

Guest Editor's Note

Lacunae & Palimpsests: Reading Brian O'Nolan's Libraries

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From the 'bundle of papers' hidden inside a wall in Dublin's National Library in 'The Reckonings of our Ancestors'¹ to the discursive parody of exegesis and scholarship contained within the footnotes of *The Third Policeman*, from the 'Buchhandlung' service offered to wealthy non-readers in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to the formulaic iterations of 'na dea-leabhair'² – or the 'guid buiks'³ – that determine subjectivity in the Gaeltacht in *An Béal Bocht*, the works of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen reveal an ambivalent fascination with the purpose of public and private libraries, with textual materiality and early twentieth-century publishing practices, and with the role of literary elites and reading publics. Although undoubtedly variable in their quality, his works constitute a sustained interrogation of the concept of authorship and the function of literature itself, a deconstructive process of disassembly and reassembly, where pseudonymity thwarts the reader's search for a stable authorial voice, where the boundaries between the textual and nontextual are persistently blurred, where highfalutin assertions about the 'nobility of literature'⁴ are debunked within the egalitarian pages of the daily newspaper, and where the institutionalisation of literature in the limited edition and the university are persistently rejected in favour of the figure of the autodidact.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for example, recitations of Middle Irish sagas and excerpts from *A Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences* are juxtaposed with a tipster's letter, a series of road safety rules, a shopping list, and dietetic advice on the perils of alcohol, tea, and tobacco. In *The Dalkey Archive*, De Selby and Mick's revisionist approaches to biblical and literary histories challenge the authenticity of accepted accounts of the life and work of James Joyce and Saint Augustine, while even an ancillary character such as Hackett conducts substantial research into the apocryphal gospel of Judas Iscariot. Finally, as Maebh Long states, Manus in *The Hard Life* 'wholly disrespects intellectual property rights' as he rifles through previously published texts in the National Library and the British Museum, 'amass[ing] and sell[ing] purloined and repackaged learning' in his correspondence courses through

an act of 'sanctimonious profiteering from the research of others' that 'fakes its learning and its sources, claiming expertise and qualifications where none exist.'⁵ It is tempting to simply dismiss Manus as a plagiarist, yet Long astutely reminds us of the success of his literary ventures, before reading this persistent 'counterfeiting of knowledge' alongside O'Nolan's own writing praxis: 'While throughout O'Nolan's works there is a distaste for those who copy or fabricate, and while characters' literary endeavours contain elements of the parasitic and the corrupt, the "art" of assemblage is a consistent feature of his own writings.'⁶

In the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column of 16 June 1954, Myles na gCopaleen reiterated this vision of a parasitical art of assemblage and collage, drawing upon the myth of the kleptomaniacal corvid to claim that James Joyce's writings are predicated upon a 'fabulously developed jackdaw habit of picking up bits and pieces.'⁷ Myles may claim that Joyce's writings are, in the words of Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), as 'thievish as a jackdaw,' but the works of Brian O'Nolan undoubtedly revel in the lure of such literary larceny.⁸ Accordingly, the intertextual 'weaving' of this 'story-teller's book-web' invites us to engage in a relational mode of reading that interrogates the manner, and the extent to which, O'Nolan's writings are entangled, interwoven, and interrupted by other texts.⁹ If his multi-layered writings represent an intertextual 'tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture,'¹⁰ wherein the counterfeited copy repeatedly displaces the authenticity of the original, then the contents of O'Nolan's personal library held in the John J. Burns Library at Boston College offer a tantalising opportunity for such a relational mode of reading, albeit one that poses distinct hermeneutic challenges for Flanneurs and Mylesians.

Purchased by the Burns Library in February 1997, O'Nolan's library contains 267 novels or full-length works, 12 dual-language dictionaries, lexicons, and thesauruses (English, French, German, Greek, Irish, and Latin), 20 different newspapers, periodicals or souvenir programmes, as well as 92 copies of his own works, including Dutch, German, French, Finnish, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish translations.¹¹ Although the vast majority of the aforementioned novels or full-length works are written in English, O'Nolan's personal library also contains 43 Irish language texts (including works by Douglas Hyde, Seosamh Mac Grianna, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Standish Hayes O'Grady, and Séamus Ó Grianna). There are also a number of texts written in modern and ancient European languages: 8 in French (Alfred de Musset, Molière, Paul de Molènes, Pierre de Ronsard, Stendhal); 7 in Latin (Julius Caesar, Cicero, Livy, Ovid, Tacitus); 5 in German (Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Schiller); 1 in Dutch (an anthology of modern Irish short stories); and 1 in Greek (Xenophon). In addition, there are a number of translations in English: 14 from French (Honoré de Balzac, Alphonse Daudet, Anatole France, Gustave Flaubert,

Émile Zola); 9 from Latin (Homer, Horace, Plato); 5 from Russian (Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev); and 1 from German (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe). O'Nolan's well-documented interest in science is evidenced in texts by Arthur Koestler, Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, and Alfred North Whitehead, yet, when it comes to his equally acknowledged interest in philosophy, he appears to have preferred reading secondary accounts instead of primary texts, as his library contains commentaries on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Hesiod, Immanuel Kant, and Baruch Spinoza.

