

‘Expert diagnosis has averted still another tragedy’

Misreading & the Paranoia of Expertise in *The Third Policeman*

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One of the most persistent comedic devices in *Cruiskeen Lawn* is the spectacle of misreading. Predominantly, the column’s thematic concern with misreading is staged through Myles’s primary mode of pedantry masquerading as connoisseurship. Accordingly, when regular letter-writer Oscar Love publicly aired his grievances about local traffic problems to the editor of *The Irish Times* in December 1950, the following lines in Love’s letter caught Myles’s eye: ‘Astride the zebra crossing at Main street, Blackrock, every day there are two or three delivery vans waiting for long periods. It is, therefore, impossible for pedestrians to use it.’ Myles responds earnestly:

There is, of course, a fair amount to be said for the zebra crossing. Those cunning animals, who used camouflage long before it was put on tanks, should be afforded a safe and defined means of crossing busy thoroughfares. But Mr Love seems to me to postulate a rather extravagant concept. He seems discontented with the simple notion of a zebra crossing at Main street (sic), Blackrock. ‘Astride the zebra,’ he earnestly insists, ‘crossing at the Main street, Blackrock, every day there are two or three delivery vans waiting for long periods. It is, therefore, impossible for pedestrians to use it.’

I do not quite see why an indeterminate number of vans must be placed astride a zebra crossing at Blackrock for long periods. I cannot quite grasp the implied complaint that these vans inhibit the use by pedestrians of the said zebras. [...] My own way of dealing with this rather unnecessary problem would be to have a van crossing at Main street, Blackrock, each containing two or three zebras for long periods.¹

Notoriously punctilious in his self-appointed roles of cultural cognoscente and sentinel, Myles was ever vigilant in combing local newspapers and cultural ephemera for slips of the pen and comic misfires. In his hands, these blunders and solecisms

unmasked the bland banalities of 'The Plain People of Ireland' – here the unfortunate Mr Love – and the pompous, cliché-ridden discourses of the Dublin 'corduroys,' the 'self-styled public intellectual[s]' of post-independence Irish cultural debate.² In each instance, these wilful misreadings trivialise the sincere concerns of others. Yet Myles's feigned misapprehension also slyly pulls the rug out from under his own self-declared ability, and therefore authority, to render expert diagnosis ('have a van crossing at Main street, Blackrock, each containing two or three zebras for long periods') and command readerly credulity in his column.

In this essay, I explore the significance of Brian O'Nolan's recurrent return to the misreader as character, trope, and process throughout his writing, with a particular focus on *The Third Policeman*. My primary concern lies with the ways in which O'Nolan's aesthetic project – shot through with authorial and generic misdirection and populated everywhere by spurious critical authorities and comic paranoiacs – handles misreading not only as a comedic device but also as a central thematic concern. My claim is that O'Nolan deploys the misreader strategically, as a figure who sabotages the self-proclaimed cultural authority of writers, readers, critics, and social engineers alike – including his own claims to authority in each of these roles – by implicitly disclosing the paranoid logic upon which their self-authenticated expertise is based.

In his persistent return to the figure of the misreader, I mean to place O'Nolan into two intimately related traditions of the literary comic organised around spectacles of pragmatic misfire. First, through his formal devices of authorial and generic misdirection – pseudonymity, insincere proclamations of sincerity, spuriously employed critical apparatuses, staged charges and counter-charges of plagiarism and forgery – O'Nolan enters into dialogue with a tradition of counter-discursive literary hoaxes. These are generally ephemeral texts and discourse traces that are intended to inhabit, double, deconstruct, and expose to ridicule certain discourses, genres, and rhetorics of expertise. This tradition of duplicitously falsified documents, forged signatures, and hijacked genres includes as anchoring points Daniel Defoe's anti-Dissenter hoax pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters; Or, Proposals for the Establishment of the Church* (1702), Jonathan Swift's hoax astrological almanac *Predictions for the Year 1708*, published under the signature of 'Isaac Bickerstaff,' and, particularly significant with regard to O'Nolan, the ruptures in the authority and function of newspaper discourse (and the exposure of its readers' credulity) provided at various times by Benjamin Franklin ('The Speech of Polly Baker,' 1747), Richard Adams Locke ('The Great Moon Hoax,' 1835), Edgar Allan Poe ('The Balloon-Hoax,' 1844), or H. L. Mencken ('The Bathtub Hoax,' 1917). As a literary mode, the hoax at once engenders and thematises misreadings, and serves as a counter-discourse

dedicated to 'debunking spurious expertise' through the careful planting of 'time-bombs that last just long enough to be taken seriously before blowing up in an expert's face.'³ It is particularly engaged in exposing those who would exploit genres that bear the hermeneutic tags of 'referential,' 'trustworthy,' or 'true' – such as the newspaper column, the scientific memoir, the scholarly essay, or the confession – in order to manipulate readers' trust and claim the ability, and therefore the right, to speak the 'truth' with authority. It is in these terms that I suggest the hoax is of central significance to O'Nolan's poetics.

Secondly, as he repurposes these devices from his literary hoaxes to his prose fiction, O'Nolan engages a tradition of comic novel-writing that employs not only the disguises and decoys of pseudonymity, allonymity, or anonymity, but also a number of hoax-like paratextual strategies that function as feigned marks of authenticity. Most often, this entails the framing devices of the 'authentic memoir' or the 'discovered manuscript topos,' which shape a series of ostensibly 'found' authentic papers variously corroborated, disseminated, and presented to the reader by a series of specious authorities, intermediaries, and signatures.⁴ While such devices might often be put to use in creating verisimilitude towards affective ends (as, for example, in the complex of found documents, epistolary formats, doctor's reports, diary entries, ships' log entries, and newspaper clippings assembled in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), I am specifically thinking here of their employment in a distinct tradition of comic misreading, as distinct from dramatic or tragic irony. In these texts, the 'discovered manuscript topos' frames the narrative of a supremely confident yet blundering misreader who at once fosters comic effects and bears a propositional force that exposes ideological bias and critiques the rhetoric of certainty. Anchoring points might include Miguel de Cervantes's *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, the narrative structure of which presents the fictional text we are reading as an 'authentic' Arabic manuscript by Moorish historian Cide Hamete Benengeli, which has been translated into Spanish by an unnamed *morisco* and then 'edited' for the reader by Cervantes. Couched in this elaborate network of authorities, intermediaries, and signatures, Quixote's notorious misreading of inns and windmills as castles and giants works to spuriously inhabit and thus ridicule the rhetoric, logic, and worldview of the chivalric romance. Relatedly, while its origins as a hoax have been obscured by its subsequent publication as '*Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift,' *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts* was originally published in 1726 under the name of 'Lemuel Gulliver' as his 'authentic' memoir as surgeon and captain – a fact vouchsafed within the text by Gulliver's intermediary and editor 'Richard Sympson' (also Swift).⁵ In this frame, the obtuse (and proto-de Selbian) misreadings of the Grand Academy of Lagado work to satirise and trivialise the scientific discourse of expertise

employed by the *Royal Society*. More recently, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* – which, as Joseph Brooker has shown, bears significant resonances with *The Third Policeman*⁶ – spuriously presents itself as a formally authentic scholarly edition of John Shade's poem 'Pale Fire,' replete with a table of contents, foreword, the full text of the poem itself (999 lines in 4 Cantos), an index, and commentary, ostensibly by the poet's trusted colleague and friend Charles Kinbote, whose decidedly solipsistic and paranoid exegesis ultimately burlesques the narcissism of scholarly insight.

As I turn to explore *The Third Policeman*'s repurposing of the central moves of this tradition, my argument hinges upon the presupposition that these formal framing devices and tropes of comic misreading constitute more than novelistic devices intended to create verisimilitude. Each text focuses on the comic blindness of misreading on the level of content, while bringing attention to the mechanisms of authenticity on the level of form. By these means, they formally encode the theme that trust in the written word constitutes, at once, an inescapable and easily exploitable consent to the authority of a self-authenticated expertise. I advance the view that O'Nolan's novel likewise troubles the commonplace that 'the identification of trustworthy agents is necessary to the constitution of any body of knowledge' and exposes the ideological abuses of a trust which is, perforce, 'reposed in morally bound truth-tellers and promise-keepers.'⁷

My argument that *The Third Policeman* stages an encounter between these overlapping traditions of hoax-writing and the comic novel rests, then, upon two interrelated hypotheses: first, that O'Nolan's handling of the trope of comic misreading is intimately related to his challenges to various forms of cultural authority and self-authenticating expertise; and secondly, that these challenges are expressed through a series of *ad hoc* exploitations of the devices of the literary hoax. While I propose to retrace its position within and against these two traditions, rather than write *The Third Policeman* into a survey of a particular strand of comic writing, in this essay I am more interested in how the novel exploits these longstanding devices and strategies in order to respond to what O'Nolan perceives as a peculiar, and peculiarly menacing, threat in his unique cultural circumstances: the pathology of (mis)reading. To this end, I suggest that O'Nolan's employment of the trope of comic misreading can be considered in interrelated literary and political contexts, as the discourses of insight and expertise underpinning both Irish realist and European modernist poetics and certain twentieth-century political currents are compared in his writing.

