

‘the words I taught to him’

Interfusional Language Play & Brian O’Nolan’s ‘Revenge on the English’

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Brian O’Nolan’s first short story in Irish, ‘*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*’ [Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!], appeared in *The Irish Press* on 18 January 1932 and is probably his earliest published work of short fiction.¹ Although the story is O’Nolan’s debut in the Irish language and appeared widely in Ireland at the time of its publication, it has had a limited critical response.² Thematically, it focuses on the accessibility of vernacular Irish within the state-supported language discourse, an idea which reappears in the column and in the letters to *The Irish Times* promoting *Cruiskeen Lawn* throughout October 1940. This essay interprets ‘*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*’ and the first *Cruiskeen Lawn* column as connected, hybrid combinations of Irish and English. From this point of departure, I discuss the interlingual and cross-cultural resonances of the Irish language in the English and French intertextuality of O’Nolan’s short fiction. My argument follows two interrelated strands: the first addresses the language theories expressed in ‘*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*’ and the second traces this hybridity in the column and O’Nolan’s Irish-language fiction generally. The aim is to show that these works share a common theme wherein O’Nolan satirises Ireland’s language debate by employing hybridised language and projecting either the growth or destruction of Irish within the comic arc of satire.

‘*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*’ and the inaugural *Cruiskeen Lawn* article advance linguistic arguments in favour of strengthening education and widening the use of Irish. This creative engagement with contemporary language debates can also be contextualised profitably in the roots of O’Nolan’s knowledge of the Gaelic Revival and *Gaedhilge* pedagogy. Irish was the author’s first language. The O’Nolan/Ó Nualláin family were prominent Irish-language enthusiasts; Brian’s uncle Gearóid was an Irish lecturer at Queen’s College, Belfast and published at least six books on modern Irish grammar. These books, along with the accompanying *Introduction to Studies in Modern Irish: A Handbook for Teachers and Beginners* (1921), all appeared before the publication of ‘*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!*’ and give the reference to the Irish phrasebook in the story a personal and biographical

resonance for O'Nolan.³ Written and oral Irish were a significant part of O'Nolan's early life. The older brother, Ciarán, wrote in Irish throughout childhood and adulthood. Michael Nolan, their father, taught Irish as a vocational instructor in Strabane. He also insisted that the family use Irish at home, hired servants from Gort an Choirce to ensure the children grew up around Irish speakers, and allowed his elder sons to visit the Gaeltacht in Co. Donegal.⁴ Many of these experiences with Irish education are satirised in O'Nolan's short fiction.

O'Nolan remained concerned about the relationship between Irish and English throughout his literary career. This interest sustained his conception of language hybridity: the tendency of Irish culture to hybridise English. O'Nolan explains this view of language hybridity in a letter to Sean O'Casey, dated 13 April 1942:

I cannot see any real prospect of reviving Irish at the present rate of going and way of working. I agree absolutely with you when you say it is essential, particularly for any sort of literary worker. It supplies that unknown quantity in us that enables us to transform the English language and this seems to hold of people who know little or no Irish, like Joyce. It seems to be an inbred thing.⁵

An extract of this letter is reproduced by Anthony Cronin in *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*.⁶ However, the original letter is cited here to emphasise the first sentence, which Cronin paraphrases rather than quotes, and to highlight that Cronin misquotes the text in the paragraph where O'Nolan discusses people 'who know little or no Irish' (emphasis added). Cronin's replacement of the word 'know' with the more common 'have' seems counterintuitive to O'Nolan's implied suggestion that those people unfamiliar with Irish still have the innate ability to 'transform' language.⁷ This point is crucial.

O'Nolan sees no way of reinvigorating spoken Irish, but this orality is essential to 'Gaelicising' written English. Thus, his writing is 'interfusional' in the sense defined by Thomas King as the (necessary) blending of oral literature and written literature.⁸ King's theory pertains to hybridised literature in a post-colonial context; he argues that some effort should be made to find a term for literature that combines oral and written forms because 'pre-colonial literature was [...] oral in nature,' and some 'post-colonial literature' naturally retains this orality, while the term 'post-colonial,' 'reeks of unabashed ethnocentrism' and privileges the literary.⁹ The problem also occurs with Irish terms, like '*Béarlachas*,' which focus on Gaelic 'Anglicisms' rather than the features of hybridised language. King argues that interfusional writing does not 'privilege one culture over the other,' but rather is 'literature which exists primarily within a tribe or community [...] that is shared almost exclusively by members of that

community, and [...] is presented and retained in a native language.¹⁰ This description matches the characteristics of O'Nolan's Irish fiction, but more importantly, the proposed neutrality of the term does not interfere with the English/Irish dialectic the author so painstakingly develops.

