

Myles in Space

Science Fiction & *Cruiskeen Lawn*

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The following essay considers the frequent appearances of science fiction tropes and plots in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column. Having been overshadowed by the Flann O'Brien novels for close to fifty years, *Cruiskeen Lawn* is now acknowledged as an equally important part of Brian O'Nolan's literary output, deserving of critical attention in its own right. Within the confines of this column, he lampooned various literary genres as often as he satirised the politics of the day. With this in mind, it seems apposite to consider the occasional science-fictional rants of O'Nolan's *Irish Times* alter-ego, Myles na gCopaleen. Myles, distrustful of politicians and scientists alike, was suspicious of the 'space race' and employed science fiction clichés to criticise it; at the same time, however, the comic possibilities of living in a science-fictional future evidently appealed to him. The more he engaged with the genre, the more he made use of it to articulate a number of his recurring concerns, specifically regarding the conflict between faith and science; with the passing of years, his intermittent use of science fiction tropes grew increasingly darker and more pessimistic.

In a 1963 letter to publisher Timothy O'Keeffe concerning *The Dalkey Archive*, O'Nolan professed 'a horrible fear that some stupid critic (and which of them is not) will praise me as a master of science fiction.'¹ Though I would not go so far as to call him a 'master' of the genre, it is evident that, in spite of his protestations, O'Nolan had an abiding interest in it. This interest is so obvious, in fact, that his profession of a 'horrible fear' could be considered briar patching.

Among his earliest works is a short story in Irish (written as Brian Ó Nualláin), 'Díoghaltas ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliadhain 2032' which I translated as 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*.² Originally published in *The Irish Press* in 1932 (a publication not generally known for its interest in genre fiction), the story sends the narrator forward in time to an Ireland where English is no longer spoken; at one point, he gazes in astonishment at the date on a receipt – 12/02/2032 – and then remarks that he thought it was only the eleventh.³ This gag demonstrates that Ó Nualláin/O'Nolan was familiar enough with the clichés of time-travel stories to be able to parody them. Another story, also published in *The Irish Press* in 1932 and translated in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, tells of the grotesque giant

John Bull visiting Ireland as part of a research trip for 'Connradh an Béarla,' a society aimed at the restoration of the English language.⁴ Deliberately written in bad Irish, the story satirises some of the more earnest (but inept) efforts at language revival in the early twentieth century, but the setting – a future world where only Irish is spoken and society has regressed to medievalism – is of some interest to the science fiction scholar.

His early short stories thus demonstrate a familiarity with the genre, but they also reflect a teleological view of the world in which Catholic teaching, economic progress, and Newtonian science are all compatible with one another; to a certain extent, this worldview may also account for his use of supernatural themes and figures in his experiments with a genre that (superficially, at any rate) emphasises rationality and plausibility. Whimsical though these stories are, they assume time is linear, moving in a forward direction from past to future; in Christian theology, this continuum culminates in the Apocalypse and/or the manifestation of God. With this Newtonian conception of time, it is possible for religion and the sciences to exist in a state of non-contradiction.

By the time O'Nolan was writing *The Third Policeman* in the autumn of 1939, however, his view of the sciences was turning grimmer. Already pessimistic in temperament, his outlook on life was probably not improved by the scientific discoveries of the age. Quantum physics was not as compatible with Catholic theology (or, indeed, common sense) as Newtonian physics had seemed to be. While the new sciences appealed to him in broad strokes as an interested layman, he remained anxious about the fate of his immortal soul; he was not alone in this anxiety: as described by Alana Gillespie, the general Irish attitude towards science was merely open-minded at best, dismissive and suspicious at worst.⁵ Like some of his Irish contemporaries, he turned to the bizarre theories of J. W. Dunne, whose non-linear Serialism purported to prove the immortality of the human soul.⁶ Even though O'Nolan's appropriation of Serialism was primarily ironic, the resonances between Dunne's theories and the description of time in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* are what enable the Catholic time-travel of *The Dalkey Archive*.⁷ Gillespie argues that in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns dealing with science, Myles presents a Menippean satire of the aforementioned lukewarm-to-hostile Irish cultural attitudes to scientific endeavour, submitting them to 'dialogic testing' by pushing them to their (il)logical extremes; thus, it is difficult to say for certain where he himself stood on the issue.⁸