To draw out the ways in which O'Nolan's novel locates the figure of the misreader within each of these discourses, I place *The Third Policeman* in dialogue with recent writing on the concept of 'paranoid modernism' and the late writing of Paul De Man on misreading and aesthetic ideology. In the first instance, I find that the novel's

increasingly destabilised critical debates trouble certain assumptions concerning expertise and insight at the heart of modernist literature and its criticism. Specifically, it doubles the standard critical move of identifying a 'misreading' and then rectifying this blindness with the critic's more authoritative 'reading' in order to imply that this initiative constitutes less a sincere assertion of insight than a spurious claim to authority. In the second instance, by mapping the logic of the scholar's paranoid hermeneutic onto that of the policemen who interpret and order *The Parish*, the novel insinuates that a comparable logic informs some of the darker implications of paranoid (mis)reading in the realm of political and jurisdictional expertise and aesthetic ideology in 1930s Europe. Finally, beyond its implicit concern that the society into which it is written is endangered by its experts, I find that *The Third Policeman* levels a broader charge of complicity against (mis)readers of all stripes. As it increasingly moves towards the implication that misreading is not only inevitable, but also inevitably leads to destructive forces, O'Nolan's staging of the pleasures and dangers of comic misreading ultimately places all readers, and all acts of reading, on trial.

Comic Misreaders

Alongside his more renowned literary works and columns, O'Nolan's canon is populated by a series of revealing hoax events. In each instance, beyond engendering comic effects, O'Nolan's hoaxes work to cheat, and thus expose, particular forms of authority conceptualised as the ability, and therefore right, to sort the fake from the authentic, blindness from insight, reading from misreading; in other words, the authority of the critic. Before demonstrating how, and to what ends, the devices and strategies of these hoaxes are repurposed in *The Third Policeman*, two brief examples will suffice to demonstrate O'Nolan's *modus operandi* here. First, his notorious inhabitation, alongside a clique of fellow mischief-makers, of the *Irish Times* letters page between 1938 and 1940. Secondly, his ostensible hoax of Joyce scholarship in 1949. Of particular significance in each case is O'Nolan's positioning of the trope of misreading (with its inherent trivialisation of others' claims to expertise and implied critique of the rhetoric of insight) in hoax-like inhabitations of genres that conventionally establish readerly expectations and credulity by exploiting the hermeneutic tags of 'sincere,' 'trustworthy,' and 'true.' At the same time, O'Nolan's hoaxes anticipate and inform his fiction by steadily working to destabilise the proper name as a marker of unified identity and disrupt an unthinking trust in the authority of the written word.

Given his taste for dissimulation, it is appropriate that O'Nolan's most famous pseudonym, Flann O'Brien, was first introduced to the world in a pseudo-sincere

letter to the editor of *The Irish Times*, addressing a lengthy and on-going epistolary exchange being conducted in the paper's letters page between Frank O'Connor and Sean Ó Faolain under the heading 'Ideals for an Irish Theatre.'⁸ As Carol Taaffe summarises, once "'Flann O'Brien" invaded the letters page of *The Irish Times* [his] contributions sparked off a farcical correspondence which, conducted under many pseudonyms, would run on and off in the paper over the following two years, finally leading to the commissioning of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.'⁹ In many ways, this was a continuation, and relocation, of O'Nolan's many disguised contributions to *Comhthrom Féinne* (1931–35) and *Blather* (1934–35), in whose pages Niall Montgomery recalls O'Nolan 'descended, like a shower of paratroopers, deploying a myriad of pseudonymous personalities in the interest of pure destruction.'¹⁰ Niall Sheridan, one of O'Nolan's fellow *faux* correspondents alongside Montgomery, recalls the nature of their 'invasion' into *The Irish Times*:

Writing under several different names, [O'Nolan] proceeded to carry on famous arguments on many topics, satirizing *en passant* almost every established literary figure. Before long, many notable personalities joined the melee and the whole affair exploded into a giant display of fireworks, a mixture of satire, polemics, criticism, savage invective and sheer nonsense.¹¹

Over the course of two years, these multi-pseudonymous letters from O'Nolan, Sheridan, and Montgomery (and whoever else might have belonged to their *coterie*) under such unlikely signatures as 'Velvet-Texture,' 'Whit Cassidy,' 'Judy Clifford,' 'Hilda Upshott,' 'Na₂ CO₃,' 'Jno. Ruddy,' and 'CuSO₄,' filled the letters section with 'parody, puns, literary readings of metaphoric language [and] false histories.'¹² Contaminating a space officially reserved for texts marked with the tag of 'true' (or at least 'sincere'), the letters worked to throw the paper's carefully demarcated zones into disorder and thus lampoon the self-proclaimed expertise, and hence authority, of O'Connor and Ó Faolain's (and soon any public intellectual's) attempts to arrogate to themselves the ability to divine the nation's true literary and cultural interests.¹³

In one particularly revealing episode, matters turned to 'literary criticism' with Patrick Kavanagh's review of Maurice Walsh's *The Hill Is Mine*. Kavanagh's review opened with the provocative question 'Can a writer of best-sellers, like Maurice Walsh, be an artist?' Kavanagh went on to offer his expert diagnosis through a sweeping condemnation of modern writing, casting the works of Hopkins, Eliot, the later Yeats and Joyce, and, indeed, 'nearly all the prose and verse innovators of the past twenty-five years' as nothing but 'empty virtuosity': ploughmen with 'horses and plough, but no land.' Almost immediately, Kavanagh turns to deprecate the common

reader with the assertion that 'suspicion haunts the book which sells ten thousand copies' as 'in our world ten thousand perceptive readers is an optimism too large for ears of ordinary credulity.'¹⁴ Kavanagh's self-positioning as artist and arbiter of taste proved distasteful for many of the paper's regular correspondents, with Oscar Love openly wondering whether, on the basis of Kavanagh's review, the literary critic or the politician 'represent[s] civilisation at its lowest.'¹⁵ Amping up the terms of the debate, N.S. Harvey complained to the editor that 'Kavanagh's stuff smells strongly of the Goebbels' midden.'¹⁶

However it was the publication of Kavanagh's sombre poem 'Spraying the Potatoes' in the same paper a week later – by which Kavanagh switched roles from critic to poet in order to verify his status as a ploughman *with* land – that solicited a letter from 'F. O'Brien.'¹⁷ At the outset, O'Brien's correspondence lauds Kavanagh's poem for being 'on the right track here'; crucially, however, this professedly sincere praise is undermined through an act of wilful misreading: 'At last, I said to myself, the Irish banks are acknowledging the necessity for hygiene. My eye had lighted on the heading 'Spraying the Potatoes' and I had naturally enough inferred that our bank notes were being treated periodically with a suitable germicide.'¹⁸ As Brooker perceptively underlines, 'the frankly emotional tone of [Kavanagh's] poem [...] makes O'Nolan's wilful misreading' – in which 'potatoes' are understood as slang for money – 'verge on a public insult.'¹⁹

Numerous critics have referred to the *Irish Times* letters as a 'hoax,'²⁰ however none to date have expanded upon what is meant exactly by the use of this term in this context, especially given the prevalence of pseudonymous and satirical letters in the paper at the time. In attempting to achieve greater precision in analysing hoaxes, Brian McHale conceives of a distinction between:

1. *Genuine Hoaxes*: self-serving deceptions with no intention of ever being discovered.
2. *Trap-Hoaxes*: 'didactic and punitive' hoaxes intended 'to be exposed by the hoaxer himself or herself when the time is right, to the discomfiture of the gullible.'
3. *Mock-Hoaxes*: literary or aesthetic inhabitation of the formal devices of (1) or (2), but distinguished by the fact that they are purposely adorned with signs of self-exposure so that 'issues of authenticity and inauthenticity are elevated to the level of literary "raw materials"' and thereby 'out of inauthenticity they make self-reflective art.'²¹

Noticeably, the *Irish Times* letters do not fit neatly into any of these categories. While not a *Trap-Hoax* in the sense of engendering misreadings (readers could hardly misconstrue much of the letters' nonsense as sincerity or miss the underlying stance, if not the propositional content, of F. O'Brien's contributions), the letters do programmatically exploit authorial and generic misdirection to draw their targets into public confrontation, so as to ultimately undermine the terms upon which their claims to connoisseurship are based. As Keith Donohue underlines, 'one consequence of this masking is that a certain amount of conjecture and speculation about the true author occurs' and 'part of the game must have been to see how quickly and earnestly others could be drawn into the trumped-up controversies.'²² In advancement of this project, the *faux* letter-writers ceaselessly throw each other's proclaimed identities into confusion, further cultivating a sense of instability and paranoia by thematising dissimulation, deception, and the difficulty of distinguishing accident from essence. Correspondent 'Luna O'Connor,' for instance, brings Flann O'Brien's trustworthiness into question by declaring 'never for one moment was I deceived by Miss O'Brien's delicious fooling when she alluded to herself as a stuffy old gentleman.'²³ The letters hit their mark: compelling Ó Faolain to write to 'recommend the Man in the Gaelic Mask to note that, when ever he feels inclined to address his spleen to me, if he would breathe deeply through his nose it would keep his mouth shut'; and O'Connor to charge O'Brien with 'violent personal abuse' and demand to know, in increasingly paranoid frustration, 'Is there such a person as "Flann O'Brien"?'²⁴