Interfusionality in O'Nolan's writing, though the term is applied retroactively, is consistent with a general understanding of Irish hybridity in the period roughly spanning 1932 to 1942.¹¹ Robin Flower writes in the preface to his translation of *An t-Oileánach* that the 'mixture of Irish and English idioms [...] does not [...] convey the character of the language as naturally spoken by those to whom it is their only speech.'¹² That is to say, hybridised Irish that incorporates English is significantly different from Irish that has had little contact with English. Both languages are vastly different in their mode of expression. In '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' and the early *Cruiskeen Lawn*, O'Nolan employs Irish as an oral syntax; inversely, his use of English is discursive and signals the written form. These ideas inform the thesis that the clash between the Irish and English languages invoked to varying degrees in O'Nolan's short fiction is represented in an interfusional way. This linguistic clash evokes social and political tensions within Ireland's language debate, resonant histories of British oppression, and the post-colonial desire to re-establish Irish identity. O'Nolan's interfusional fictions establish a false dialectic which is ironically resolved by satire, but centres on the real, unsolved conundrums of linguistic and cultural identity within the Free State.

Connections between the language debate and O'Nolan's concept of transformative writing can be traced back to letters to *The Irish Times* preceding the first *Cruiskeen Lawn* article, and even earlier, to the stories published by *The Irish Press*. The letters form an adequate subtext to his satire of Irish. On 1 October 1940, *The Irish Times* published 'Compulsory Irish,' a letter, signed by S. Ua Duibne, advocating mandatory Irish in all twenty-six counties. It sparked an Irish-language debate in the editorial section of the paper throughout the fall of 1940. Unlike the 'Abbey Theatre' and 'Literary Criticism' letters to the editor of *The Irish Times*,¹³ the comic responses to Duibne's letter have not yet been attributed to O'Nolan or his friends:

In reality the Government is either wholly insincere or abysmally stupid in regard to the revival of Irish as the spoken language of the people. It has never taken steps to make Irish really compulsory, and that is the reason its policy regarding Irish has failed and will continue to fail [...]. Let Irish be put in the position now held by English, let money and energy now spent in fostering English be spent on the fostering of Irish, let genuine compulsion be tried for ten years, and the number of Irish speakers will be increased a hundredfold, the

language problem would soon be solved, and Irish would again become the spoken language of the people. We may then hope to become a nation with a distinctive character, a really Irish nation, not a mere imitation, mentally, morally, socially and culturally of our neighbours.¹⁴

This drastic proposal mirrors the fictional Ireland of 'Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!' Duibne suggests a similar inversion of reality to the one depicted in the story, where all English becomes marginalised in a futuristic, O'Nolan-esque Dublin, in favour of 'oral' Irish. The word 'compulsion,' which Duibne derives from a pun on 'compulsory,' evokes the neuroses and language radicalism of such a world, and this also seems characteristic of the Gaelic Revival.

The letter may be attributable to O'Nolan, but it would be of little significance to his position in the Irish language debate if it were not for Oscar Love's letters – possibly written by O'Nolan – opposing Duibne's view. Ute Anna Mittermaier convincingly demonstrates Oscar Love was a real person in her recent chapter 'In Search of Mr Love; or, the Internationalist Credentials of "Myles before Myles".' Mittermaier shows that Love was a Dublin resident, according to church records, and a civil servant, who was purportedly living in Blackrock; but as Mittermaier herself observes, that 'need not have deterred O'Nolan from borrowing the name for *some* of his own letters.'¹⁵ On 3 October 1940, *The Irish Times* published Oscar Love's response to 'Compulsory Irish':

Duibne writes in a patriotic vein [...]. I would remind him that patriotism is destroying Europe, and may yet destroy Ireland. [...] We cannot have faith in the strength and goodness of our people if we possess no respect for the virtues of our neighbours. When the churches adopt full Services in Irish a real beginning will be made, but it is useless to start this crusade until we recognise that narrow prejudice is a danger, worse and more insidious than the danger of battle.¹⁶

This response is only a thinly veiled attempt to split the debate by using two of Ireland's sacred cows, the Free State government and the Roman Catholic Church.

The ensuing language controversy in *The Irish Times* – inasmuch as it has been linked to O'Nolan – convinced R. M. Smyllie to hire him to write the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column.¹⁷ Love and Duibne's letters were an integral part of this debate. Here, Love's argument is strikingly similar to O'Nolan's position in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Mittermaier illustrates, too, that Love 'resented Irish insularity' and 'his [later] defence of *Cruiskeen Lawn* [...] has made some critics assume that Oscar Love was yet another of O'Nolan's numerous pen names.'¹⁸ If these are coincidences, they work to O'Nolan's advantage.

Duibne's 'Compulsory Irish,' carried to fruition, aims to transform Ireland into O'Nolan's first imagined world. Love is an interlocutor to two other confirmed pseudonyms, Flann O'Brien and Lir O'Connor. Richard T. Murphy also notes O'Nolan's tendency to assume two pseudonyms in order to launch salvos from opposite sides of a debate.¹⁹ There is no way to be exact about their acquaintance outside the letters page of *The Irish Times*, but Oscar Love was not O'Nolan's creation. He was born on 28 February 1884 and published his first letter to *The Irish Times* in 1918.²⁰ Yet, Love's position in the language debate, his career in the civil service, and the likelihood that he knew O'Nolan well enough professionally not to contest the author's use of his name plausibly suggest that O'Nolan's involvement in the language debate is greater than what is already known.