Along with the theological implications of non-linear time, the political and military applications of science constituted another moral dilemma. Following the 'outsize barbarity' of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,⁹ this anxiety escalated into a full-blown philosophical crisis, hinted at with a telling spoonerism: 'Talking still of the abombic tomb – I *meant* atomic bomb but leave it, I am a neutron in such

matters.¹⁰ O'Nolan's subsequent full-blown crisis of conscience is explicitly articulated in *The Dalkey Archive*, which is dedicated to his Guardian Angel and depicts a direct assault upon religion by a mad scientist. Around the time of its publication, O'Nolan wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for the *Guardian* in which he lists a number of misfortunes, illnesses and injuries that befell him while he was writing the novel, a string of bad luck that he attributes to the vengeance of Saint Augustine.¹¹

Though he continued trying to find some compromise between science and theology, by the time *The Dalkey Archive* was published in 1964, O'Nolan seems to have come to believe that no compromise was possible – one had to wholeheartedly choose either God or science. These attempts at compromise, and his later change of heart, gave rise to idiosyncratic science-fiction texts wherein the scientific and the supernatural are equally real and mutually antagonistic. The *Cruiskeen Lawn* column provided him with a space in which he could regularly explore this conflict, though in a more straightforwardly humorous fashion than in his novels.

Definitions & Extrapolations

At this point, it may be helpful to offer a definition for what science fiction is, with the caveat that there are as many definitions of the genre as there are researchers working in the field. The critic Darko Suvin classifies science fiction, fantasy, and horror as 'ahistorical' genres (i.e. genres demonstrating a non-normative relationship to accepted human history), and I would argue that this is the most useful starting-point for coming up with definitions for each one.¹² Science fiction can be defined as a genre within which an ahistorical narrative is presented as being historically possible or inevitable, such presentation being legitimised *via* the use of naturalist philosophical precepts and scientific-sounding terminology (often derided as 'technobabble').¹³ The future depicted in *Star Trek*, for example, is supposed to be *our* future, a continuation of our history (imperfect prophecies aside); texts set in the present day (such as the television series *Fringe*) are even more explicit in their grounding of ahistorical plots in the 'real world' with pseudoscientific rationalisations.¹⁴

O'Nolan's interest in the genre is evident in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, where Jules Verne is an occasional guest star in the 'Keats and Chapman' articles and Myles regularly claims to live on the moon.¹⁵ An interest in the esoteric terminology of quantum theory informs Myles's vernacular, such as his mention of having read something by Patrick Kavanagh 'a quaternion of moons ago,'¹⁶ while the Brother, among many other things, is also something of a mad scientist, combining astronomy with research into 'quateernyuns.'¹⁷ Particularly interesting is an apparent dry-run of *The Dalkey Archive*, featuring Myles na Gopaleen as an insane scientist who has invented a substance

called 'Cruscalon' in his home laboratory in Santry, necessitating that the surrounding area be cordoned off and evacuated. Cruscalon is intended to help mankind by 'throwing the earth into neutral,' thus allowing the planet to orbit the sun without using as much fuel or incurring much wear and tear. Cruscalon also gives the user control over the planet's revolution. Among Dr na Gopaleen's other schemes is a plan to turn Earth into a bomb to repel 'attacks' from the sun and the moon, the latter of which Myles regards as an 'obsequious nocturnal spy.' At the story's close, we are told that Dr Na Gopaleen has been 'taken away by four keepers and will be out of town for forty years.'¹⁸