Significantly, once the 'hoax' had thus baited its targets, it turned this suspicion and paranoia back upon them. Correspondent 'Lir O'Connor' writes to disclose that the editor and the paper's readers 'have been made victims of a particularly stupid practical joke.' O'Connor reveals that upon 'search[ing] every shelf and comb[ing] every catalogue' of his vast library for the works of Patrick Kavanagh under debate, the nearest he could come was "'The Utility of the Horse," by Paul Kavanaugh; "What to do with your Pulsocaura," by Pietro Kavana; "Yoga and Rheumatism," by Pav Ka Vanna; [and] "I Was Stalin's Chamber Maid," by Pamela Kay Vanagh.' Unable to find 'one single work from the pen of Mr Kavanagh,' O'Connor is compelled to inform the poet that 'until such a time [...] as you or some of your admirers can furnish me with convincing literary proof of your existence, I cannot in all conscience take up your case.'²⁵

Given its dedication to exploding the self-important assertions of various self-proclaimed public intellectuals, the classic literary hoax is primarily conceived as being 'directed not at readers in general but at critics in particular.'²⁶ A decade later, O'Nolan would focus his engagement with this project further when he (allegedly) fabricated an interview with James Joyce's father John Stanislaus Joyce. The interview

was published as authentic in Maria Jolas's *Joyce Yearbook for 1949* – much to the supposed hoaxer's reported amusement – in the process embarrassing Joyce scholarship by deflating its pretensions and exposing its expertise through a staged and manipulated contagion of misreading. As Margaret Heckard notes, 'despite its questionable origin, the interview has had considerable impact on Joyce criticism.'²⁷ Having gained Jolas's authoritative tags of genuineness and trustworthiness, the Joyce *père* hoax proceeded to contaminate Joyce studies, being referenced and reproduced as authentic in Hugh Kenner's *Dublin's Joyce*, Richard Ellmann's authoritative *James Joyce*, and Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain's *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.'* Yet, despite revelations about O'Nolan's purported hand in the interview (and about the credulities of previous Joyce critics), many critics were unswayed. In his 1986 study *Finnegans Wake: A Plot Summary* John Gordon remains 'convinced that the John Joyce interview is genuine,' calling on the testimony of 'Dr John Garvin, formerly a colleague and acquaintance O'Nolan's [who] reports that the story of the hoax was itself a hoax.'²⁸

Kenner – himself a hapless victim of O'Nolan's purported hoax – astutely notes the double bind that makes each of these declarations to have solved the case untenable. Whether O'Nolan forged the interview or not, the hoax has already been irreversibly set in motion:

To have made the undisprovable claim to have written it would have been equally good fun, especially after it had begun to be cited, as it is to the extent of four footnotes in the standard biography [Ellmann]. There dances before the mind an ideal academicism, manipulated from Ireland, founded wholly on items of fictitious data.²⁹

As Kenner implies, the literary hoax in O'Nolan's hands is not a case of finally revealing the real facts of the matter to the chagrin of the duped (a *Trap-Hoax*, in McHale's terms), but is more precisely an aesthetics of paranoia, organised around a fomented contagion of irreconcilable suspicion and carefully cultivated undecidability. Rather than clarify matters, Gordon's claim, *via* Garvin, only serves to deepen our hesitation. Is the interview genuine? Is it a hoax? Is it a hoax of a hoax? Is Garvin's charge that the hoax was a hoax itself a hoax? To the extent that O'Nolan's adaptations of hoax devices work to engender and expose misplaced declarations of expertise both before and after the hoax's (unconfirmable) revelation, they suggest that the task of the critic – the sorting of authentic from spurious knowledge, of reading from misreading, of insight from blindness – is always on the cusp of becoming a comic spectacle.

Paranoid Critics

These hoax devices, strategies, and concerns are absorbed into O'Nolan's fiction, which expands and complicates their goals of creating comic effects, trivialising sincere convictions, and critiquing the rhetoric of certainty and expertise. The programme of assuming and then challenging authority – established in *The Irish Times* and *James Joyce Yearbook* hoaxes and thematised in the Myles persona of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns – is indexed in the novels through a recurring concern with the unreliability of an ineluctable yet easily-exploitable trust in the written word. As St Augustine insists in *The Dalkey Archive*: 'There is no evidence against me beyond what I wrote myself. Too vague. Be on your guard against that class of fooling.'³⁰ Accordingly, in *The Dalkey Archive*, 'Joyce denies writing all of his major works' and 'even Augustine's *Confessions* are treated as lies and "shocking exaggeration".³¹ Mirroring the move to undermine Kavanagh's authority by refusing to consider truthful (or even persuasive) his very proclaimed existence, the novels stage a sustained erasure of trust in identity and, concomitantly, figures of authority. In *The Dalkey Archive*, 'Mick retains some doubts as to whether the man he met really is Joyce,' while 'De Selby casts doubt on the legitimacy of the encounter [with Augustine], as he suspects that the figure with whom they spoke was Beelzebub, acting under orders of Lucifer.'³² These recurrent motifs work to '[destabilise] the apparent authenticity of the voice.'³³ Given this state of uncertainty, and the paranoia engendered by it, the impulse to sort readings from misreadings becomes a recurring concern, and the primary means of claiming authority, in O'Nolan's fiction. The character of Joyce, having survived death (if not his critics), 'needs to find the real origins of the Church and correct doctrinal misreadings, while Hackett plans to discover and reveal the truth about Judas.'³⁴ Most significantly, the increasingly messianic Mick means to write 'a real book on Joyce' which 'could clear up misunderstandings and mistakes, and eliminate a lot of stupidity.'³⁵

The epitome of this project is to be found in *The Third Policeman*, which I contend draws together these themes, devices, and strategies to broadly generate what McHale terms a *Mock-Hoax*, in which 'issues of authenticity and inauthenticity are elevated to the level of literary "raw materials"' towards a form of 'self-reflective art.'³⁶ In its exhibition of the earnest critical debate organised around de Selby's inconceivable misreadings of the world, *The Third Policeman's* select mimicry of elements of a scholarly text constitutes its most obvious comedic device. This spurious exploitation of the apparatus of footnoted exegeses as a formal marker of scientificity, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness, also positions the novel at the crux of the overlapping traditions of hoax writing and comic novel writing from Quixote to Kinbote. Echoing the 'discovered manuscript topos,' *The Third Policeman* presents de

Selby's works as extra-textually authentic, with straight-faced references to the 'Layman's Atlas,' the 'Rural Atlas,' 'Country Album, p. 1,034,' 'Golden Hours, vi.156,' and 'A Memoir of Garcia, p. 27.'³⁷ The footnotes also grant the reader access to the impressive body of scholarly work dedicated to de Selby's *sui generis* interpretations of the world. Here we read of 'Le Fournier, the conservative French commentator' and author of *De Selby – L'Énigme de l'Occident* and *De Selby – Dieu ou Homme?*³⁸; of the 'shadowy' German critic Kraus (*De Selbys Leben; Briefe*)³⁹; and of the 'principal commentators' Hatchjaw (*Histoire de Notre Temps; The de Selby Water-Boxes Day by Day; Conspectus of the de Selby Dialectic*) and Basset (*Lux Mundi: A Memoir of de Selby*).⁴⁰ We are even presented with meta-commentary in the form of Henderson's *Hatchjaw and Bassett*, which the narrator generously deems as 'not unuseful,' or at least less unuseful than 'several lesser authorities on the Hatchjaw-Bassett school.'⁴¹ Indeed, as the reader soon learns, 'the depths of this cross-commentary are as bottomless as those presented by de Selby's own texts.'⁴² The act of opening up this archive for inspection serves only to erode the interdependent authorities of this daunting 'physicist, ballistician, philosopher and psychologist'⁴³ and his scholars, by revealing their numerous hermeneutic weaknesses.⁴⁴ Yet as the narrator-scholar enters this de Selbian critical realm through his confession's exegetical footnotes, his conceited erudition evolves beyond a (comic) display of misjudged hermeneutic connoisseurship to a darker exposition of the authoritarian heart of such claims to insight.

Rather than establishing stable and coherent points of reference, these footnoted citations repeatedly sabotage the terms of this critical debate by challenging the authenticity and sincerity of almost all texts canonical to the de Selby archive: 'Hatchjaw has put forward the suggestion that the entire *Atlas* is spurious and the work of "another hand," raising issues of no less piquancy than those of the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy.'⁴⁵ When discussing de Selby's unconventional 'disquisitions on night and sleep,' Hatchjaw 'point[s] to certain unfamiliar syntactical constructions in the first part of the third so-called "prosecanto" in *Golden Hours*' – however, here the narrator steps in to render his own expert diagnosis, brushing aside his fellow critic's 'rather facile and ever-ready theory of forgery.'⁴⁶ Increasingly this charge of 'hoax' is extended beyond de Selby's philosophy to its criticism. The novel's own spurious claim to genre is both contained in and mirrored by the narrator's accusation that 'Du Garbandier (in his extraordinary *Histoire de Notre Temps*)' has outstepped 'not the prudent limits of scientific commentary but all known horizons of human decency' by producing a hoax whereby to defame the great philosopher: 'taking advantage of the laxity of French law in dealing with doubtful or obscene matter, [Du Garbandier] produced a pamphlet *masquerading as a scientific treatise* on sexual idiosyncrasy in which de Selby is arraigned by name as the most abandoned of all human monsters.'⁴⁷

Again, the interrelated problems of authenticity and trust are not limited to the written word but extend to the very identities of the critics themselves. As the main text's doubling confusion spills over into the footnotes, we are informed that Hatchjaw, convinced that his rival du Garbandier was 'merely a pseudonym adopted for his own ends by the shadowy Kraus,' sets off to Hamburg armed to the teeth to dispose of the duplicitous critic, only to be arrested 'for impersonating himself.'⁴⁸

In considering O'Nolan's goal in returning to this scene – a recasting of the backbiting, role-reversing, and self-effacing acts of pseudonymity of the *Irish Times* hoax with the roles of (letter) writer and critic transplanted – it is worth dwelling on the ways in which *The Third Policeman* broadens O'Nolan's aesthetics of paranoia. Rather than wilfully misreading another's text, here O'Nolan inhabits the critic's role in order to figure it as a performance of self-seeking paranoid misreading. Such misreading can be said to be paranoid in so far as it is characterised by impulses of exaggerated self-importance, suspicion of the true motives of competing readings, and delusions of persecution. Indeed, as 'de Selby's commentators seem to spend more time commenting on (and generally reviling) each other than on explicating the works of de Selby,'⁴⁹ the scholarly debate increasingly appears invested in fostering critical uncertainty in order to leverage the critic's own authority through corrective reading.