O'Nolan's personal library offers us an opportunity, then, to produce a more extensive, albeit not an exhaustive, account of the literary, psychological, philosophical, theological, and scientific interests of one of the most important writers of the mid-twentieth century. This critical endeavour should, however, be located alongside at least two earlier accounts of O'Nolan's formative reading practices. In *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, his younger brother Ciarán Ó Nualláin offers an extensive survey of the 'broad and varied' collection of books which their father had amassed in Tullamore, where the family lived from November 1920 until the summer of 1923:

Strange to say we had no Dickens except for *The Pickwick Papers*, although we had all his works at a later date in Dublin. Among other novelists and writers whose work was in the house were the Brontë sisters, Trollope (*Autobiography*), George Eliot, Defoe, George A. Birmingham (*The Northern Iron*), George Meredith, Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells, Ambrose Bierce, Arnold Bennett, James Stephens, Jane Austen, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* – one of the most difficult books to read. There were many other less well-known authors whose names I have forgotten. Among the books other than novels were all the plays of Shakespeare (the Windsor Shakespeare), collections of poems of the principal poets in English, *The Faerie Queene* (Book I), the essays of Dryden, and Hazlitt's essays. We had Mangan and Ferguson among the Anglo-Irish poets; *The Literary History of Ireland* by Douglas Hyde; and that work which is symptomatic of that period – the six volumes of D'Alton's *History of Ireland* in their green covers. *The Life of Gladstone* by Morley and *The Origin of the Species* were in the house. I tried to read and understand Darwin's book but failed. There were many Greek and Latin books including all Cicero's letters *Ad Atticum*.

We had few Irish books in Tullamore, as they simply were not available. Although Pádraic Ó Conaire began to write as early as 1906, the majority of his best books, including *Seacht mBua an Éirí Amach*, did not appear until 1918. The collection of Irish books we did have in Tullamore included a good anthology by Flanagan, *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and

Gráinne), and the poems of Dháibhí Uí Bhruadair. There were others such as *Seachrán Chairn tSiail*, *Brisleach Mhór Mhaighe Muirtheimhne*, *Amhráin Ghrá Chúige Chonnacht* [...].¹²

In a similar account, O'Nolan's close friend Niall Sheridan provides a brief overview of their shared literary interests at University College Dublin and throughout the 1930s:

Like the rest of us, Brian read everything he could get his hands on. Eliot was a big influence on us, as were the French writers *The Waste Land* had brought back into vogue. We felt that the Anglo-Irish Renaissance was already a spent force, though the stature of Yeats – especially since *The Tower* poems – was beyond question. Sam Beckett, whom we knew personally, had opened new horizons with *Murphy*. Joyce, of course, was in the very air we breathed.

Of the Americans, we were reading Hergesheimer, Cabell, Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Scott Fitzgerald. The nineteenth-century Russians were required reading, and there was also a lively interest in Proust, Kafka and Kierkegaard. Brian greatly admired these last three writers, but this would not prevent him, in a sudden chauvinistic pose, from thundering against 'layabouts from the slums of Europe poking around in their sickly little psyches.'¹³

A reader perusing the shelves of O'Nolan's library for the first time, or comparing the inventory of that library with Ciarán Ó Nualláin and Niall Sheridan's earlier accounts of his literary interests, will inevitably be struck by its surprising inclusions and its puzzling omissions. Given his apparent resistance to 'art for art's sake,' for instance, who would have suspected that O'Nolan would own copies of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1920 edition) or Walter Pater's *Appreciations, With an Essay on Style* (1944 edition), *Marius the Epicurean* (1934 edition), and *The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893 edition)?¹⁴ Even more conspicuous are the library's gaps and omissions; where, for example, are O'Nolan's copies of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) or J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927) and *The Serial Universe* (1934)? Despite our best attempts to dispel the 'confusion' of O'Nolan's library through what the German philosopher Walter Benjamin refers to as the 'order' of the 'catalogue,'¹⁵ like the fragmented narrative of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the inventory can only ever tell us an atelic, 'gap-worded story.'¹⁶ Rather than view these omissions as a source of hermeneutic anxiety, however, they might provide a figurative model for the kind of relational reading that O'Nolan's work encourages, particularly since his debut novel repeatedly links the act of authorship to an interconnected network full of holes, that is, a book-web or a trellis.