The letters to *The Irish Times* and the initial linguistic theme of the column have their origins in the earlier Irish short fiction. They share a strong affinity with the fictional letters in O'Nolan's 1932 short story '*Mion-Tuairimí ár Sinnsir*.'²¹ These ancient texts, we are told, were found inside the walls of the National Library but have been 'fully edited, abbreviations have been expanded, and all instances of Old Irish have been translated to clear New Irish.'²² Duibne's 'Compulsory Irish' letter in English is mirrored in the story with an Irish letter about 'Compulsory English' which Fennell has translated into English as 'The Reckonings of our Ancestors':

Dear Friend,

My son is being obliged to spend most of his time at school learning this 'Compulsory English,' instead of studying poetry or magic. What will he gain from English when he leaves the country? Not one note is spoken in Scotland other than Gaelic, and the Kingdom of the Saxons is full of nobody but violent, ignorant savages; Gaelic is spoken throughout two thirds of the world—or are we to believe that there are other countries somewhere out there? Bah!

—Yours, 'Anti-Humbug.'²³

State-supported Irish and the spread of English are satiric targets here. '*Mion-Tuairimí ár Sinnsir*' is also linguistically interfusional for its combination of Irish and English. The effect of this interfusionality is lost in the English translation, but the origin of this style of hybridised writing in the Irish stories is pertinent. It draws a political and satiric continuity which thematically links the column to the earlier writing. However, O'Nolan's original ideas receive a fuller treatment in the more successful '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*'

'Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!'

Formally, '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' is a speculative metafiction about language politics. It adapts the science fictional premise of time-travel and diachronous language signification, providing the reader with a hypothetical view of a future Ireland. Its opening and closing addresses to the reader, its headers, and the various acknowledgments of its own artifice through paratextual references all reinforce a metafictional reading of the work.²⁴ These elements are essential to the story's interfusional language play and satire on English and Irish, combining both oral and written traditions, Uncial and Roman scripts, and literary representations of the Other.

Dynamic tension between the English and the Irish in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' reflects Ireland's postcolonial condition and social and political tensions, realities that Love and Duibne both contextualise in the quotations above. The dynamic movement of the narrator/protagonist follows a comic curve wherein the narrator successfully plays a prank on a visiting Englishman. As a bilingual native, the narrator easily adapts to his futuristic dream world where only Irish is spoken. While endeavouring to teach the visitor some useful Irish phrases, the narrator recalls his own resentment of Britain and teaches the man profanities instead. This comic portion of the story's satiric form is mirrored by a resonant tragic history of Ireland that foregrounds the trickery²⁵ of the English over the Irish. This Irish/English tension is presented in a false dialectic the significance of which extends beyond the story, because getting revenge does not undo subjugation and colonisation. If one considers this dialectic as a relationship between Irish orality as 'self' and English textuality as 'Other,' the story shows that self and Other are actually one, or that they define each other. Only an interfusional combination of orality and textuality can convey their shared difficulty communicating.

Defining the Other in terms of the self is possible through considering what is made conspicuous by its absence. There is a sense throughout of the 'missing' hegemonic condition. The story stands outside of conventional notions of time, suggesting that it exists within a mythic realm, rather than an actual place. The imagined realm depicted in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' is akin to the Irish hell of *The Third Policeman*; the archetypal hell the narrator refers to, the 'devil's Hell,' the paratextual frame, and the narrator's walk down a plank packed with a 'horrible crowd,' all evoke an Other world.²⁶ There are certainly allusions to an archetypal parody within the story, as can be seen in the narrator's dysphemistic description of the Englishman/antagonist: 'I saw a small, low fellow, as broad as three men, a sharp, bitter face on him, and a strange squareness to his shoulders that brought the image of

a bull to mind.²⁷ The narrator represents the Englishman's seemingly grotesque, minotaur-like appearance as that of the archetypal John Bull.²⁸

If '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' is read on a mythic level, this aspect of the story seeks to reconcile the reader's disbelief and the text's ironic conceit. The microcosm seems Other-worldly to readers who have no familiarity with Irish language, but to John Bull, the archetypal Englishman, an entirely Irish-speaking place *must* seem truly hellish. This archetypal resonance seeks to make the otherness of the English reader feel more acute. This effect is reversed in O'Nolan's '*Teacht agus Imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe*' [The Arrival and Departure of John Bull], when John Bull comes to Ireland as a 'mongrel of a giant' and the 'seven tribes of Gaels' and '*Gnáth-Gaedheal*' must band together and speak their 'scraps of English' to get him to leave.²⁹