The de Selby scholar's claim to authority, and increasingly menacing will to power, hinges upon his own *De Selby Index*, which 'contained [...] proof that many opinions widely held about de Selby and his theories were misconceptions based on misreadings of his works.'⁵⁰ Positioning himself as the final arbiter of such critical disputes, the scholar's metacommentary (and meta-meta-commentary) on his competing critics persistently tags alternative readings as misreadings, marginalising them against the scholar's superior insights: Hatchjaw's claims of forgery are based on 'many ingenious if not quite convincing arguments,' while Kraus's *De Selbys Leben* is labelled as 'credulous.'⁵¹ In this fashion, the increasingly paranoid (not to mention absurd) footnoted debates work to disclose, and ironise, the critic's insights as static prejudices about meaning, value, and correctness. By figuring these successful (because dogmatic) insights as markers of expertise, 'the various interpretations and contestations produced by de Selby's critics present a parody of the narcissism of scholarly commentary that rivals [...] the solipsistic marginalia of Charles Kinbote in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.'⁵² They present reading itself as a site of contested authority.

O'Nolan's concern is summarised in a revealing *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, which posits that literature is the 'most objectionable' art owing to its necessitating an (ultimately spurious) expertise:

Music, painting, sculpture, architecture, do not require to be translated before an 'uninitiated' man; a foreigner or a barbarian can understand them. The whole field of literature is a mass of misunderstandings, inaccuracies, whimsy and mumblings of all sorts. [...] Worst imposters are the 'scholars,' whose prestige derives from the fact that they burn their midnight oil in the graveyards of dead jargons.⁵³

In testing the merits of the distinction between authentic and inauthentic reading, in O'Nolan's hands the scholarly misreader implies a form of inquiry that reconceptualises the question of expertise from *what is an authentic reading?* to *how, and why, does one claim that a certain reading is authentic?*⁵⁴

Paranoid Modernism

The Third Policeman advances the poetics of paranoia that O'Nolan explores in *The Irish Times* and *James Joyce Yearbook* hoaxes through its assembly of these delusions of exaggerated self-importance, suspicion, and persecution into a fuller paranoid hermeneutic. In broad terms, a paranoid hermeneutic can be said to consist of the arrangement of such suspicions into a rigidly-organised analytical system that guarantees 'successful' outputs while producing readings that are, in one way or other, unmoored from more general consensuses about the nature of reality and events arising from the discourses of experience. Thus conceptualised, paranoia is seen as 'a form of hyper-analysis – the belief in a method or system that is indistinguishable from the search for meaning, order, and coherence.'⁵⁵ In other words, any 'method of interpretation, in which the subject seeks to uncover the hidden connections that link various phenomena to one central source' might be considered 'structurally [...] similar to the central interpretive strategy of paranoia.'⁵⁶ Thierry Robin frames *The Third Policeman* as a text that tests the "'paranoid" processes' that are required 'to make sense of precisely senseless occurrences.' If de Selby's theories are compliant with an understanding of paranoia as an 'excessive, delusional, untamed, proliferating knowledge [...] characterised by an extreme propensity to see intentions and purposes (especially negative ones) everywhere,'⁵⁷ O'Nolan was not alone in seeing this paranoid structure in the rhetoric of his targets; Sigmund Freud, too, asserts that 'the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers.'⁵⁸

In the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column that marked Shakespeare's quadricentenary in 1964, Myles again raises the Bacon-Shakespeare plagiarism controversy, this time to argue the case that anti-Stratfordian hermeneutic models *have not been paranoid*

enough.⁵⁹ Myles 'suggests a re-study of the plays in the semantic twilight of acrostics, anagrams and abecedarian procedures' towards discovering their true author, and shares with his 'pedantic reader' a 'rewarding result' he has achieved 'from merely setting down the names of the plays, reading vertically downwards only the fourth last letter in the titles':

MacBeth
OthEllo
Comedy of ErRors
Merchant of VeNice
Anthony and CelopAtra
Midsummer Night's DReam
Merry Wives of WinDsor
Measure for MeaSure
Much Ado About NotHing
CoriolANus
All's Well That Ends Well

By applying the same hermeneutic tools to the fourth initial letters of titles of Shaw's plays in turn, Myles proceeds to unmask Shakespeare as 'the real author of the plays for which Shaw got the plaudits and the cash.'⁶⁰

The Third Policeman's comic staging and unveiling of such Quixotian paranoid hermeneutics (or schematic biases) as a dubious logic of competence which guarantees successful readings, centres on the question of the de Selby Codex, 'a collection of some two thousand sheets of foolscap closely hand-written on both sides,' the signal distinction of which is that 'not one word of the writing is legible.'⁶¹ Once again, the waters are muddied for the earnest critic through 'rumours that the "Codex" may be a forgery, and to top things off, there are at least four different copies, each radically different from all the others, that claim to be the genuine original of the document.'⁶² The narrator records the divergences in critical opinion:

One passage, described by Bassett as being 'a penetrating treatise on old age' is referred to by Henderson [...] as 'a not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm.' Such disagreement, it must be confessed, does little to enhance the reputation of either writer.⁶³

M. Keith Booker infers that the impenetrable Codex, alongside its fanciful interpretations, 'parodies both the status of certain difficult modern texts and the

critics of those texts.⁶⁴ A number of O'Nolan's critics have identified in the Codex – characterised by du Garbandier as 'a repository of obscene conundrums'⁶⁵ – an implicit joke specifically directed at Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and its critics.⁶⁶ Kelly Anspaugh spells out the perceived correspondences in detail: 'One can detect in *The Third Policeman* [...] under the name of the eccentric philosopher De Selby, the name of Joyce; under the surface of the unreadable De Selby "Codex," the unreadable *Finnegans Wake*; beneath the footnote-residing De Selby scholars, those "juvenile drools," those "high school punkawns" [...], the American Joyce scholars.'⁶⁷

That there is in O'Nolan studies a prevalent paranoid hermeneutic that sees Joyce's trace in all of O'Nolan's writing is a subject I will side-line in this essay, yet I am interested in the Codex's implication that if the concept of expertise that underpins the relationship between de Selby and his scholars is figured as a form of paranoia, then the relationship between modernist poetics and its critics is commensurable. Taaffe summarises the stakes of this comparison:

In its literary sub-plot, *The Third Policeman* implies that the very authority of authorship is dependent on a confidence trick. Who would take the illegible Codex seriously (or, O'Nolan may have felt, the illegible *Finnegans Wake*) if the name de Selby were not attached to it? In its unreadability, there can – very profitably – be no end to the 'brand of nonsense' that is created in attempting to decode it.⁶⁸

Seen in this light, we might consider *The Third Policeman* a literary forebear of recent scholarship on the concept of 'paranoid modernism' by David Trotter, Kenneth Paradis, David Spurr, Aaron Bibb, and Jean-Michel Rabaté.⁶⁹ This concept frames modernist experimentation as a claim to expertise that is inextricable from its paranoid response to the world. According to this line of thought, if any 'method of interpretation, in which the subject seeks to uncover the hidden connections that link various phenomena to one central source, is structurally [...] similar to the central interpretive strategy of paranoia,'⁷⁰ then this creative power of obsessive paranoia is mirrored in the modernist writer who feels compelled to systematise an increasingly chaotic modernity to find or forge meaning and value. As Spurr summarises:

In the economy of the early twentieth century, artists and writers struggled with the need to establish the symbolic capital of their talent in the absence of any real legitimating authority or institution. Inevitably they felt that their talent was not properly recognised, and this lack of recognition was often experienced as persecution. In this context, modernist experimentation can be

understood as a paranoid response to this imagined persecution insofar as it insists on the writer's expertise as a form of symbolic capital.⁷¹