Following the author's centenary in 2011, critics have begun to examine the books and attendant marginalia in O'Nolan's library, with the work of Brian Ó Conchubhair and Dirk Van Hulle at the forefront of a reinvigorated genetic approach. The former, for instance, has recently read *An Béal Bocht* as a proto post-modernist text by offering a painstaking consideration of eight instances of marginalia in O'Nolan's personal copy of Tomás Ó Criomthain's *An tOileánach* (undated edition), while the latter has sought to examine O'Nolan's relationship with Joyce through the marginalia of his two-volume Odyssey Press edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1932 edition).¹⁷ Neither Ó Conchubhair nor Van Hulle, however, acknowledges the recursive quality that O'Nolan's work has in interrogating the legitimacy of such a critical endeavour. In *The Third Policeman*, for example, the apparently 'reliable French commentator' Le Fournier attributes de Selby's peculiar theorisation of 'roofless "houses"' and "'houses" without walls' to the philosopher's inability to read the doodles of his manuscript, while the illegible 'two thousand' holographs sheets of de Selby's 'Codex' have resulted in a series of nonsensical, competing critical accounts by Bassett, Hatchjaw, Kraus, and Le Clerque.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the 'Buchhandlung' service offered to 'vulgar, wealthy' individuals in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, who own substantial private libraries but possess neither the time nor the inclination to read the books within them, the act of writing marginalia within the leaves of a book is figured both as a form of commodity fetish and as an egregious sexual assault. Rejecting the possibility of a reading machine that could read 'any book in five minutes' as indicative of the mechanistic, 'cheap, soulless approach of the times we live in,' Myles advocates a revival of literary handicraft that, at first, seems remarkably akin to the practices of William Morris's Kelmscott Press: 'No machine can do the same work as the soft human fingers.'¹⁹ The literal translation of *Buchhandlung* is 'bookshop,' but the homophony of the German '*handlung*' and the English 'handling' encourage us to read the first stages of this service as a kind of a tender liaison, a loving caress. In contrast, the more expensive *De Luxe* handling has darker connotations of sexual gratification, as handlers are dispatched to 'maul, bend, bash, and gnaw whole casefuls of *virgin books*,' with some even caught sadistically 'thrashing inoffensive volumes of poetry with horsewhips, flails, and wooden clubs.'²⁰ On one hand, then, the attempt to decipher an author's marginalia gives rise to nonsensical, conflicting theories; while, on the other hand, the act of writing within the leaves of a book is figured through the metaphor of a sexual assault.

If the recursive quality of O'Nolan's writings poses problems for genetic approaches to the contents of his library, then another figurative model from his writing might perhaps give Flanneurs and Mylesians a more productive metaphor for examining the importance of intertextuality in his work. Early in the narrative of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the student narrator refers to his manuscript as a 'palimpsest,'²¹ that

is, 'a parchment or other writing material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing' (*OED*). Drawing upon Phillippe Lejeune's coinage of the French term '*lecture palimpsestueuse*' (palimpsestuous reading; my translation) in *Le Roland Barthes sans peine*, Sarah Dillon has recently argued for a reinscription of both interdisciplinarity and intertextuality through the concept of 'palimpsestuousness textuality,' in order to acknowledge the 'productive violence of the involvement, entanglement, interruption, and inhabitation of disciplines [and texts] in and on each other.'²² 'Palimpsestuousness' would involve, then, 'a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation' between texts that could preserve 'the distinctness' of texts while at the same time 'allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence.'²³ The texts in O'Nolan's library are, then, partially erased and written over by his various writings as Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, but the model of the palimpsest possesses a 'paradoxically preservatory power,' since this partial erasure frequently leaves a 'trace' of the original.²⁴

These 'traces' cannot, however, be restricted to a singular source nor to a stable notion of authorial intention; instead, they require a more disparate sense of the relational network between O'Nolan's writings and the various textual materials contained within his library. Crucially, Dillon observes that when the French philosopher Michel Foucault attempts to elaborate upon the concepts of genealogy and history in '*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*,' he turns to the metaphor of the palimpsest, noting that genealogy 'operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.'²⁵ As such, genealogy is not an ontological process, not an attempt 'to capture the exact essence of things,' but an acknowledgement that 'they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion.'²⁶ Thus, Foucault's palimpsestuous genealogy acknowledges that 'at the beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origins' but the 'disparity' and 'dissension of other things' that form 'a network that is difficult to unravel.'²⁷ The essays contained within this issue of *The Parish Review* represent the first steps towards a palimpsestuous model of reading O'Nolan's writings in relation to other texts through the contents of his personal library, whilst also revealing the hermeneutic issues inherent within the study of such materials.