In a column titled 'Space, Drink, Covetousness,' Myles considers the effects that easily affordable space travel may have on Irish society. In one scenario, the author arrives home to find the house empty and a note from his 'treasured benatee or shanvan' to tell him that she has gone to the moon and has left his dinner in the oven for him. In the second scenario, a gang of drunks are 'bet out of a pub in Donnybrook' and decide to fly off into outer space in search of another bar. This glimpse of a future Dublin, where a space-ship can be 'parked' around the back of Herbert Park, indicates that perhaps Myles was, in his own way, warming to the idea of a science-fictional future.¹⁹ His science-fictional extrapolation could, however, sometimes lead to distasteful conclusions. In a column from 6 June 1962 titled 'Our Strange Day,' he makes a pragmatic, Swiftian proposal to help speed up the march of progress. Upon hearing the news of Adolf Eichmann's death sentence, Myles considers various historical means of execution, from the ancient Roman practice of *poena cullei* to the guillotine; he concludes that no punishment from the ancient or modern world seems commensurate with the magnitude and monstrosity of Eichmann's crimes. Myles then wonders whether people of this kind should be utilised in dangerous scientific endeavours, such as deep space exploration.²⁰

It was probably inevitable that Myles would eventually throw his hat in the ring as an interplanetary explorer. In 'Going Upstars,' he excuses his recent absence from the paper by explaining that he was actually on the moon, an expedition made off his own bat, without the support of the government or private enterprise: the only help he received was a pair of pills from a kindly doctor, the purpose of which is not explained. Wearing a space-suit of his own design, with one tank of liquid oxygen and another of malt (combining to make a powerful propellant), upon completing his journey the author finds himself in an environment much like a hiring fair in Tipperary, full of youths smoking Pasha cigarettes.²¹ In Myles's second instalment of his lunar journey, he refrains from describing the moon in any great detail, save to note that it has neither water nor atmosphere, but instead is abundant in very thin lava, which he supposes could be brewed into a kind of *poitín*. He plans to go back (in a sort

of 'planetary van') to plant the Irish flag and live there on a semi-permanent basis. Among his plans are the establishment of lunar branches of the Gaelic League (to be named *An Cumann Gealach*) and the 'Feeny Fayl' party, as well as a department of finance.²² He anticipates that by the time the Americans finally reach the moon, he will have been in residence there for a while, along with a 'small, subject community of Russian flyboys.'²³ It is possible that in this description of the moon, Myles was making fun of pundits and politicians who objected to the pursuit of science in Ireland on the grounds that the rural Irish had no use for it, or those who argued that scientific inquiry should be limited to agricultural science for economic reasons.²⁴ The sceptics have nothing to fear on Myles's moon: the plain people there are indistinguishable from The Plain People of Ireland.

Descriptions of the moon are scanty in the final instalment of this series, most of which is concerned with advice on how Ireland should enter the space race: Myles advises against going to the moon, which he says is full of nothing but fishermen and craters, and while Mars supposedly has an atmosphere, 'so has the inside of a Dublin gasometer.' Instead, Myles urges the Irish government to launch a mission to Saturn; after settling at least one Gael on each ring, the Irish would be able to re-establish the ancient festival of Saturnalia.²⁵ Perhaps realising that the joke was not working out as well as he had hoped, Myles abandoned it after this episode, leaving the reader to wonder what had inspired him to try it in the first place. Among the books in O'Nolan's library is Rev. William Lucas Collins's *Lucian*, an 1873 biography of the classical satirist whose works include the *True History*, one of the earliest known texts to describe a trip to the moon and give an account of its bizarre inhabitants; perhaps Myles intended to pastiche Lucian's work with this series, but knowing that the moon had neither water nor an atmosphere, could not bring himself to follow through with it.²⁶

While Myles's voyage to the moon was a bust, it is worth noting that he chose to describe space exploration in supernatural terms: the scientific and the otherworldly are equally real, it seems, but the latter is only apparent to those who are attuned to it. In the second instalment he tells us that, as an Irishman, he found the journey to the moon more arduous than American astronauts or Russian cosmonauts do, as their 'apprehension of arcane, extra-mundane emanations must be truly scant': being of a 'saintly disposition,' he was subjected to attacks from the astral plane, 'evil banshees, demoniac vampires and goodness knows what fearsome scruff from the netherest pit of hell.'²⁷ Outer space is naturally populated by such creatures, and to be unaware of them is suffer from a deficiency of perception or awareness; Myles makes no value distinction between the arcane and scientific worldviews, but seems to be equally wary of them.