Trotter likewise insists that 'the literary experimentation by means of which [modernists such as Conrad, Hulme, Lewis, and Lawrence] hoped to achieve a degree of' symbolic capital in an intellectual and cultural marketplace 'can be understood as a psychopathy of expertise.'⁷² Thus viewed 'as an epistemological rather than nosological descriptor, paranoia is a term that participates in the discursive management of the individual's tendency to remythologise modernity's disenchanted cosmos.'⁷³ This problem of framing the world appropriately informs every aspect of *The Third Policeman*, from the subtle stakes of the scholar's inference that The Parish's 'fine views of bogland had been arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made' to the obsession with mirrors that inculcates within de Selby the belief that he possessed 'two left hands' and inhabited 'a world arbitrarily bounded by a wooden frame.'⁷⁴

The Third Policeman appears to be deeply 'sceptical of the typical modernist notion (espoused by a number of commentators on modernism, if not necessarily by the modernists themselves) that art, particularly literature, functions as a privileged mode of access to the Truth.'⁷⁵ In this regard, the novel aligns itself with a series of twentieth-century hoaxes that can be read as responses specifically to the critical exegesis that surrounded modernism, such as Samuel Beckett's 'Le Concentrisme',⁷⁶ Ern Malley's *The Darkening Ecliptic*,⁷⁷ and the *Spectra* Hoax.⁷⁸ However, I contend that O'Nolan's clowning of modernist insight goes much further than these aesthetic hoaxes. It at once reveals and blurs the lines between 'the quasi-mythical high modernism that loves truth' (as in the case of modernists such as Ezra Pound) and 'the subversive counter-modernism that loves a lie' (as in the case of modernist or anti-modernist hoaxers such as Beckett, Malley, Bynner, and Ficke).⁷⁹ In laying out its complex suspicion of modernism's models of expertise and insight, *The Third Policeman* establishes a writerly claim to insight through de Selby's paranoid organising system for the world. It then compares these authoritative texts with a critical heritage that both contests and mirrors their paranoid hermeneutics, through confident misreadings of the opaque document of de Selby's Codex.

Through this comparison, *The Third Policeman* suggests that this relationship between paranoid modernists and their paranoid critics is, in fact, a symbiotic claim to cultural capital. Yet, significantly, in O'Nolan's novel the distinctions between paranoid critic, paranoid writer, and insightful hoaxer are steadily effaced. De Selby 'himself is the victim of his own ingenuity; according to Le Fournier, he is his own first misinterpreter, retrospectively reading his own absent-minded doodles as intricate plans for "roofless 'houses' and 'houses' without walls".'⁸⁰ By the same token, each

critical tract on de Selby is destined to become itself a subject of analysis, as further critics (and particularly the novel's murderous narrator) reshape it according to their own (mis)readings and (in)credulities. If *The Third Policeman* dismantles the expertise of the interpretive community who should form a baseline of standard sanity and thus render de Selby's delusions harmless, it also increasingly implies that *nobody* in its world of paranoid reading and counter-reading is, or can be, innocent of the charges being brought against its footnoted critical authorities.

In their confusion of discursive genres and misalignment of text to conceptual context, the novel's misreaders stand as figures of comic madness. Yet, if 'what distinguishes paranoia from other forms of delirium is the perfect coherence of [...] interpretation [...] and the subject's absolute certainty of its truth,'⁸¹ then the novel's spectacles of misreading, considered within O'Nolan's broader hoax aesthetics, ultimately work to foster a suspicion that we can never be fully certain that our own insights – especially at their most perfectly coherent – are nothing more than absurd misreadings masked by our own blindness. For Kenneth Paradis,

Paranoia is such a pervasive trope for both madness and insight in modern thought because it marks a threshold at which the promise held out by intellectual effort – of insight into the deepest truths – blurs into the recognition that beyond consensus it becomes impossible to determine the extent to which thought is not a lens into the hidden real, but a mirror in which one sees only the obscured shape of one's own folly.⁸²

Robert Markely spells out the double bind that emerges from this state of play:

Characterised by projective thinking, hostility, suspiciousness, centrality, delusions, fear of loss of autonomy, and grandiosity, paranoia in practice becomes difficult to distinguish from 'normal' processes of forging logical connections among disparate phenomena or observations or, more simply, negotiating one's way through daily existence.⁸³

In O'Nolan's hoax aesthetics, then, it is not individual readers but reading itself that is rendered as an inescapably paranoid act, in which the certainties upon which we found the distinction between the world out there and the world inside our head are under constant threat of erasure. Having staged this spectacle of misreading and paranoia, what *The Third Policeman* ultimately appears to imply is that there can be no real literary or critical distinction between a spurious and an authentic reading (of

texts, of the world) which comes *prior to* a particular claim to authority that establishes the coordinates of this distinction.

This broader concern with the authoritarian dimension of the rhetoric of expertise and the paranoid logic that underpins it extends *The Third Policeman's* project beyond that of a *Trap-Hoax* – which exposes the spurious status of individual cultural authorities whose expertise merely privileges ideologies or paranoid hermeneutics as insight – towards a *Mock-Hoax* that prompts a broader philosophical re-evaluation of the values of truth and falseness, canonical authority, and authorial prestige. While engaging specifically with the paranoia at the heart of modernist aesthetic modes, O'Nolan's scepticism extends to any aesthetic ideology within his cultural moment that he suspects to be exploiting a self-authenticated expertise to claim a spurious and dogmatic authority. In doing so, he moves the hoax away from the certainties of the Swiftian satire towards a more complex critique of critical insight in which the hoaxer can no longer step outside of ideology to avoid complicity.

To demonstrate this point more fully, I want to argue, in closing, for placing *The Third Policeman's* characterisation of a modern moment defined by competing rhetorics of expertise, insight, and grand vision grounded in a paranoid hermeneutics back into its unique cultural and political context, by attending to its engagements with the normative and prescriptive aesthetic discourse that was coming to dominate the political climate of late 1930s Europe.

States of Paranoia

In *The Third Policeman*, the comic, if increasingly violent trope of misreading played out in the footnotes is expanded in the main text to a treatment of the punishment meted out by misreaders whose self-authenticating paranoid hermeneutics are intrinsically tied up with the exercise of authority. Most prominent among 'the tricks and wiles' that Divney uses to persuade the scholar to his murderous enterprise is 'that he read portions of [his] "De Selby Index" (or pretended to) and discussed with [him] afterwards the serious responsibility of any person who declined by mere reason of personal whim to give the "Index" to the world.'⁸⁴ The certainty of insight and of the 'serious responsibility' of implementing his corrective reading that leads the scholar to commit his 'greatest sin'⁸⁵ is doubled in the novel's other major rhetoric of authority through expertise: the technocratic language of state control embodied by the philosophers/inventors-cum-policemen. If the text's scholarly discourse is populated by strangely detached figures – lacking in empathy, demanding attention, recognition, and admiration for their superiority – the policemen stand as the critic's double invested with real power. The policemen's mode of organising The Parish –

hiding bicycle parts so that they can find them themselves, performing esoteric readings of the opaque operations of Eternity – is undergirded by the paratext's critical logic of expertise as a hermetically sealed paranoid hermeneutic. (That such connections were already part of the public discourse is suggested by N.S. Harvey's charge in *The Irish Times* that 'Kavanagh's stuff smells strongly of the Goebbels' midden.'⁸⁶) This intimation that the scholars' critical logic implicitly props up The Parish's jurisdictional authorities is visually suggested by the footnoted layout of the page.

To develop this point, I want to read the correlation between the paranoid logic of critical and jurisdictional authority in *The Third Policeman* against the argument central to Paul de Man's late, and controversial, article 'Kant and Schiller.' Here de Man traces the introduction of aesthetics into the logic of the state's functions back to Friedrich Schiller's populist misreading of Immanuel Kant, by which Schiller argues for the aesthetic as an exemplary model for the state.⁸⁷ In short, de Man's complaint with Schiller's misreading is that it hinges upon a misconception of the possibility of progressing from an individual work of art to a 'collective, massive notion of art,' which would assume 'natural characteristics' and thus serve as a model for an emancipatory aesthetic state.⁸⁸ Despite its founding upon a misreading, for de Man 'aesthetic education by no means fails; it succeeds all too well, to the point of hiding the violence that makes it possible.'⁸⁹ De Man forces this point home by closing 'Kant and Schiller' with a provocative reference to Joseph Goebbels's misreading of Schiller's theory of art and aesthetic education in his 1929 novel *Michael* to define the goal of politics as the moulding of the masses: 'The statesman is an artist too. For him the people is neither more nor less than what stone is for the sculptor [...]. To shape a People out of the masses, and a State out of the People, this has always been the deepest intention of politics in the true sense.'⁹⁰ As Marc Redfield summarises, underpinning these aesthetic politics founded upon successive assured misreadings (Goebbels's misreading of Schiller's misreading Kant) is the possibility 'to expunge any overt recognition of violence' in so far as 'there can be no overt politics "against the people" in a structure of such symmetry.'⁹¹

In *The Third Policeman*, the authoritarian heart of the assured misreader is unfolded through the ways in which the policemen's faculties of detection are put to work towards the coherent, and thus satisfactory, resolution of the issue of the non-existent stolen watch:

'It is true' he said, 'that you cannot commit a crime and that the right arm of the law cannot lay its finger on you irrespective of the degree of your criminality. Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true.'

I nodded my agreement comfortably.

'For that reason alone,' said the Sergeant, 'we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death [...] only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard [...]. If it is not a lie to say that you have been given the final hammer behind the barrack, equally it is true to say that nothing has happened to you.'