The crucial point is that O'Nolan advocates for a revitalised Irish identity through the use of hybrid Gaelic in this second 'John Bull' story, but its satire of the vitality of Irish literature seems distant from the views expressed in the letter to O'Casey. It is more personal. For instance, *Sean agus Nua* (1923), a collection of stories by O'Nolan's paternal uncles, Gearóid and Fearrgus, makes an appearance on the list of Irish books given to John Bull in the story.³⁰ And while it is in a similar style and has linguistic affinities with '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*', it is primarily focussed on mythological parody rather than language politics. One is reminded of the lengthy discussion preceding the battle in '*Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*' ('The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'), including the injunction 'woe to him who carries out this destruction, if only because of that one man.'³¹ If 'The Arrival and Departure of John Bull' has '*Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*' as an archetype, then battle with the English giant is unavoidable and this impending violence undermines the peaceful ending of the story. It contravenes history. Similarly, John Bull's choice of Irish words, translated in 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!' as: 'Protestant...Orangeman,' causes the narrator to recall Diarmaid Mac Murchada's historic betrayal of the Gaels; but these references effectively politicise Bull's Irish and thus warrant cultural revenge.

In both cases, O'Nolan chooses to synthesise or hybridise colonial and colonised modes of communication to advance a satirical attack against the postcolonial conditions that shape Ireland and the Irish language. The stories move beyond the effects of colonisation and return to the larger and more important agenda of re-establishing an 'Irish' cultural identity that can embrace future developments. In '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*', O'Nolan satirically projects views about the Irish language into the future and suggests how language needs to hybridise and change. But aspects of postcolonial Irish culture in 1932 are the apparent impetus for satire. O'Nolan satirically implicates Ireland in her failure to hybridise colonised modes of communication that will eventually lead to the loss of language and culture.³²

This theme appears in the symbolic presence of the Irish-language phrasebook that figures in the story.

An actual Irish phrasebook from 1932 deals mainly with the language and its pedagogy, while 'recognising that a language which is not used in intercourse between people in ordinary affairs of life is no better than a dead language.'³³ However, the representation of the phrasebook in the story is even more culturally motivated, containing 'Gaelic songs and airs,' 'Gaelic phrases,' and 'Ulster Gaelic phrases,' all for the price of a '*Gandailín*/threepence/half-réal.'³⁴ Like the last signifier for its fictional price, the phrasebook of the story is only 'half-real.' It is aimed at protecting *cultúr*, and the Ulster dialect of Irish, which was O'Nolan's first language. The primary object of attack is the Free State-supported restoration of Irish, which, as Fennell notes, led to the eventual institution of *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, or 'Official Standard.'³⁵ Consequently, language itself (both the incursion of English from Britain, and the irresolute state of vernacular Irish represented here as 'Ulster Gaelic phrases') is under attack.

The Irish language debate is evident in the social politics of O'Nolan's short stories. In '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*,' the movement of the story into a hypothetical future indicates an extended projection of these politics and corresponds with the drive to wonder about the future of the Irish language. The hypothetical future in the story evokes the reader's sense of wonder and allows them to view Ireland in a recontextualised way. By beginning with a diachronous fantasy in 2032, instead of synchronous political resonance surrounding 1932, O'Nolan shows, as an artist, how he has interpreted his nation's socio-cultural values. This perspective supports an analysis of how the Irish and English languages mix and clash in an interfusional way in the short fiction. O'Nolan synthesises written and oral language, Uncial and Roman text, as well as both languages, thereby deconstructing these three linguistic dialectics, as well as some of the cultural differences between Ireland and England. One key target is the persistent perception of difference between the two cultures. From a pragmatic perspective, there is little that can be done to return national identities to their original condition prior to colonisation. However, O'Nolan's concerns are diachronic and thus imaginative. By synthesising the two language forms he suggests that Ireland's changing social climate creates a need for hybridised language and succeeds in establishing a 'new' Irish literary paradigm for the present.

The juxtaposition of Uncial and Roman script in the original story draws the reader's attention to O'Nolan's synthesis of the English and Irish languages. This synthesis is also analogous to the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised. Linguistic juxtapositions define the story, revealing British and Irish tensions. These tensions have resonant histories. Take, for instance, the diaspora of Uncial and Insular minuscule (Insular Celtic) scripts used by Irish monks, who converted the English of

the North and essentially taught them how to read and write.³⁶ This history, represented ironically in the story as the Irish lesson the narrator gives to John Bull, resonates with the incursion of oral English into late mediaeval and early modern Ireland. These tensions are reflected in the story's style of interfusional patterns because they combine written and oral forms—just as modern vernacular language does today.

The story's diachronic philosophical projection of the widespread use of Irish is satirised through the deployment of various types of language play. Once inside the futuristic world, the narrator expresses his wonder through dysphemism and alludes to the metafictional frame of the story, revealing the linguistic aim of O'Nolan's satire, that language must evolve:

Ah, a thousand pities seven times over, gentle reader! How empty and miserly the language of today, when we try to speak of unearthly wonder! There is neither oratory in the mouth nor literature in the pen for it, and even if there were, neither would suffice in this particular instance.³⁷

The irony that he cannot describe the fantastic future world in which he finds himself suggests his attitude to the limitations of both language and literature. Nonetheless, he continues with the story through a combination of oral and written forms.

