

# *The Dalkey Archive*

## & Pierre Teilhard de Selby

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There are several technical oddities in Flann O'Brien's last novel, *The Dalkey Archive*. For instance, from the first page there is a suggestion that the third-person narrative is being focalised through Sergeant Fottrell. After a brief description of a granite hill covered in furze and bracken, the text descends into alliterative repetition: 'vert, verdant, vertical, verticillate, vertiginous, in the shade of branches even vespertine. Heavens, has something escaped from the lexicon of Sergeant Fottrell?'<sup>1</sup> This narrative intrusion is particularly odd since we do not meet Fottrell for some time, and most of the novel was changed from the first-person perspective of Mick Shaughnessy to the third-person at a late stage in its composition, hence the overwhelming focalisation through Mick. This is only one of the burrs that might justify Maebh Long's observation that *The Dalkey Archive* 'reads with all the random noise, inconsistencies and disorder of the archive.'<sup>2</sup> The recent publication of an inventory of Brian O'Nolan's library is an occasion for us to explore some more overtones between the archive and the 'random noise' in this novel, and to examine the author's intellectual engagements. One such engagement is O'Nolan's apparent interest in the French philosopher and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, for the Irish writer's library at Boston College contains copies of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (T. W. Moody's 1959 English translation) and *The Future of Man* (Norman Denny's 1964 translation).<sup>3</sup>

Many aspects of the later incarnation of De Selby in *The Dalkey Archive*, plundered from the draft of *The Third Policeman* (1967; written 1939–40), find parallels in the work of Teilhard de Chardin. Of particular relevance is Teilhard de Chardin's best-known tract *Le phénomène humain* (1955; written 1938–40), a complex attempt to think about the teleology of creation and to discern where humanity as a whole is going. Although Teilhard de Chardin's reception is mainly discernible in the genre of science fiction, as well as in the philosophy of Ray Kurzweil and other transhumanists, there are numerous enlightening parallels between O'Nolan's novel and Teilhard de Chardin. In particular, De Selby and Teilhard de Chardin share a negative image of convergence with the divine – for them, salvation and annihilation meet. Reading the De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive* as a character through Teilhard de Chardin suggests that O'Nolan was interested in the idea of a philosopher who was as religious as he

was scientific.<sup>4</sup> This allows us to add another thinker to the canon of unorthodox, speculative philosophers whom O'Nolan encountered alongside J. W. Dunne.<sup>5</sup>

But there is a caveat: *The Dalkey Archive* is a text which problematises any neat correspondence or lines of influence between De Selby and Teilhard de Chardin. *The Dalkey Archive* counters this suggestion because it is, above all, a novel about repudiating influence. The treatment Joyce receives is the clearest indicator of this. Although I do not want to imply a literary hierarchy, we might figure the dilemma in the following way: while the peaks of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* assist a slow drift to the ground-level of influences, the valleys of the later works make *ascending* to that zone more difficult. It is difficult to work against the nullifying pull that the ideas in this later novel exude. This novel pummels all, including itself, to a fine dust.

Before discussing the De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive*, we should tease out the differences between this character and the earlier de Selby of *The Third Policeman*. The prototype de Selby is not bent on world-destruction. There is no DMP in *The Third Policeman*, although omnium serves in the text as an equivalent phlebotinum.<sup>6</sup> In *The Dalkey Archive*, De Selby is a living, breathing character that we meet, whereas the earlier de Selby is a historical philosopher whom the unnamed narrator admires. O'Nolan's discovery of Teilhard de Chardin may have given him license to make this character our contemporary, rather than a historical personage. The first de Selby is filtered, usually, through the escapades and arguments of his commentators, Hatchjaw and Bassett. His theories also often introduce the individual chapters of O'Nolan's novel. He believes that houses cause human degeneration and so designs new houses either without walls or without roofs. He has an onomatopoeic theory of names, suggests human movement is a hallucination, and investigates time through mirrors to view his younger self.<sup>7</sup> These theories and the many others he advances have no correlate in the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin.