In the aforementioned *Guardian* article, O'Nolan tells an apocryphal story of the discovery of a birth certificate testifying to the existence of a younger sister he never knew he had. In telling this story he includes an oddly specific denial of 'foetal dyscrasia' and 'gynandrous aberration,' and insists that Saint Augustine's 'wrath had been permitted to reach into gestation.'²⁸ O'Nolan's Catholicism was having an increasing impact on his writing, particularly with regard to an omnipresent supernatural threat – either from the 'netherest pit' or from the heavens.

Things Man Was Not Meant to Know

In a column titled 'Dream No More,' Myles voices his trepidation at the speed with which science fiction seemed to be changing into science fact, warning: 'If it is permitted to go on, there will be nothing left to dream about.' His anxiety has been triggered in this instance by the launch of an American nuclear submarine called the *Nautilus*, after Captain Nemo's war machine from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Myles does not see this as a mere homage:

There is no avoiding the conclusion that these 'scientists' read the most fanciful penny-dreadful stuff they can lay their hands on, including the comic-strips intended for juveniles interested in death-rays, space ships and sweethearts from Mars, and then quietly make all that come true. The more impossible the project, the more certain they will succeed.²⁹

Even as he disparaged the genre as juvenile, Myles frequently employed science fiction tropes to illustrate his point: the solar system of *Cruiskeen Lawn* was, in the tradition of the old pulp-fiction space operas, fully inhabited and disconcertingly fragile. Attendant with the end of World War II and the invention of nuclear weaponry was the development of a dangerous rivalry between two superpowers. Ireland, officially allied to neither NATO nor the Warsaw Pact, could only watch from the side-lines as the Cold War threatened to turn hot at a moment's notice, and the space race seemed like a prelude for something much worse.

In the first decades of independence, there was a general assumption in Irish society that an antagonism existed between science and religion, as indicated by an education system that prioritised religion over maths and science and a widespread worry that 'scientific speculation might contest religious truth.'³⁰ According to Anthony Cronin, O'Nolan was preoccupied with the idea that 'the balance of good and evil in the universe as we know it had been disturbed in favour of evil,' a notion exacerbated by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³¹ O'Nolan regarded

these attacks, according to Cronin, as an atrocity 'so great that it seemed even to strain his own general expectation of evil.'³² The intersection of politics and science now held particular horror for O'Nolan, summed up in a paragraph from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, published five days after the bombings, in which it seems to Myles that

scientists and governments are very worried about the possibility that people may not die, or may not expire in sufficiently gigantic numbers, and, *in order to make sure*, have devoted much thought and treasure to research on the subject. The most efficient device yet evolved appears to be this 'atomic bomb.' I do not find that the quest for it is an adult performance.³³

In an August 1955 column titled 'Lunacy,' Myles looks on aghast at Russian and American plans to engage in a 'celestial football match' and expresses some fear as to the outcome.³⁴ As well as the USA annexing Pluto and 'conferring upon its inhabitants the right to pursue happiness,' Myles hypothesises that manned space-flight may upset the natural order of things so much that the laws of physics themselves will be thrown into disarray. The tides will cease, and Earth will leave its normal orbital path to circle around Mars instead, thus exposing humanity to the risk of invasion from hypothetical metallic-skinned Martian slave drivers. It falls to Ireland, being devoid of any 'lunatic or interplanetary imperialisms,' to talk the superpowers down from their expansionist euphoria. To that end, Myles sends a telegram to Eisenhower reading: '*Very glad you have graciously decided not to interfere with the sun – Myles.*'

In 'The Moon and I,' Myles's alarmist warnings become even more extreme. Beginning with a criticism of the space race between the USA and USSR as a race to see who "owns" the moon, he hypothesises about what might happen if atomic bombs were detonated up there; perhaps the moon would fragment and turn into a comet, flying off into outer space. The consequences, Myles tells us, would be catastrophic: marine life would die, Earth's orbit would alter to bring us closer to the sun (thus shortening terrestrial years and throwing human timekeeping out of order) and the polar ice caps would melt. Alongside all of this, he argues, human science would have to start again from scratch, since all human systems of knowledge are founded on natural constants – one of which is the presence of a moon in our sky. This is all due to 'the demonic ingenuity of those scientists' and is the logical fate of a world wherein Eisenhower and Khrushchev will soon be worshipped 'as new gods, to be known perhaps as Holy Electron and Blessed Proton.'³⁵ The distinction between scientists and politicians is no longer important, for it seems that they are equally culpable for the impending apocalypse. Myles was not going to leave anything to chance: in 'White House Party,' he frets about the possibility of a third World War, and wonders if some