The second aspect of this interfusional language play is evident through the prank played on John Bull. This again returns the reader to the failings of language – which can be cultural and political – and how these failings can sometimes be turned to one's advantage. The effect can be traced to the narrator's falsely naïve voice and neutral tone, which invite the reader into interpreting the outcome of the story with reference to both its internal movement and metafictional frame. This internal movement involves John Bull's 'loss' or disadvantage, resulting from the Irish narrator's prank, while the metafictional frame includes the socio-cultural and political resonance involving the British colonial 'gain' over Ireland and Ireland's historic 'loss' of cultural identity, economic self-determination, and home rule. By maintaining a 'neutral' voice, the narrator invites the reader to enjoy the prank while still considering the larger unresolved socio-cultural crisis of the Irish nation.

However, the narrator seems more or less at home in an imaginative world where the only language appears to be Irish. This attitude is surprisingly neutral when one compares it to O'Nolan's various experiences with the Irish language. According to Robert Tracy, O'Nolan 'scorned the stiff Civil Service Irish that came into use, and was quick to spot the frequent mistakes made by new users of the language.'³⁸ However, Flore Coulouma has recently noted diglossic opposition between official and vernacular languages in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and these ideas better inform the

combination of languages in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' Coulouma argues that oppositional linguistic digressions within one speech community inform O'Nolan's diglossic view on language and 'his satiric charge against linguistic oppression.'³⁹ The hybridity resulting from this 'opposition' is interfusional; it expresses oral and written dimensions within diglossic language; thus it has unity with other tropes in the story. Coulouma writes:

Ireland's primary diglossic opposition is of course English versus Irish, the colonial language versus the native tongue [...]. Yet Myles's Dubliners are in fact native English speakers. They have lost their original linguistic identity, and their dialect of English is still dominated by the 'standard,' dictionary variety regularly caricatured in the chronicles. On the other hand, they must face a paradoxical situation where Irish has become the new official language, and English the everyday life vernacular.⁴⁰

The 'paradoxical situation' defined by Coulouma is analogous to John Bull's experience in an imagined Ireland of 2032. Diglossic opposition between each language is played out in the juxtaposition of Roman and Uncial fonts, but happily, this dichotomy is continued throughout the column.

Linguistic Clashes

The initial neutrality of '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' allows the narrator to begin to address the dialectic of oral and written culture by arriving at an interfusional synthesis that represents both in a hybrid form. The juxtaposition of Irish in its Uncial Gaelic typeface with English in Roman typeface is one concrete example of such an effect. Readers unfamiliar with Irish lose the effect of this irony by reading the story in the English translation and not in its original Irish.⁴¹ Several linguistic slides in meaning result from the synthesis of the two languages, their 'oral' and 'written' forms, and the appearance of both typefaces in the original. These slides themselves can be understood as miniature representations of the English/Irish, oral/written, and Uncial/Roman dialectics that are under attack in this story. The implication is that by dismantling these dialectics, Ireland can once again return to a condition where it can rebuild its linguistic identity, which Coulouma, Cronin, and O'Casey see as 'lost.'

An examination of linguistic clashes between Irish and English (including translations) breaks down the language play of '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' into its various elements. One of the most apparent is oral ambiguity. John Bull mispronounces *Baile Átha Cliath*, the Irish for Dublin, as 'Blaclee.'⁴² His pronunciation

of the name of the city is ambiguously British and puns on English signifiers like 'Blackly' or 'Blacklee.' However, his mispronunciation, represented by a phonetic spelling, is also instructive because most neophyte readers of Irish would read and likely mispronounce *Baile Átha Cliath* in a variety of ways. John Bull's mispronunciation of the name also reflects the auditory method in which he obtained it and this emphasises the orality of the Irish language, as well as the written inclinations of English. The manner in which the English acquire an understanding of Irish place names is being satirised. Hybrid meanings like these synthesise Irish and English culture. The translated phrase 'All that's left now is to pin the tail on my story' is both euphemistic and satirical.⁴³ It is an allusion to the childhood game of 'pin the tail on the donkey,' but it also has a satirical double meaning because the narrator is euphemistically calling an Englishman a jackass. The story concludes with the prank being 'pinned' upon John Bull. With the phrase itself, O'Nolan is engaged in *Béarlachas*. He has appropriated an English language expression for playing 'a party game in which blindfolded players attempt to place a representation of a tail on the appropriate spot on a picture of a donkey.'⁴⁴ The original Irish is, '*ní fhuil agam anois acht an ruball a chur ar mo scéal,*' and though the verb '*bioráin*' (to pin) is absent, the line in Fennell's translation evokes the phrase 'pin the tail on the donkey,' which has a North American etymology from the late nineteenth century. Finding an equivalent phrase in Irish is slightly more difficult; the line 'pin the tail on my story,' or 'put the tail on my story,' has been translated back into English in the English version of the story; but the phrase originated in English and likely has no equivalent in Irish. This is at least one example of O'Nolan's trans-Atlantic Gaelicisation of language. The narrator's willingness to mould English and Irish phrases into an interfusional, hybridised language has thematic unity with *Cruiskeen Lawn* because, as in the column, neither language on its own completely suffices to convey the spirit of the tale.