The point has been reached where a summary of Teilhard de Chardin's work must be attempted. In his introduction to the 1959 English translation of *The Phenomenon of Man*, Julian Huxley, an evolutionary biologist who became a science-fiction writer and public intellectual, compliments the French writer for taking evolution's consequences for theology seriously.<sup>8</sup> This is one of Teilhard de Chardin's major contributions, and *The Phenomenon of Man* is remarkable for its attempt to see and narrate the whole universe. It discusses the 'within' and 'without' of things, the origins of the universe, and the emergence of life, all in overwhelmingly broad brushstrokes. Teilhard de Chardin has a strongly teleological view of history and evolution and aims to grasp the universe in its totality. Unapologetically anthropocentric, Eurocentric, and Christian, he claims – following Herbert Spencer's

*First Principles* (1861) – that evolution exhibits a tendency towards ‘complexification.’<sup>9</sup> This is a process of layering and accretion that results in increasingly complex structures. The ‘world-stuff’ is being ‘rolled up’ or ‘folded in’ upon itself: ‘wherever we look on earth, the growth of the “within” only takes place thanks to a *double related involution*, the coiling up of the molecule upon itself and the coiling up of the planet upon itself.’<sup>10</sup> Once thought is born, humanity begins evolving primarily on the level of what he terms the ‘noosphere,’ the sphere of human thought, mind, or soul.<sup>11</sup> The word derives from the Greek *νοῦς* (mind), and Teilhard de Chardin was instrumental in popularising the term. This new evolutionary process and tendency towards complexity will culminate, he argues, in a convergence with the divine, which he dubs the *Omega point*. Teilhard de Chardin refers to the movement towards the *Omega point* as *Christogenesis* because this is the point at which Christ will truly be manifest. Although this point lies in the future, Teilhard de Chardin emphasises that it *already exists* and is *transcendent*. Humanity is being pulled towards this point.

Such is an overview of a remarkable and strange book prone to sweeping statements. Some of its more unusual moments might be worth delving into. Teilhard de Chardin realises how important machines are to man’s evolution, especially when it comes to developing man’s collective consciousness: ‘how can we fail to see the machine as playing a constructive part in the creation of a truly collective consciousness?’<sup>12</sup> His stress on the interdependence of mankind and its tools, i.e. machines, may have some kinship with Sergeant Fottrell’s Mollycule theory in *The Dalkey Archive*, were it not for the fact that this was extracted from the languishing draft of *The Third Policeman*.<sup>13</sup> This is not a question of influence but of parallels, as *The Third Policeman* was composed earlier than the first English publication of this text. As Fottrell puts it: ‘Everything is composed of small mollycules of itself and they are flying around in concentric circles and arcs and segments and innumerable various other routes [...]. What is a sheep only millions of little bits of sheepness?’<sup>14</sup> In a similar manner, Teilhard de Chardin suggests that changes of scale do not result in qualitative changes of attributes with regard to mind or soul, and so some aspect of mind or soul must be attributable to atoms.<sup>15</sup> He infers the presence of mind in all matter at all levels, even at the molecular level. Teilhard de Chardin and Fottrell, the ‘poor man’s De Selby,’ share some modes of cognition implicitly.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, both Teilhard de Chardin and many of O’Nolan’s characters employ syntonic reasoning. Throughout Teilhard de Chardin’s work, *is* and *ought* are constantly switching places and leading each other in an elaborate dance. Time and again, when arguing against a nihilistic, non-progressive outlook, Teilhard de Chardin finds it enough to say that life would be unliveable without something worthwhile lying ahead – and therefore it must lie ahead, since we are living. This line

of argumentation is most discernible in the more polemical moments of the collection of essays in *The Future of Man*, a chronological collection released five years after *The Phenomenon of Man*, which largely continues and rehashes the train of thought set out in his *magnum opus*. This kind of syntonic reasoning also operates in *The Third Policeman*. Sergeant Pluck initially claims that since the narrator has no name 'the law cannot touch' him. But when this reasoning is used by the protagonist in an attempt to avoid the death penalty, the absence of a name can be used to 'hang the life' out of him; Pluck claims that because our protagonist has no name, when he is hanged he 'is not hanged at all' because 'there is no entry to be made in the death papers.'<sup>17</sup> If one has no name, one might escape the law or not, according to principles which are never overt and which are always subordinate to the speaker's desired destination. As the narrator's soul puts it, it seems as if '*Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and have to be believed.*'<sup>18</sup>

Both De Selby and Teilhard de Chardin are scientist-theologians. In *The Dalkey Archive*, the character of James Joyce sees the conflation of religion and science in the figure of De Selby as a 'Fascinating mixture,' but notes that it is 'not incongruous.'<sup>19</sup> In the same novel, De Selby tries to destroy the world by removing all the oxygen from the air – rather than gaining a noosphere, we are losing the atmosphere.<sup>20</sup> Where Teilhard de Chardin and De Selby most forcefully converge is the point where we would imagine they are most different. Teilhard de Chardin remains largely silent about the nature of the *Omega point* and the form which the convergence between humanity and the divine will take. Is this moment of revelation an end to history? Is it a kind of heaven on earth, or in the stars? In *The Future of Man*, he asks what lies ahead for mankind: death or escape from the planet? It is a rather strange dichotomy to set up. For him, there is no spectrum of alternatives nestled between these two polarities. His answer, some pages later, is that joining the *Omega point*, or reaching it, may be a 'phenomena outwardly akin to death.'<sup>21</sup>