'You mean that because I have no name I cannot die and that you cannot be held answerable for death even if you kill me?'

'That is about the size of it,' said the Sergeant.⁹²

The Sergeant's internally coherent reading, in which the world fits the hermeneutic frame rather than *vice versa*, implicitly reveals the destructive power and triumphalism of a stance that an authentic reading is one in which 'the "crime" is always identified and usually solved,'⁹³ whether or not it had been perpetrated in the first place. As Paradis contends, because paranoia 'is fundamentally hermeneutic, identifiable only in relation to "proper" ways of understanding, it retains an irreducibly cultural dimension tied up with the experience of power.'⁹⁴ The picture is one of destruction grounded upon an authority claimed through the expertise of aesthetic ideologies of insight that double as paranoid acts of reading. Yet the scene also recasts O'Nolan's other disappearing acts – his disappearing of his own authorial self, but particularly of Kavanagh and Joyce – with dark overtones: for once an other is (mis)read out of existence what, indeed, is to prevent their destruction?⁹⁵

If the narrator plays 'text' here to the policeman's detached enforcement of the model of statesman as artist or critic, the implications are equally grim when the roles are reversed. As the de Selby scholar concludes, the reason that Fox has failed to exploit omnium for its full use is that he is not a strong reader: 'It was clear that he was not the sort of person to be entrusted with the contents of the black box. His oafish underground invention was the product of a mind which fed upon adventure books of small boys.'⁹⁶ Yet if Fox has misapprehended the power of the omnium he has in his possession by using it to make strawberry jam, boil eggs, get the mud off his boots, and vex his colleagues, then the de Selby scholar, with his expertise and insight, has no delusion about how to properly apply its power. The scholar imagines the uses it could be put to in ridding himself of his obstacles and punishing his foes.⁹⁷ Primarily, he would use it to make the world realise his expertise as a de Selby scholar:

Sitting at home with my box of omnium I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. [...] I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will. [...] I could write

the most unbelievable commentaries on de Selby ever written and publish them in bindings unheard of for their luxury and durability. [...] I would bring de Selby himself back to life to converse with me at night and advise me in my sublime undertakings.⁹⁸

In revisiting the figure of the comic misreader, *The Third Policeman* reveals him in his modern incarnation as a paranoiac who 'stands as a parodic image of the autonomous rational individual to which modernity aspires, an uncanny reflection that foregrounds the potential for violence in that subject's capacity for intellectual self-deception and moral self-justification.'⁹⁹

As 'Lir O'Connor' had written that the *Irish Times's* readers 'have been made victims of a particularly *stupid* practical joke,'¹⁰⁰ so, in R.W. Maslen's weighing of the evidence of *The Third Policeman*, had Europe 'got itself enmeshed in an *appalling* practical joke, which [would] not release its victims until its inexorable logic has been worked out – at the expense of their lives or their collective sanity.'¹⁰¹ Thus *The Third Policeman* moves us towards its implication that misreading is not only inevitable, but also inevitably leads to destructive forces being unleashed. In this light, Maslen argues for reading the novel as a 'fantasy of complicity,' viewing O'Nolan as one of a group of wartime writers who 'figure[d] fascism as emerging from the dark recesses of their own brains' and thus 'suggest that they cannot so easily exonerate *themselves* from some degree of participation in the circumstances that gave rise to the fascistic state of mind.'¹⁰² A *Cruiskeen Lawn* column written in the last year of its twenty-six year run, speaks to this sense of doubling complicity: 'In the year 1939, a book curiously entitled AT SWIM TWO BIRDS appeared. Adolf Hitler took serious exception to it and in fact loathed it so much that he started World War II in order to torpedo it.'¹⁰³ Myles's rehearsed delusions of persecution, exaggerated sense of self-importance, and preoccupation with authority and violence demonstrate the extent to which O'Nolan's voices constantly implicate themselves as complicit in the paranoid mode of thinking they mean to stage as spectacle.¹⁰⁴ The de Selby scholar's misreadings and power plays move him towards a fantasy of exploiting omnium in order to summon de Selby from beyond the grave to confirm an authority he will have no compunction about wielding punitively. Yet, this was a move Myles also regularly played in various *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, in which he exploited his own position of authority to summon Joyce from beyond the grave in order to vouchsafe for his own view as fact.⁸⁴

It is these senses of inevitability and complicity, rather than assured ideological derision, I want to suggest, that stand as *The Third Policeman's* unique repurposing of its hoax devices. Rather than solely satirising critical certainty by exposing certain spurious claims to authority as being grounded upon misreading (with the

coordinates of 'authentic' and 'spurious' re-established by the hoaxer), the novel levels a broader charge of complicity. In so far as it targets potential gulls whose pride in misplaced certainty demands ridicule through exposing their readings as misreadings, the classic literary hoax 'is directed not at readers in general but at critics in particular.'¹⁰⁵ However, it seems O'Nolan increasingly saw all readers as potential threats and considered that they were not only at their most foolish but also at their most dangerous when misreading.¹⁰⁶ This danger is inevitable, Myles seems to suggest in a particularly pointed 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, owing to 'the pathology of literature':

The blind urge to read, the craving for print – that is an infirmity so deeply seated in the mind of to-day that it is (well-nigh) ineradicable. [...] The writer can be systematically discouraged, his 'work' can be derided and if all else fails we can (have recourse) to the modern remedy known as 'liquidating the intellectuals.' But what can you do with the passive print addict? Absolutely nothing.¹⁰⁷

By this logic, the novel's 'fantasy of complicity' extends not only to philosophers/modernists and their critics, or the policemen who interpret and order *The Parish* and their subjects, but also to O'Nolan himself and his own generations of future (mis)readers.

Reading Brian O'Nolan's Libraries

In his renowned 'Buchhandlung' series of columns, Myles offers his services to annotate his readers' unread books with impressive marginalia, such as 'Yes, but cf. Homer, *Od.*, iii, 151' and 'I remember poor Joyce saying the very same thing to me.'¹⁰⁸ As Myles promises to have his readers' volumes 'inscribed with forged messages of affection and gratitude from the author of each book' and bookmarked with authoritative letters ('every one of them an exquisite piece of forgery'), we are forced to reconsider our own confidence regarding his own variously pseudonymous signatures. To the extent that O'Nolan's thematic and formal concern with misreading exploits various devices of the literary hoax, his writing constitutes a kind of 'anti-archive' that draws its own readers into, and makes them complicit with, his troubling of the coordinates of trust (expertise, insight, authority) upon which 'successful' distinctions between reading and misreading depend.

Throughout *Cruiskeen Lawn's* run, Myles makes myriad claims to the true authorship of works made famous under other writers' names. When Frank O'Connor's translation of *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche* [*The Midnight Court*] was banned, Myles offers his own uniquely qualified help: 'I had a certain amount to do with the

writing of the original work – Merryman was a personal friend though of inferior morals.¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, he claims to have written poetry and criticism ‘under the pseudonym “Austin Clarke”’ and dropped casual references to ‘the old days in Paris, when I was helping Sam Beckett with his work.’¹¹⁰ Indeed, Myles claims responsibility for some of the most canonical works of Western letters:

I was amused to recollect a similar interrogation, explained by me in a thing I wrote there some time ago, called (consults tiny notebook) called *Euthyphro*, a little work which at the time I attributed to ‘Pluto’ (or ‘Plato,’ was it?), a pseudonym I have not used in ‘recent’ years.¹¹¹

We need not assume the part of the credulous misreader who takes these purported acts of allonymity on faith to see the comic role they play in O’Nolan’s hoax aesthetics, in which a recurring thematisation of dissimulation carefully works to cultivate suspicion in his readers. O’Nolan’s project to create his own anti-archive to envy de Selby’s can be seen in the fact that not only did he go out of his way to claim authorship of the work of others (often absurdly), but also to refute his authorship of his own work. When the forthcoming ‘*At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O’Brien’ was announced in *The Irish Press* as having been really written by University College Dublin alumnus ‘Brian O’Nolan,’ he wrote to the paper to correct the ‘error’:

Dear Sir,

I have been shown an entry in your College Notes in Monday’s Irish Press in which the authorship of a book called ‘Swim Two Birds’ is attributed to me. Your information apparently derives from a rumour spread by two gentlemen called Sheridan and O’Brien who charge me with the authorship of a book of this name or something similar. The cream of this elaborate ‘joke’ is that the supposed book is anti-clerical, blasphemous, and licentious. [...] I naturally take strong exception to the publicity given by your paragraph, which associates me by name with something which is objectionable, if non-existent. I must therefore ask you to withdraw the statement. I would be satisfied if you merely mentioned that a graduate mentioned in your last Notes is not the author of any book mentioned and has in fact no intention of publishing any book.¹¹²

That O’Nolan continued this line throughout his career demonstrates the centrality of hoax logics to his poetics. After *At Swim-Two-Birds* was republished by MacGibbon and Kee in 1960, Quidnunc’s ‘An Irishman’s Diary’ was paid a visit by a surly Myles na Gopaleen:

'To what,' I asked, 'am I indebted...'

'It's this MacGibbon and Kee lark,' said the Squire. 'That crowd is bringing out a new edition of a book called "At Swim-Two-Birds" by some gurrer that calls himself Flann O'Brien. I am pairsonally consairned about it.'

'May I ask why?' I said gracefully.