of the space rockets being developed could be used to evacuate 'invaluable philosophers like myself' to the moon or Venus, though he admits that 'We have, of course, no assurance that awful wars are not in progress also in those places.'³⁶

In a column titled 'Martial Aid,' Myles again considers the US-Soviet rivalry with regards to space exploration.³⁷ The fact that the 'atom-clad spatial imperialists' are already racing to conquer the moon, he argues, behoves us to consider how the colonisation of Mars might proceed. 'I see no objection to the maniac militarists staging massive invasions of Mars,' he says, because the journey to Mars will logically be a one-way trip. Reflecting the commonly believed pseudoscientific myths of the time, Myles remarks that Mars is supposed to have an atmosphere, a sunny, temperate climate, and 'a profusion of lakes and canals' (though he dismisses the latter as nonsense). This leads him to surmise that Mars is quite like Ireland, and he asks, 'If we don't much like being here, do we really want to go there?' This reservation notwithstanding, he insists that any future mission to the red planet should include an Irish ambassador, whose first task would be to take over the canals on behalf of CIE, because 'In recent years there has been a regrettable shortage of oul' yap out of that crowd.'

O'Nolan was keenly interested in science, but at the same time he had an evident instinctive distrust of the professionals associated with it. Myles's opinion on the subject seems to be only a mildly exaggerated version of O'Nolan's:

A scientist has assured me that the recent arctic spell here was caused by the sputniks because they 'caused the precipitation of gases on the terrestrial periphery.' Laugh if you like, but we have to listen seriously to this type of chap in future. He talks as airily of going to the moon as if it was a question of getting a bus to Tibbradden (I am not saying, mind you, that the two enterprises are dissimilar in difficulty). When he casually mentions the temperature of the sun, you are first stupidly inclined to advise him to call a doctor; then you realise he is talking about the centre of the whole universe, the *heliokentron*, that orb which cannot be looked upon.³⁸

Myles's standpoint on the issue, comically exaggerated though its phrasing may be, could not be clearer: scientists are interfering with things best left alone. The intersection between science and politics, therefore, was a cause for special concern, and as the space race intensified in the decades following World War II, O'Nolan continued to express this concern through an alter-ego who (thanks to his status as a regular feature in a national newspaper) could respond publicly to astro-political developments as they arose. As can be seen in the paragraph quoted above, however, Myles often preferred to defer to myth rather than take science seriously. This

tendency is even more pronounced in another column, wherein he denounces astronomers as 'assemblers of useless data' and makes a modest proposal which privileges the mystical over the scientific:

Ah, no; if the gaudy vault of the heavens is not – as I think it is – a back-drop to edify and intimidate mankind here, then I think all the money and energy the astronomers have lavished on it would be better devoted to reviewing the ancient and noble science of astrology. A speaker at the recent assembly [of the International Astronomical Union] said that the sun's expectation of life was 'about 100,000,000,000 years.' A good astrologer would have given the exact figure to four decimal places. What we all want to know is the date of the end of the world.³⁹

Some critics (such as Suvin, Brian Stableford and Brian Aldiss) would argue that such an 'anti-science' stance militates against the creation of legitimate science fiction, but I disagree. Neither deliberate malapropisms nor an apparently cavalier attitude to the sciences necessarily disqualify a work from being termed science fiction, especially when the desired effect is laughter. For example, we might look at Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, which is indisputably science fiction and yet has practically no grounding in any kind of real-world science.⁴⁰ Despite the name, science fiction has more to do with pseudoscience than with actual science (as demonstrated by the trope of faster-than-light travel, for example), and for all his wilful ignorance, O'Nolan's Myles persona was particularly suited to writing it:

I do not disguise that I find it more pleasant and easy to write on quasi-fictional and hypothetical themes rather than about 'facts'; thus I am attracted to projects for visiting the moon, the search for the Philosopher's Stone, democracy, vegetarianism, cures for baldness, horse racing, 'additives' which make petrol of supernatural propulsolosity, and various other situations wherein is to be detected the hand of the fairies.⁴¹

While the supernatural is notionally out of bounds for a genre that appears to define itself in relation to science, this is not always the case. Returning to the generic definition offered earlier, the boundaries between the different ahistorical genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror are unstable and, in a practical sense, almost meaningless. Cross-pollination between them has always occurred to some extent and deliberate genre blurring is becoming more and more prevalent. However, the distinctions between them are still observed on what China Miéville calls 'the

sociological level of production and consumption.⁴² In other words, fans acknowledge a commonality to these genres, even as they mark the differences between them; to have an interest in one is to have at least a passing familiarity with the others.

It is not surprising, then, that O'Nolan's personal library contains works of fantasy alongside scientific and philosophical treatises. Alongside Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the collected short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, we find Rev. George F.L. Bampfield's *Sir Ælfric and Other Tales*, which details the adventures of a knight on a quest and is clearly inspired by Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Then there is James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen*, a comic fantasy mocking contemporary American society through the use of fantasy tropes and a medieval setting, alongside Paul Eldridge and George Sylvester Viereck's *My First Two Thousand Years*, which is presented as an autobiography of the Wandering Jew.⁴³ Combined with O'Nolan's interest in the sciences, this predilection for the fantastic, the hypothetical and the quasi-fictional easily gives rise to a narratological pseudoscience, the stuff of which science fiction is made. Aside from illuminating his reading tastes, however, the inventory of his library also offers an important clue to O'Nolan's philosophical outlook in his later years.

Among the contents of O'Nolan's library is a copy of *God and the Atom* by Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, a theologian and former Anglican vicar who converted to Catholicism.⁴⁴ Knox, to a degree, is even-handed about the advent of nuclear power, noting that it represents a leap forward, 'for better or worse or both,' for humankind.⁴⁵ His main concern, however, is the 'social conditioning' that comes with each scientific advance. It is neither a coincidence nor a surprise that Knox would appear in the library of the author of *The Third Policeman*, and the central conceit of *God and the Atom* resonates with certain themes in O'Nolan's writing. Newton's discoveries, Knox argues, ushered in 'the Machine Age,' during which the mathematical underpinnings of the universe encouraged people to think of themselves as machines.⁴⁶ The societal influence of Newton's work thus led to a danger of 'deadness and unimaginativeness.'⁴⁷ Following this came the Darwinian Age, which taught people to regard themselves as products of survival of the fittest and replaced Newtonian 'treadmill ethics' with a doctrine of progress 'of an orderly kind, slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent; all would be well in the long run, but in Heaven's name let us keep step.'⁴⁸ It followed, according to Knox, that the Atomic Age would inflict its own kind of social conditioning. When people start to think of themselves in atomic terms, Knox predicts, they will see their potential as something to be released, as energy is released in the splitting of an atom; in practical terms, this release amounts to the abrogation of all responsibility: 'we shall feel vaguely, some of us at least, that the atom is the symbol of our release from every internal principle of self-control.'⁴⁹

Knox effectively presents a kind of pathetic fallacy in reverse, whereby human behaviour takes its cues from the latest scientific understanding of the universe.

In O'Nolan's work, this pattern can be seen most obviously in *The Third Policeman*, wherein moral relativism is dramatised in a setting so relativistic as to be completely meaningless.⁵⁰ Sergeant Pluck's dire warning that 'the Atomic Theory is at work in this parish,' along with his description of that theory as 'worse than the smallpox' and his story of Michael Gilhaney, 'a man that is nearly banjaxed from the principle of the Atomic Theory,' present it as a recent invention that has impacted upon the laws of nature: scientific theory alters the world, rather than simply trying to describe it, and in so doing it alienates human beings from their humanity, making them little better than simple machines – such as the bicycle.⁵¹