De Selby's aim is to destroy the world by annihilating the atmosphere with a mysterious substance known as DMP. When De Selby speaks to Augustine, he releases a small quantity of his atmosphere-annihilating substance, only allowing 'timeless nitrogen' to remain, and so allowing access to the world of the dead.<sup>22</sup> DMP, then, is the agent for access to the divine realm. But amongst all this pseudo-science, the very fact that Augustine speaks in a Dublin accent works powerfully to undermine any suspension of disbelief. For De Selby, this complete annihilation of the atmosphere is salvation, but 'by way of complete destruction.'<sup>23</sup> As Long puts it, 'removing oxygen from the atmosphere [...] becomes automatically a religious act of approaching God.'<sup>24</sup> Although both Teilhard de Chardin and De Selby share a desire for convergence with the divine, for De Selby such a convergence also constitutes the

apocalypse. While this is a possibility that Teilhard de Chardin entertains, he does not go so far as De Selby in endorsing or pursuing it.<sup>25</sup> Where the *Omega point* in Teilhard de Chardin remains an underdetermined moment of ecstatic and mystical collectivity for humanity and the divine, O'Nolan fleshes it out in a radically negative fashion. For De Selby, humanity is 'debauched and aborted' and hence 'merits destruction.'<sup>26</sup> De Selby is essentially a pessimist and nihilist, whereas Teilhard de Chardin is an optimist whose aim is to restore his readers' faith in the future, as *The Future of Man* attempts to do many times over. If the *Omega point* is outwardly akin to death for Teilhard de Chardin, the real emphasis is placed on the fact that inwardly it is a form of union with the absolute. De Selby is less concerned about humanity's collective ascent to such a union.

What might O'Nolan's text itself have to say about such a reading of the later incarnation of De Selby as a modified or expanded Teilhard de Chardin? The problem with posing such a question is that much of *The Dalkey Archive* exhibits a serious unease about the adequacy of figurative language, an unease about the ability of certain figures, metaphors, and allusions to convey anything in terms of something else. For example, when Chapter XII opens we are offered the following metaphor for Mick's mental state: 'The floor of that apartment in Mick's head which he liked to call the spare room was becoming a bit littered and untidy.'<sup>27</sup> But this metaphor is immediately followed by another: 'Several tides seemed to be running simultaneously on the same shore, if that metaphor serves better.' Does it serve better? The text is wringing its hands. The narrator interrogates the gap between signifier and signified; the second attempt implicitly gestures at the first metaphor's inadequacies, and a different vehicle is offered. In both sentences, O'Nolan highlights the spurious nature of the links between tenor and vehicle. This is an interrogation of the nature of metaphor itself, of any attempt to convey one thing in terms of another that is incongruous with it.<sup>28</sup>

Equally, specific associations between similar proper names are negated. In the first chapter, O'Nolan's narrative immediately disavows the relation between Dalkey's Vico road and the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico: 'But why this name Vico road? Is there to be recalled in this magnificence a certain philosopher's pattern of man's lot on earth – thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos? Hardly.'<sup>29</sup> Although Chris Morash refuses to take O'Nolan's text at its word, this refusal is important and worth entertaining in all its strangeness.<sup>30</sup> It calls the Italian philosopher to mind more prominently than no comment at all, but nonetheless the disavowal of a link between these identical proper names is a serious point. If even here there is no allusion, then what is one to make of any attempt to suggest that Teilhard de Chardin is linked to De Selby in any way but the most accidental?