'There's stories going round that Flann O'Brien and my good self are wan and the same pairson. I know my own know about that leaper. People has said that I receded under many disguises in many papers, but *nobody on or under this world knows what I have written or can declare on oath what I have not written.*'¹¹³

That the relationship between O'Nolan's writing and its scholars is shot through with a cultivated sense of uncertainty, and some suspicion, can be seen in the problems of basic attribution, at least at the margins, that continue to resist a final closing of his canon's borders. As Ute Anna Mittermaier attests, 'Brian O'Nolan's use of a great variety of more or less fanciful pseudonyms for his writings has inevitably left students of his *œuvre* dependent on a considerable degree of speculation.'¹¹⁴ If, from our present vantage, we feel more secure in our certainties about the identities of Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, Count O'Blather, *et al.*, we should not let that knowledge foreclose our considerations of the very real initial uncertainties and hesitations with which his more established novels and columns were initially met. Even now, fundamental critical certainty about the authors of the *Irish Times* letters remains elusive. Oscar Love, the fellow correspondent and target of Myles's own misreading in this essay's opening letter, has often been (mis)taken for one of O'Nolan's many pseudonyms.¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, hints that O'Nolan wrote a series of Sexton Blake novels under the pseudonym 'Stephen Blakesley' remain tantalisingly difficult to confirm or deny,¹¹⁶ as do rumours of O'Nolan's travels through Germany in his youth.¹¹⁷ A hint in Niall Montgomery's obituary in *The Irish Times* of 'a little known fact that he would occasionally write O'Nolan's "Myles na Gopaleen" column for *The Irish Times* when Myles was indisposed,' has been explored in detail by Carol Taaffe.¹¹⁸ Rather than clarify matters, Taaffe's insight that Montgomery in fact wrote a significant but indefinable number of the columns has meant that O'Nolan's critics find themselves in a situation in which 'it seems impossible today to apportion precise responsibility for individual columns.'¹¹⁹ More recently, the speculative attribution to O'Nolan of the short story 'Naval Control' by John Shamus O'Donnell, originally published in the American periodical *Amazing Stories Quarterly* in 1932, speaks to the ways in which the writer's strategies of pseudonymity can inculcate a form of scholarly paranoia in the Flanneur who begins to see traces of his hand everywhere. In her review of *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* in *The Parish Review*, Taaffe attests to

a spreading sense of misgiving: 'I feel uncertain about the story's provenance, though on reflection I am uncertain even about Lir O'Connor.'¹²⁰

By engendering a critical heritage shot through with uncertainty and hesitation, O'Nolan's own archive stands as a curious double of the narrative scene of *The Third Policeman* (itself doubled elsewhere in *The Irish Times* letters and the critical fallout of the Joyce interview affair). Indeed, taken in their entirety, O'Nolan's 'frequent disappearing acts under cover of pseudonymity, his arsenal of disguises, his generic eclecticism and his debunking of fantasies of immortality seem designed to pull the rug from under the scholar's feet.'¹²¹ And if O'Nolan's hoax aesthetic works to make us all paranoid readers, then perhaps as we turn to the perils and pleasures of reading O'Nolan's own reading – his libraries, marginalia, and genetic debris – we need to consider not only how we read, but also how we are compelled to misread this archive.

Notes & references

¹ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* [hereafter CL], 15 December 1950, 6.

² Carol Taaffe, 'Plain People and the Corduroys: The Citizen and the Artist,' in *'Is it about a bicycle?': Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts, 2011), 113.

³ Nick Groom, 'Romanticism and Forgery,' *Literature Compass* 4, no. 6 (2007): 1634.

⁴ See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2002), 56. O'Nolan most explicitly handles these devices in *An Béal Bocht*, which is proffered as the authentic Gaeltacht autobiography of Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa, as bequeathed to the reader by the text's 'editor' Myles na gCopaleen.

⁵ O'Nolan's personal copy of the text was an 1865 edition published under the title *Gulliver's Travels into several Remote Regions of the World* and attributed to 'Dean Swift.' As well as illustrations by T. Morten, this edition contains footnoted explanatory notes by poet and Royal Irish Academy Vice-President John Francis Waller. It is conceivable that this layout, in relation to the book's theme, was an influence on the form of *The Third Policeman*. Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, 'An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College,' *The Parish Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013).

⁶ Joseph Brooker, "'That Carrousel Inside and Outside My Head": Flann O'Brien and *Pale Fire*,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 120–33.

⁷ Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6, 9.

⁸ Flann O'Brien, letter, *The Irish Times* (15 October 1938): 7.

⁹ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 26.

¹⁰ Niall Montgomery, 'An Aristophanic Sorcerer,' *The Irish Times*, 2 April 1966, 7.

¹¹ 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), 49.

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- ¹² Keith Donohue, *The Irish Anatomist: A Study of Flann O'Brien* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 2002), 16.
- ¹³ For a taste of the self-positioning that might have provoked O'Nolan, consider Ó Faolain's declaration that as distinguished from the audiences or literary critics whose philistinism was ruining Irish theatre, he and O'Connor 'are both artists' (Sean Ó Faolain, letter, *The Irish Times*, 15 October 1938, 7); or the exchange in January 1939, following the *Times's* panning of O'Connor's play *Time's Pocket*, in which they 'compare the critical reception of their plays to the treatment meted out to Chekov and Ibsen' and 'complain about the credentials of the *Times* critic' (Donohue, 16).
- ¹⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Maurice Walsh's New Novel,' *The Irish Times* (20 July 1940): 5.
- ¹⁵ Oscar Love, letter, *The Irish Times* (25 July 1940): 4. Love is directly alluding to Kavanagh's claim, made in his 20 July review, that 'the boy scout may be said to represent civilisation of its lowest'; and in truth it was this remark, rather than the condemnation of writers and readers, that drew the majority of the correspondents' ire.
- ¹⁶ N.S. Harvey, letter, *The Irish Times* (25 July 1940): 4.
- ¹⁷ Patrick Kavanagh, 'Spraying the Potatoes,' *The Irish Times* (27 July 1940): 5.
- ¹⁸ F. O'Brien, letter, *The Irish Times* (29 July 1940): 2.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Brooker, 'Ploughmen without Land: Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Ronan McDonald, Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 98.
- ²⁰ See, for instance, Tony Gray, 'Mr Smyllie, Sir' (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1991), 168; Flore Coulouma, 'Tall Tales and Short Stories: *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Dialogic Imagination,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 165; Thierry Robin, 'Tall Tales or "Petites Histoires": History and the Void in "The Martyr's Crown" and *Thirst*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 90.
- ²¹ Brian McHale, "'A Poet May Not Exist": Mock-Hoaxes and the Construction of National Identity,' in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 236–7.
- ²² Donohue, 15, 16.
- ²³ Luna O'Connor, letter, *The Irish Times* (19 June 1940): 4.
- ²⁴ Sean Ó Faolain, letter, *The Irish Times* (13 January 1939): 5; Frank O'Connor, letter, *The Irish Times* (13 January 1939): 5.
- ²⁵ Lir O'Connor, letter, *The Irish Times* (30 July 1940): 6.
- ²⁶ K.K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 171.
- ²⁷ Margaret Heckard, 'The Literary Reverberations of a Fake Interview with John Stanislaus Joyce,' *James Joyce Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 468.
- ²⁸ John Gordon, *Finnegans Wake: A Plot Summary* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 91.
- ²⁹ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), 23–4.
- ³⁰ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 636.
- ³¹ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 192, quoting O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, 636.
- ³² Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, 193.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 200.
- ³⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 698.
- ³⁶ McHale, 237.
- ³⁷ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 325, 353, 236, 251, 252.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 236, 373.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 376, 325, 374.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 374, 305, 264.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 325, 374.

⁴² M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 53.

⁴³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 373.

⁴⁴ One such instance is de Selby's reported 'inability to distinguish between men and women,' culminating in his social *faux pas* of referring to the Countess Schnapper as 'that cultured old gentleman' and a 'crafty old boy.' As a scholarly footnote verifies, 'in the few references which he ever made to his own mysterious family [de Selby] called his mother "a very distinguished gentleman" (*Lux Mundi* p. 307), "a man of stern habits" (*ibid*, p. 308) and "a man's man" (Kraus: *Briefe*, xvii).' *Ibid.*, 374.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 303. In support of this reading, Hatchjaw puts forward 'many ingenious if not quite convincing arguments, not the least of them being that de Selby was known to have received considerable royalties from this book which he did not write, "a procedure that would be of a piece with the master's ethics".' The narrator concludes that 'the theory is, however, not one which will commend itself to the serious student.' *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 374; emphasis added.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁴⁹ Booker, 52.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 229.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *CL*, 5 January 1942, 6.

⁵⁴ See Michel Foucault, '*Society Must Be Defended*': *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 9–10.

⁵⁵ Robert Markley, *Dying Planet: Mars in Science and the Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 207.

⁵⁶ Aaron Bibb, 'Vision, Paranoia, and the Creative Power of Obsessive Interpretation,' *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 99.

⁵⁷ Thierry Robin, 'Representation as a Hollow Form, or the Paradoxical Magic of Idiocy and Skepticism in Flann O'Brien's Works,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 35–6.

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 17* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 261.