Don't let that strange word frighten you, reader.

*That's the French for poteen.*⁴⁵

Turning to the column, O'Nolan's tendency to re-mould English or French phrases to bring new words into Irish is a recurring feature of his satire of the language debate. By synthesising a new language, O'Nolan satirises Ireland's failure to return to a pre-colonial or pre-English condition. This seems to be of the utmost importance because his satiric technique essentially stays the same across a ten-year period, linking the early Irish fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn*. In both bodies of work, the linguistic drive is consistently focussed on Gaelic hybridity as O'Nolan advocates for a revitalised national identity through this peculiar combination of Irish and English. This

interfusional approach reflects the social climate of post-colonial Ireland, as well as a bilingual reality, where discourse can no longer be limited purely to any one language. Kevin O'Nolan describes this hybridity in his preface to *The Best of Myles*, writing that many of the columns were 'not in English or Irish but in a strange-looking mixture, English through the phonology of the Irish alphabet.'⁴⁶

It would be wrong to define *Cruiskeen Lawn* as a vehicle for promoting Irish language material, though, just as it would be wrong to categorise it as a body of work that is written mainly in English. Myles revels in the same kind of language play that is characteristic of *The Irish Press* stories, and thus the column has a similar social and political agenda. The noteworthy difference in the column is the wider scope; O'Nolan's approach to incorporating words and phrases into Irish has become international. The allusions to English and French intertextuality with Alphonse Allais, Edward Lear, and Stephen Leacock discussed below mark different linguistic influences on O'Nolan's Irish. These incursions epitomise the theory behind the interfusional slides in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' but also suggest that through the ironically false Irish/English dialectic, there are sustained concerns about revitalising the Irish language and linguistic identity.

Alphonse Allais

The success of the first *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, published 4 October 1940 and signed '*An Broc*' [The Badger], hinges on interfusional hybridity. Firstly, the name '*An Broc*' is an allusive nod to Alphonse Allais and O'Nolan's own 'Gaelicising' of the title, *L'Affaire Blaireau* or 'The Badger Case' (1899). Martin Green was the first critic to suggest intertextuality with Allais, noting the appearance of 'two characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* who originally appeared in the pages of French writer, Alphonse Allais.'⁴⁷ The possible allusion to Allais implies an interlingual and cross-cultural influence. It is not difficult to believe that O'Nolan heard of Allais's work and incorporated French-style comedy into his writing, as he read and understood French. Film versions of the novel also appeared in theatres in 1923 and 1932 respectively.⁴⁸

Allais's comedic journalism provides an interesting model for the development of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the earlier comic occasional writing. With respect to the latter, 'Balm for Ireland's Ills' from *Blather* is Allaisian. In the *Blather* version, Ireland is sawed from its moorings, from Antrim's coast to wild Cape Clear, and left to float. The narrator states the purpose behind turning the country into a gigantic, sailing landmass, is political. They make 'our subjection to England [...] no longer dependent on our proximity to her.'⁴⁹ The *Blather* piece bears an uncanny resemblance to '*Finis Britanniae*,' '*Finis Britanniae (continued)*,' and 'Final Thoughts on the Floating of

England,' which originally appeared in French newspapers and were only translated into English a decade after O'Nolan's death.⁵⁰ In the Allais pieces England is on the point of disappearing, 'the English have taken so much coal and ore and mineral wealth from the bowels of the earth that their country has become light enough to float.'⁵¹ Both works realign notions of economic determination. The Irish become masters of their own ship and literally saw their way to self-governance, while the English have the exploitation of their natural resources ironically turned against them.⁵²

Allais's potential influence on the Irish badger, '*An Broc*,' in the first *Cruiskeen Lawn* exemplifies O'Nolan's readiness to hybridise Irish and to undermine the nation's language debate by widening the dialectic beyond a simple dichotomy of English and Irish, which informs the comedic argument of the first column. O'Nolan takes the idea to task when he quotes from a leading article which describes the government's attempt 'to eliminate and extend the use of Irish language in place of English':

The task of reviving Irish, we are told, would be hard 'unless conversations could be limited to requests for food and drink.' And who wants conversation on any other subject? Why not admit that hardly anybody ever thinks of anything else? If on and after to-morrow the entire *Irish Times* should be printed in Irish, there would not be a word about anything but food and drink. Those who find that they cannot do without 'incendiary bombs,' 'decontamination,' and the like, would have to get some other paper to accompany their ghoul's breakfast.⁵³