In the first essay of this issue, Paul Fagan examines the significance of 'the misreader as character, trope, and process' throughout O'Nolan's writings, arguing that the misreader is strategically deployed to 'sabotage the self-proclaimed cultural authority of writers, readers, critics, and social engineers' by 'implicitly disclosing the paranoid logic upon which their self-authenticated expertise is based.' Turning to the

critical 'uncertainty and hesitation' of *The Third Policeman* and, what he terms O'Nolan's 'hoax aesthetic,' Fagan argues that O'Nolan's work makes us all 'paranoid readers' who are 'compelled' to misread his own archive of marginalia and genetic debris. The second essay by Andrew V. McFeaters draws upon *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the novels, and the library to interrogate O'Nolan's enduring interest in the figure of Henry Ford as 'a global harbinger of modernisation,' reading O'Nolan's treatment of Ford as a 'socio-political critique on the influences and consequences of modernisation, technology, and capitalism on Ireland's political economy and cultural history.'

In contrast, the next essay by Roibeard Ó Cadhla examines O'Nolan's previously unacknowledged interest in the work of French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Focusing upon *The Dalkey Archive*, Ó Cadhla argues that although there are a number of parallels that can be drawn between Teilhard de Chardin and the character of De Selby, O'Nolan's final novel 'problematizes any neat correspondence or lines of influence' and encourages us to 'pay attention to divergences as much as convergences.' In the final essay, Jack Fennell provides an extensive survey of the science fiction plots and tropes that appeared in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, arguing that these allowed O'Nolan to vent his technophobic distrust of 'politicians and scientists alike,' whilst exploring 'the comic potentialities' of living in 'a science-fictional future.' Intriguingly, Fennell examines some of the works of fantasy that sit alongside 'scientific and philosophical treatises' in O'Nolan's library, before interrogating the Irish writer's interest in the Ronald Arbuthnott Knox's theological treatise on the mechanisation of the atomic age in *God and the Atom*. In addition to these four essays, this issue of *The Parish Review* also contains an extensive interview with Micheál Ó Nualláin by Johanna Marquardt from June 2014 on the subject of O'Nolan's library and his reading habits, which provides a number of crucial insights including his extensive use of public libraries in County Dublin, as well as Dublin's National Library. As such, Marquardt cautions that O'Nolan's library at Boston College 'can only provide an incomplete [...] record' of his reading materials.

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Notes & references

- ¹ Flann O'Brien, 'The Reckonings of Our Ancestors,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 38.
- ² Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Cork: Mercier, 1999), 56.
- ³ Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth: A Bad Story About the Hard Life*, trans. Patrick C. Power (Hammersmith: Paladin, 1988), 65.
- ⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* [hereafter CL], 24 February 1942, 3.
- ⁵ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ CL, 16 June 1954, 4.
- ⁸ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (London: George Routledge & Co., 1857), 78.
- ⁹ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin, 2001), 19. See Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), 2.
- ¹⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.
- ¹¹ Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, 'An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 46.
- ¹² Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, trans. Róisín Ó Nualláin (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), 42–3.
- ¹³ Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles (The Springtime of Genius),' in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe (London: Martin, Brian & O'Keeffe, 1973), 39–40.
- ¹⁴ In one column, Myles na gCopaleen even went so far as to reveal that he had discovered that the 'works of Walter Pater burn with a steady blue flame and leave a fine grey residue, not unlike cigar ash.' CL, 20 May 1942, 2.
- ¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 62.
- ¹⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 19.
- ¹⁷ Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'An Béal Bocht and An tOileánach: Writing on the Margin: Gaelic Glosses or Postmodern Marginalia?,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 191–204; Dirk Van Hulle, 'Flann O'Brien's *Ulysses*: Marginalia and the Modernist Mind,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 107–20.
- ¹⁸ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 22–3, 150–1, n.2.
- ¹⁹ CL, 5 November 1941, 2. For an extensive discussion of Morris's Kelmscott Press and the modernist institution of the 'limited edition,' see Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Reading Publics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). It is worth noting, of course, that the bombing of Longmans's warehouse during the Blitz had transferred *At Swim-Two-Birds* into something of a collector's item (only 244 copies were sold by 1944), but without offering O'Nolan any of the pecuniary advantages of his modernist forebears.
- ²⁰ CL, 5 December 1941, 2 (emphasis added).
- ²¹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 185.
- ²² Dillon, 4, 2. For a consideration of the function of the palimpsest as a psychological, historical, and social model in the nineteenth-century, see Josephine McDonagh, 'Writings on the Mind: The Importance of the Palimpsest in Nineteenth-Century Thought,' *Prose Studies* 10 (1987): 207–14.

²³ Dillon, 3-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 3, 12.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 139, cited in Dillon, 7.

²⁶ Foucault, 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 142, 145.