a disruptive anomaly which hinders the possibility of the theory being universal and complete.

Given that light takes time to travel, if two lightning bolts flash at the same time, but occur at different places relative to the position of the observer, they will appear to occur at different times, even if the difference is, speaking in terms of the experience of the viewer, very minimal. Einstein's illustration of the problem of simultaneity involves one observer standing on a train platform, and one observer sitting in the middle of a train. This story is known as the "train embankment" thought experiment¹⁶ and runs as follows: a train travels along a track on an embankment, and two lightning strikes occur at the same time from the perspective of one viewing the embankment.¹⁷ Technically, for this observation to occur, the observer would have to be placed in the middle of the two points at which the lightning strikes occur. This perception of simultaneity, which appears by all empirical accounts to be objectively correct, is attributed to an observer standing on the platform, and is contrasted in Einstein's tale to the experience of someone within the moving train. If the passenger is seated in a parallel position to the observer on the platform at the time of the lightning strikes, would they not also experience them as simultaneous? They would not, because, where the train is travelling at a constant velocity, the passenger is not a stable point and will thus be moving towards one of the strikes as it happens, and this

strike would be perceived as coming first. The conclusion drawn from the thought experiment has significant consequences for simultaneity:

Events which are simultaneous with reference to the embankment are not simultaneous with respect to the train, and vice versa (relativity of simultaneity). Every reference-body (coordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement at the time of an event.¹⁸

As Max Jammer explains, the concept of simultaneity involves the simultaneity of events, which, in terms of relativity, has a very particular meaning:

We shall adopt the point of view that the basic problem of science in general is the description of 'events' which occur in the physical universe and the analysis of the relationship between these events. We use the term 'event,' however, in the idealised sense of a 'point-event,' that is, a physical occurrence which has no spatial extension and no duration in time.¹⁹

A distant simultaneity will not necessarily be a local simultaneity, and the two experiences will operate according to incommensurable reference systems.

Both O'Nolan's and Einstein's allegories of trains involve a discrepancy between the experience of those who are outside and inside the train, and in each, the narrative of events – the nature of darkness, the moment of a flash of light – will be utterly different. The writer, who perceives only the clatter and impact of being shunted from one place to another, or perceives the dark of the tunnel as the night, is fundamentally separated from the observer on the platform, just as events for the passenger in the train and the stationary observer are unreconcilable. The final position is that of the critic, who, following these speculative modes of relation, exists not in a hierarchical or transcendent position to either of the narratives, or in an objective position: a fidelity to the speculative capacity of both the scientific and the literary narrative requires a different stance. I hope that here I have used a speculative position – bringing two incommensurable narratives together to reflect on their surprising modes of agreement – to illustrate precisely a consistency of speculation. From these two allegories, and with reference to O'Nolan's narratives, we can extract several features of speculative fiction.

Speculative fiction involves two incommensurable points of view presented simultaneously, or, on the same 'ontological plane,' to use Breuer's phrase: a writer, and his agenda for his characters, for instance. It also involves the defiance of a

verifiable absolute. O'Nolan's speculative fiction thus presents stacked and interacting reference models which do not present a universality, an interaction or equality of referential systems, but rather pure speculative systems which can never be verified. Moreover, these systems are always out of kilter by virtue of the disjunct between ontological speculation and experience: a character or writer is never unproblematically 'in their place,' but are always transgressing or 'going beyond' – certainly one might be asleep or in hell, or in a night that is unlike any other night one has experienced. This failure of scientific universality – and a proper account of events – seems to be the opening for the speculative narrator who explodes the hierarchies of the novel and the ideas of the artist, at once affirming the genuine engagement with the other, but without knowledge, only a wild guess at the cause of the light, only a nagging expectation that the shunters might move him again.

Notes & references

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), viii.

² Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 617–8.

³ *Ibid.*, 618.

⁴ Jurgen Meyer, 'Flann O'Brien's Anti-Esotericism: *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*,' *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 267–78.

⁵ O'Brien, 614.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷ Rolf Breuer, 'Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett,' *Irish University Review* 37, no. 3 (2007): 343.

⁸ O'Brien, 234.

⁹ Brian O'Nolan, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' *Irish Writing in the 20th Century: A Reader*, ed. David Pierce (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 610.

¹⁰ O'Nolan, 'Bash,' 610.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 611.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Max Jammer, *Concepts of Simultaneity: From Antiquity to Einstein and Beyond* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 132.

¹⁷ See *ibid.* for a fuller exposition.

¹⁸ Albert Einstein, as qtd. in *ibid.*, 133.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.