Knox believes it inevitable that nuclear physics 'will be launched as a fresh bombshell against the structures of religious orthodoxy' and that the atom itself will become 'the totem of irreligion tomorrow, as the amoeba was yesterday.' His treatise is an attempt 'to dispel an atmosphere unfriendly to the appeal of religion, an atmosphere psychologically conditioned by the prominence which will necessarily be given to atomic power in the popular literature of the coming decade.'⁵² Knox's apprehensions are echoed in the newspaper columns – witness Myles's prediction that Eisenhower and Khrushchev will soon be worshipped 'as new gods, to be known perhaps as Holy Electron and Blessed Proton.'⁵³ There is an optimistic side to his predictions, though, as he hypothesises that religious faith may even ultimately benefit from nuclear physics, since 'The picture of God as an omnipotent Creator will not, perhaps, seem remote or fabulous to a civilisation which holds infinity in the palm of its hand.'⁵⁴ Judging by the texts he produced toward the end of his life, however, O'Nolan does not seem to have taken this optimism on board.

Conclusion

O'Nolan seems to have had no problem with science until science fiction started to come true – most notably in the case of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, reminiscent of the planet-killing super-weapons found in pulp fiction. This shift in perspective goes some way towards explaining the difference between the playful parodies of the twenty-one-year-old Brian Ó Nualláin and the more pessimistic, mystical thought experiments of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen. Cronin criticises *The Dalkey Archive* as a missed opportunity, asking why De Selby, being possessed of the means to summon up any figure from history, should limit himself to interrogating Saint Augustine about the Catholic afterlife 'in the fashion of an inquisitive nun trying to find out what the Pope had for breakfast.'⁵⁵ The oversimplified answer is

that by the time O'Nolan wrote this novel (which included recycled elements from *The Third Policeman*), this was the only issue that mattered to him.

O'Nolan's stance in defence of the mystical is by no means strictly Catholic. In one *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, Myles takes aim at ZETA, the British experimental fusion reactor that was promised to deliver limitless energy from seawater. Taking the concept of nuclear fusion to its extreme, Myles hypothesises that the seas will eventually be used up, leading to humanity's doom; just as serious, however, is the acronym itself (ZeroEnergy Thermonuclear Assembly), because the letter Z immediately suggests the ancient Greek deity Zeus, and 'It is possible [...] to blaspheme against false or mythological gods.'⁵⁶

This is not simply a case of playing devil's advocate, or just being contrarian in an age of accelerating scientific and technological achievement. O'Nolan's columns in *The Irish Times*, and to a lesser extent the presence of Knox's *God and the Atom* in his personal library, speak to his concerns about the rivalry between science and religion. True to form, O'Nolan took this notion to its logical extreme, redressing the balance in favour of the supernatural and creating a literary world in which astrology is a science, and outer space is populated by banshees and vampires.

Notes & references

¹ Brian O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe, 1 March 1963, qtd in Samuel Whybrow, 'Flann O'Brien's Science Fiction: An "illusion of progression" in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Is it about a bicycle? Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 129.

² For a fuller analysis of the science-fiction tropes of O'Nolan's early Irish short fiction, *The Third Policeman*, and *The Dalkey Archive* that are laid out here in the next pages, see Jack Fennell, 'Irelands Enough and Time: Brian O'Nolan's Science Fiction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 36.

³ Flann O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 24.

⁴ Flann O'Brien, 'The Arrival and Departure of John Bull,' in O'Brien, *The Short Fiction*, 29–34.

⁵ Alana Gillespie, "'Banjaxed and bewildered": *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Role of Science in Independent Ireland,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), 172.

⁶ See 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.

⁷ Fennell, 'Irelands Enough and Time,' 36–40.

⁸ Gillespie, 171–2.

⁹ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* [hereafter CL], 20 August 1945, 3.

¹⁰ CL, 22 August 1945, 3.

¹¹ Flann O'Brien, 'The Saint and I,' *The Guardian*, 19 Jan 1966, 9.