⁵⁹ *CL*, 19 December 1964, 10. Myles speaks to the ideological underpinnings of various paranoid readings of Shakespeare's signature by noting that the suspicions by which 'William is accounted a sham, and true authorship of the plays imputed variously to certain Earls of Rutland, Derby and Oxford, to Kit Marlowe [...] devolved on the assumption, held to be self-evident fact, that the plays [...] could not have been the work of an uneducated actor' (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 352.

⁶² Booker, 50.

⁶³ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 352.

⁶⁴ Booker, 145, fn7.

⁶⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 353.

⁶⁶ See Booker, 145, and Taaffe, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 88–9.

⁶⁷ Kelly Anspaugh, 'Agonising with Joyce: *At Swim-Two-Birds* as Thanatography,' in *At Swim-Two-Birds by Flann O'Brien: A Casebook*, ed. Thomas C. Foster (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 11–2.

⁶⁸ Taaffe, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 88–9. This broad charge is developed in numerous *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns that test aesthetic models against their self-claimed value in the marketplace. See, for example, the selection 'Waama, etc.' in Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 15–40.

⁶⁹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 3/4 (Summer 2002): 58–74.

⁷⁰ Bibb, 99.

⁷¹ David Spurr, 'Paranoid Modernism in Joyce and Kafka,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 178.

⁷² David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalisation of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

⁷³ Kenneth Paradis, *Sex, Paranoia, and Modern Masculinity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 24. Here we might organise a canon of 'paranoid modernism' between the bookends of T.E. Hulme's claim that 'nothing is bad in itself except disorder; all that is put in order in a hierarchy is good' and T.S. Eliot's advocacy of the mythic method as 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.' T.E. Hulme, 'A Tory Philosophy,' *Commentator* (3 April, 1912): 295; T.S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 177. Anchoring points between these coordinates might include aesthetic manifestoes and -isms, Joycean epiphanies, Yeatsian gyres, and various other modernist spectacles of insight.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 251, 276.

⁷⁵ Booker, 12.

⁷⁶ At Trinity College Dublin, Beckett 'delivered a long, scholarly paper to the Modern Languages Society about a literary movement called "Le Concentrisme," [...] which was supposedly revolutionising Parisian intellectual circles [...]. The body of the membership, all serious scholars, spent the remainder of the meeting diligently discussing the possible literary merit of this shocking new school of writing.' Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 50.

⁷⁷ 'Ern Malley' was a fictitious poet created by James McAuley and Harold Stewart in order critique what they saw as a decline into incoherence in the transition from early to late modernism. The hoax manifested itself in the successful submission of a series of seventeen 'nonsensical' poems to Australian modernist poetry magazine *Angry Penguins*.

⁷⁸ Under the pseudonyms 'Emanuel Morgan' and 'Anne Knish,' American writers Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke published *Spectra: A Book of Poetic Experiments* (1916), a volume of poetry intended to hoax Imagism.

⁷⁹ John Attridge, 'Mythomaniac Modernism: Lying and Bullshit in Flann O'Brien,' in Murphet, McDonald, and Morrell (eds.), 39.

⁸⁰ Taaffe, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 88. 'So much for the readers,' F. O'Brien wrote in his mock praise of Kavanagh's 'Spraying the Potatoes,' 'or, if one may term them so, the anti-writers. Now if we turn to the writers we find that the same boots is also on the other foot.' F. O'Brien, letter, *The Irish Times* (29 July 1940): 2.

⁸¹ Spurr, 179.

⁸² Paradis, 23.

⁸³ Markley, 207.

⁸⁴ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 231.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁶ N.S. Harvey, letter, *The Irish Times* (25 July 1940): 4.

⁸⁷ Paul de Man, 'Kant and Schiller,' in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 130.

⁸⁸ De Man, 'Kant and Schiller,' 150.

⁸⁹ Paul de Man, 'Aesthetic Formalisation: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*,' in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 264.

⁹⁰ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael: A German Destiny in Diary Form* (Berlin: Amok Press, 1929), qtd in Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 111.

⁹¹ Redfield, 111.

⁹² O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 311.

⁹³ Ruthven, 58.

⁹⁴ Paradis, 24.

⁹⁵ This darker consequence of a form of paranoid misreading that effaces the other's difference, and ultimately the stakes of its existence, is implied in de Selby's claims to be able to 'state the physiological "group" of any person merely from a brief study of the letters of his name after the word had been "rationalised" to allow for variations of language.' From this analysis de Selby concludes, in terms particularly resonant with the socio-political environment of 1930s Europe, that 'certain "groups" [are] universally "repugnant" to other "groups".' O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 254.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁹⁷ 'I could get rid of John Divney,' he speculates, while imagining visiting upon MacCruiskeen and Pluck 'putrescent offals, insupportable smells, un beholdable corruptions containing tangles of gleaming slimy vipers each of them deadly and foul of breath, millions of diseased and decayed monsters [...], rats with horns walking upside down along the ceiling pipes trailing their leprous tails on the policemen's heads.' *Ibid.*, 395.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Paradis, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Lir O'Connor, letter, 6.

¹⁰¹ R.W. Maslen, 'Fantasies of Complicity in the Second World War,' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 521 (emphasis added).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁰³ *CL*, 4 February 1965, 10. Myles adds, 'In a grim irony that is not without charm, the book survived the war while Hitler did not.'

¹⁰⁴ De Man's own complicity is marked by his wartime contributions as cultural editor for the Nazi-controlled and anti-Semitic newspapers *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land*, in which he had idealised the German nation in aesthetic terms (not to mention his charges of misreading as his own claim to insight).

⁸⁴ See *CL*, 7 July 1958, 6, in which Myles confirms his own critique of Joyce scholars by writing: 'I do not think I have ever heard or read comment on Joyce's work that did not seem to me to be fundamentally mistaken and the man himself – whom I once met – was by no means the last to be amused by the pre-occupation he had become with eggheads.' It hardly bears mentioning that 'Myles' had never met Joyce in person.

¹⁰⁵ Ruthven, 171.

¹⁰⁶ The dangers inherent to reading are implied early in the novel, in the scholar's unpacking of de Selby's discourse 'on the subject of houses [*fn. Golden Hours*, ii, 261],' which 'he regards as a row of necessary evils. The softening and degeneration of the human race he attributes to its progressive predilection for interiors and waning interest in the art of going out and staying there. This in turn he sees as the result of the rise of such pursuits as reading.' O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 236.

¹⁰⁷ *CL*, 12 February 1943, 3. O'Nolan subsequently rewrote this passage for publication on 7 May 1954. Jon Day addresses the consequences of this self-plagiarism for O'Nolan's deconstructive turns against the authority of both writer and reader, as well as his wilful pulling of the rug out from under his earnest critics: 'with the writer acting as editor of his own material and reforming it for a new audience, the limitations of establishing a "definitive" copy [...] becomes apparent. Are we to interpret such changes as authorial "corrections"? Or do they provide an entirely new piece of work [...]?' Jon Day, 'Cuttings from *Cruiskeen Lawn*: Bibliographical Issues in the Republication of Myles na gCopaleen's Journalism,' in Baines (ed.), 43–4.

¹⁰⁸ *CL*, 10 November 1941, 6.

¹⁰⁹ *CL*, 19 July 1946, 4.

¹¹⁰ *CL*, 10 June 1961, 10; *CL*, 10 June 1961, 10.

¹¹¹ *CL*, 9 October 1945, 2.

¹¹² Brian O'Nolan, letter, *The Irish Press* (4 January 1939).

¹¹³ Quidnunc, 'An Irishman's Diary,' *The Irish Times* (23 July 1960): 8 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁴ Ute Anna Mittermaier, 'In search of Mr Love; or, The Internationalist Credentials of "Myles before Myles",' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber, (eds.), 95.

¹¹⁵ For the most thorough summary of the debate over the attribution of Love's letters, see Mittermaier, 95–109.

¹¹⁶ See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 198–201; and John Wyse Jackson, 'The Mysteries of Flann O'Brien,' *The Spectator* (30 January 1988): 31. For the most recent work on the Blakesley question, see Pádraig Ó Méaloid, 'The Cardinal & the Corpse: A Flanntasy in Several Parts,' *gorse* 3 (March 2015): 218–37.

¹¹⁷ Tellingly, this uncertainty was cultivated by O'Nolan himself, when a seemingly credulous reporter from *TIME Magazine* reproduced as printed fact O'Nolan's word, given in interview, of his 1933 visit to Germany to 'study the language.' By O'Nolan's somewhat farfetched recounting, while there he was 'beaten up and bounced out of a beer hall for uncomplimentary references to Adolf Hitler' and 'met and married 18-year-old Clara Ungerland, blonde, violin-playing daughter of a Cologne basket weaver. She died a month later. O'Nolan returned to Eire, and never mentions her.' Anon. [Stanford Lee Cooper], 'Eire's Columnist,' *TIME Magazine* 42, no. 8, 23 August 1943, 31.

¹¹⁸ 'Death of Mr Niall Montgomery,' *The Irish Times* (13 March 1987): 8; Taaffe, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 15, 163–6.

¹¹⁹ John McCourt, 'Myles na gCopaleen: A Portrait of the Artist as a Joyce Scholar,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), 113.

¹²⁰ Carol Taaffe, 'Review of Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (eds.), *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*,' in Maebh Long, (ed.), *The Parish Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 50.

¹²¹ Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber, 'Editors' Introduction,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), 13–4.