As in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*,' there is a glimmer of an imagined world where only Irish is spoken, followed by a political statement about the uses of language that reads both synchronically and diachronically. O'Nolan is commenting on neutral Ireland during the Second World War, and these comments are suggestive of unity between the political expressions of non-aggression and the language of the Irish people. He assesses the ability of the Irish language to engage new terminology, to synthesise words or exclude them – as in the following scene, wherein reports of the 'Winter War' between Russia and Finland (1939–40) cause confusion for the child of a committed Irish-speaking family:

Shawn Beg: *Ní dóigh liom go bhfuil aon Ghaedhilg ar 'Molotoff bread-basket.' Níl sa Ghaedhilg seo acht seanchanamhain ghagach. Cad chuige nach dtig linn Béarla a labhairt sa teach seo?*

Mother: *Mura mbíonn tú 'do thost, ní bhfuighidh tú do phighin Dia Sathairn. Caith do bhrachán!*

Shawn Beg: But, Maw! What's Molotoff bread-basket?

Mother: *BI DO THOST, ADEIRIM!*⁵⁴

Again, the dialogue is interfusional in its juxtaposition of Irish against English in favour of hybridised vernacular language. While the argument is simple, it is essential to the canon because it emphasises that Irish can grow by synthesising foreign terminology and thus diversify, rather than limit, its uses. The juxtaposition between Irish and English in Roman type in the first column has a counterpart in the article, 'Is This Irish,' where English words appear entirely in Uncial script.⁵⁵

Multilingual, cross-cultural influence and the interfusional (or hybrid) contexts of O'Nolan's early Irish-language stories culminate in Myles na gCopaleen's Irish activism in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. In their synchronous context, these influences are essential to understanding O'Nolan's relationship to popular writing. This point is evinced in a letter to *The Irish Times* by 'Cóilin Ó Cuanaigh,' who hails Myles as 'a Gaelic Stephen Leacock,' and by Oscar Love, who hints that Myles might become 'a Lear, a Lewis Carroll, or a W. S. Gilbert, because the Irish have not discovered that nonsense is a new sense.'⁵⁶ However, Stephen Leacock's sketch satire and Edward Lear's popular nonsense limericks and drawings, while connected to the column by letters to the editor, remain to be seen directly within O'Nolan's writing.⁵⁷ Also, any association either with Lear and the column or Leacock's satiric vision of Orillia, Canada, further suggests that the *Cruiskeen Lawn* has sophisticated cross-cultural influences rather than a subtext of provincial themes and linguistic clichés characteristic of language nationalism.

It would be a disservice to conclude that Brian O'Nolan and Myles na gCopaleen put no stock in the restoration of the Irish language. There is also an inherent problem with reading O'Nolan's Irish fiction in English translation, because so much of it is based upon concerns about the Irish language. The frequently polysemic, slippery, sliding meaning is elusive. O'Nolan constantly tries to obscure his target – the connection between language and Irish identity. To overtly challenge the Irish language might have resulted in the author being ostracised by his Irish readership, who likely would have considered his views to be culturally treasonous, or worse, led to the outright rejection of the column. However, in its most basic form, O'Nolan's synthesis of new words and phrases is a phenomenon that spans his writing. Such work engenders a hybrid literary mode wherein arises a new direction for Irish literary expression, both written and oral.

Notes & references

¹ Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!', *The Irish Press* (18 January, 1932): 4–5.

² For instance, Richard T. Murphy notes connections between minor literature, Ó Nualláin's early Irish-language writing, *The Irish Times*, and *An Béal Bocht*, in his "'A root of the new sprout'?: Flann O'Brien, Minor Literature and the Modern Gaelic Canon' in *'Is it about a bicycle?': Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 67–82. Murphy does not mention 'Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!' or the minor Irish pieces published by the *Irish Press* as significant works within the 'Gaelic canon'.

³ Gerald O'Nolan, *Studies in Modern Irish (Part I–IV)* (Dublin: Educational Co. of Ireland, 1920–22).

⁴ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, trans. Niall O'Nolan (Dublin: Lilliput, 1998), 72–4. In his memoir, Ciarán recalls his 1927 trip to Donegal during which he rented a house with Brian and Gearóid on Cnoc na Bealtaine, about three miles from Gort an Choirce in the Gaeltacht. Both Nollaig Mac Congáil and Deirde Learmont note that the Ó Nualláins employed speakers from Gort an Choirce 'to maintain Irish as the spoken language of the household regardless of where they happened to live'; writing about the connection in the *An tSeanbheairic* arts festival magazine, Meitheamh 2014, Learmont observes: 'Is i nGort a'Choirce a d'fhoghlaim a áthair, Micheál, a chuid Gaeilge, is go Gort a'Choirce a thagadh said ar laethanta saoire ina óige agus is i nGort a'Choirce a fuarthas na cailíní aimsire a chuaigh leis an teaghlach le aire a thabhairt dona páistí agus leis an Ghaeilge a choinneáil mar theanga an teaghlai, ba chuma cén áit ghallda ina raibh said.'

⁵ Brian O'Nolan, 13 April 1942, letter to Sean O'Casey, in MS 38,130 *Leabharlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann*/National Library of Ireland.