Just as any allusion to Vico is held in suspension, one should be cautious about forcing any clear link between Teilhard de Chardin and De Selby. We must pay attention to divergences as much as convergences in this work, and learn to live with them, in the mess and the mix. There is something at work in this moment which negates any attempt to make a strong statement on the importance of allusions or influences in O'Nolan's work. That is to say, from the very first page *The Dalkey Archive* declares itself to be uncooperative with certain established modes of literary criticism, where everything must always remind one of something else. From the first pages, it declares: *Leave your learning here, at the entrance, and don't drape it over me. Do not alter me.*

Mick desires to wed De Selby and Joyce because he seems to feel that this conjunction would produce astounding texts, a 'new Bible.'<sup>31</sup> But the two fail to meet. *The Dalkey Archive* is an immense Keats and Chapman anecdote shorn of a pun, an exercise in disappointment. There is no convergence; a major plotline fails to culminate. Equally, the connections between Teilhard de Chardin and De Selby should probably be held in suspension, as informative as their similarities may be. What O'Nolan's later texts ask of us is that we school ourselves in disappointment. This is not merely to repeat, in the tradition of Cronin and others, that O'Nolan's later novels are failures, but to stay with these texts and refuse to repudiate them in advance because of such aesthetic evaluations. This text does not respond well to the demands of literary criticism, in particular criticism with an archival emphasis, and this gives its title all the more irony. The imperfect convergence between Teilhard de Chardin and De Selby necessitates a more tenuous and sensitive argument, one that remains alert to O'Nolan's interrogation of such acts of metaphoric coupling.

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## Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 191.

<sup>3</sup> Myles na gCopaleen's residence, *The Irish Times*, also ran some articles on Teilhard de Chardin's work, albeit shortly after O'Nolan's death, testifying to either popular interest in the figure, or a very slow news day. See Anon, 'Teilhard de Chardin: Scientist, Visionary, and Theologian,' *The Irish Times* (5 August 1966), and 'Good Attendance at Meeting on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,' *The Irish Times* (14 February 1967). Subject to a ban by the Catholic Church (though not placed on their list of prohibited books), Teilhard de Chardin had been under strict instructions not to publish *Le phénomène humain* during his lifetime because of its non-orthodox argument. The Catholic Church has since re-assessed his importance. Perhaps some attraction towards banned or censored works drew O'Nolan to this thinker, especially as O'Nolan imagined, and hoped, that *The Hard Life* would be banned upon release. He wrote to Timothy O'Keeffe on 1 September 1961 that 'the mere name of Father Kurt Fahrt S.J. will

justify the thunder clap' and imagined this would 'lead to wirepulling behind the scenes to have the book banned,' cited in Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990), 214. See *Ibid.* 233.

<sup>4</sup> In O'Nolan's work, both of those labels may deserve to be blunted by a preceding 'pseudo-.'

<sup>5</sup> Mark O'Connell, "'How to handle eternity": Infinity and the Theories of J. W. Dunne in the Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*,' *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2009): 223–37.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Applied Phlebotinum,' *TV Tropes*, accessed 30 March 2015, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AppliedPhlebotinum>.

<sup>7</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 22, 42 n.3, 52–3, 66–7.

<sup>8</sup> Julian Huxley, 'Introduction,' in Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 19, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. T. W. Moody (London: Collins, 1959), 224, 212, 163ff. For more on complexification, see Siôn Cowell, *The Teilhard Lexicon: Understanding the Language, Terminology, and Vision of the Writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 38–9.

<sup>10</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 73 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Cowell, 131.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 161. Teilhard de Chardin is most famous for predicting the internet. *Ibid.* 162.

<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 53ff.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 64, 102–3, 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 172. On a related note: suspicion towards Teilhard de Chardin's order, the Jesuits, is subtly present in *The Dalkey Archive*. When offered a 'sugar-top' cake, Mick wonders if this is part of the 'sybaritism,' or love of luxury, that the Jesuits exhibit. *Ibid.* 117. See *Ibid.* 120. This is quite light-hearted, but wariness and outright disparagement of the Jesuits is more heavily present in Flann O'Brien, *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* (London: Souvenir, 2011), 75–84, 123, 128, 137.

<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, 91, 116. See 'in a converging Universe each element achieves completeness, not directly in a separate consummation, but by incorporation in a higher pole of consciousness in which alone it can enter into contact with all others. By a sort of inward turn toward the Other its growth culminates in an act of giving and in excentration. What does this mean except that at this final stage there reappears the mystical 'annihilation' advocated by those whom we called earlier [...] the partisans of Withdrawal' (47).

<sup>22</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Long, 198.

<sup>25</sup> For both De Selby and Teilhard de Chardin, Father Cobble is absolutely correct to say that 'there might be some parallel between the propagation of the faith and the worldwide dissemination' of DMP. O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 122.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> See *Ibid.* 145. I am paraphrasing Joyce's attempt to discuss a writing practice which translates spiritual ideas into words here.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Morash, 'Augustine... O'Brien... Vico... Joyce,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1997), 134.

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, *Dalkey Archive*, 153.