¹² Darko Suvin, 'Science Fiction and the Novum,' in *Defined By a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*, ed. Darko Suvin (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 69. For a more detailed examination of these genres and their 'ahistoricity,' see Jack Fennell, *Irish Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

¹³ Fantasy could then be defined as a genre within which an ahistorical narrative unfolds without any deference to history as we understand it: texts can be set in a completely different world (in which our history is irrelevant in a practical sense), or in our own, as in the 'urban fantasy' subgenre (in which the supernatural is presented as objectively real, thus implying that our historical narratives are mistaken or incomplete). In fantasy literature, then, our history is depicted as being either irrelevant or simply wrong. *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ Supernatural horror, for the sake of completeness, would then be a genre in which an ahistorical narrative (one intended to frighten the reader) defies naturalism by invoking the absurd and the grotesque. The operational paradigms of supernatural horror are nihilism and incongruity: the ahistorical element resists rationalisation and thus thwarts the construction of an explanatory narrative. In other words, horror's non-normative relationship to history is antagonistic – it 'ends history.' Fennell, *Irish Science Fiction*, 17–8. O'Nolan's work defies easy categorisation, but in my own opinion his frequent use of absurdity, and his depiction of alienated rationality and the breakdown of meaning (especially in *The Third Policeman*), indicate a more pronounced tendency towards the horrific.

¹⁵ See *CL*, 16 May 1945, 3; *CL*, 18 May 1945, 3; *CL*, 22 August 1945, 3; *CL*, 29 August 1945, 3; *CL*, 25 June 1953, 4; *CL*, 16 September 1955, 6.

¹⁶ *CL*, 7 May 1945, 3.

¹⁷ *CL*, 18 June 1943, 3.

¹⁸ *CL*, 25 January 1950, 4.

¹⁹ *CL*, 19 April 1961, 8.

²⁰ *CL*, 6 June 1962, 10.

²¹ *CL*, 5 March 1962, 8.

²² The Irish pun is a play on *Gaelach*, meaning 'Gaelic'; *gealach* is the Irish word for 'moon.'

²³ *CL*, 7 March 1962, 8.

²⁴ Gillespie, 172–4.

²⁵ *CL*, 10 March 1962, 8.

²⁶ Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, 'An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College,' *The Parish Review* 2, no.1 (Fall 2013).

²⁷ *CL*, 7 March 1962, 8.

²⁸ O'Brien, 'The Saint and I,' 9.

²⁹ *CL*, 13 January 1954, 4.

³⁰ Gillespie, 174–5, 177.

³¹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (Dublin: New Island, 2003), 104.

³² *Ibid.*, 158–9.

³³ *CL*, 20 August 1945, 3.

³⁴ *CL*, 11 August 1955, 6.

³⁵ *CL*, 23 August 1958, 8.

³⁶ *CL*, 29 August 1959, 8.

³⁷ *CL*, 25 August 1958, 6.

³⁸ *CL*, 4 February 1958, 6.

³⁹ *CL*, 5 September 1955, 6.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, it seems that Myles anticipated the central premise of Adams's series in 1954, with his reaction to a book entitled 'A Guide to the Moon': 'I hope it contains, as the title suggests, the names of the best hotels, 4-star restaurants, address of the US Embassy, the pubs to avoid, and other elementary statistics.' *CL*, 13 January 1954, 4.

⁴¹ *CL*, 28 April 1955, 6.

⁴² China Miéville, 'Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory,' in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, eds. Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 244.

⁴³ Ahearn and Winstanley, 'Brian O'Nolan's Library.' For further discussion of Cabell's influence on O'Nolan's work, see Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 93; Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 2nd edn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 41; Cronin, 83.

⁴⁴ Ahearn and Winstanley, 'Brian O'Nolan's Library.'

⁴⁵ Ronald A. Knox, *God and the Atom* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁰ For discussions of relativism and relativity in O'Nolan's work, see Maria-Ana Tupan and Marin Cilea, *Relativism-Relativity: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Concept* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2013), 73–84; and Hopper, 240–1.

⁵¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Random House, 2007), 293–4.

⁵² Knox, 17–8.

⁵³ *CL*, 23 August 1958, 8.

⁵⁴ Knox, 115.

⁵⁵ Cronin, 228.

⁵⁶ *CL*, 4 February 1958, 6.