⁶ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990), 144.

⁷ In favouring the word 'have,' Cronin uses a common Hiberno-English colloquialism: Irish people more often say that they 'have' Irish than they 'know' Irish or 'speak' it. However, O'Nolan's choice of words is often exact, and 'know' definitely has a specific meaning (even if he never spells it out explicitly).

⁸ Thomas King, 'Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,' *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 2 (1990): 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–3.

¹¹ Myles also uses the term 'fusion' more than once in the *Cruiskeen Lawn*: 'there can be a fusion of artistic activities directed towards the communication of a single artistic concept.' See Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Flamingo, 1993), 39. Myles makes a similar comment about fusion in James Joyce's prose: 'Joyce was a great master of the banal in literature. By "banal" I mean the fusion of uproarious comic stuff and deep tragedy.' Myles na Gopaleen, 'J. A. Joyce,' *Cruiskeen Lawn, The Irish Times* (20 July 1955): 8.

¹² Robin Flower, 'Foreword,' in *The Islandman* (London: Oxford Press, 1999), x.

¹³ In his introduction to 'Henrik Ibsen and Patrick Kavanagh,' John Wyse Jackson connects O'Nolan and 'some friends' to the 'Letters Controversy' in *The Irish Times*. Wyse Jackson does not reproduce any of the letters from the 'Compulsory Irish' controversy, nor any about the Irish language debate, but writers who figure in both controversies are mentioned – notably Oscar Love. See Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988), 186–226. The most recent scholarship on the *Irish Times* 'Letters Controversy' is Ute Anna Mittermaier's 'In Search of Mr Love; or, the Internationalist Credentials of "Myles before Myles",' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014),

95–109; however, Mittermaier overlooks Oscar Love's contribution to the beginning of the 'Compulsory Irish' controversy, before the creation of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

¹⁴ S. Ua Duibne, 'Compulsory Irish,' letter, *The Irish Times* (1 October 1940): 3.

¹⁵ Mittermaier, 105 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ Oscar Love, 'Compulsory Irish,' letter, *The Irish Times* (3 October 1940): 6.

¹⁷ See Cronin in *No Laughing Matter*, 140–4, and Donald McNamara, 'Myles of Writing: Brian O'Nolan's Newspaper Columns,' *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 29–30.

¹⁸ Mittermaier, 104.

¹⁹ Murphy, 67.

²⁰ Mittermaier, 103, 105.

²¹ Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Mion-Tuairimí ár Sinnsir,' *The Irish Press* (29 September 1932): 4; Translated by Jack Fennell and collected in Murphy and Hopper (eds), 38–41.

²² *Ibid.*, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁴ These elements are also thematic to the novels. Hopper notes similar connections between the early metafictional story 'Scenes in a Novel' (1934) and the later novels. He argues that in these texts, 'the problem of authorship is fictionalised by foregrounding the gap between what is real and what is illusory.' This idea is in keeping with the interfusional style of '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' whereby, through the headers and metafictional frame, the reader is invited 'into the literary process, thereby replacing the outmoded concept of the author as the primary interpretive centre.' Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 2nd edn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 96, 122.

²⁵ A better expression for trickery is English *treachery*, colonisation of the Irish, and destruction of the Irish language.

²⁶ Hereafter, references are to Jack Fennell's recent translation of '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' into English as 'Revenge on the English in the year 2032!'; Flann O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ John Bull is frequently referred to in O'Nolan's early fiction and the character is usually associated with suffering and comic agony. The line 'BETTER THAN "JOHN BULL"' appears in *Blather* underneath a poem that has a clear affinity with the narrator's afflicted 'bursting belly' in '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' i.e. 'Don't make a beast of yourself/ Many people have to take to Bismuth/ From overeating at Chrismuth' (see O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, 120); the John Bull contest is also the impetus for one of Sergeant Pluck's bicycle-related thefts in *The Third Policeman*.

²⁹ Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Teacht agus Imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe,' *The Irish Press* (13 June 1932): 4. Translated by Jack Fennell as 'The Arrival and Departure of John Bull,' in Murphy and Hopper (eds), 29–34.

³⁰ *Sean agus Nua* was translated into English and published as Gearóid Ó Nualláin and Fearrgus Ó Nualláin, *Intrusions* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1923).

³¹ Jeffrey Gantz, trans., 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,' in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, ed. Jeffrey Gantz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 83.

³² 'The government' is a frequent object of attack in O'Nolan's Irish-language satire. His essay, '*Seoidín Fánach: Focal Fiuntach*,' originally published in *The Evening Telegraph* (3 October 1932) and translated by John Wyse Jackson as 'A bijou: a bon mot' lays the responsibility for preserving speech with 'the government': 'when Irish is daily growing rarer, it would be a good plan to put the word (with all its

nuances) onto gramophone discs, and to cause it to be used throughout Ireland, for when the day comes – may the evil thing be far off – when Irish has vanished from the country, there would be [...] wisdom, the history, the provincialism and the daemon of our forefathers in every parish [...]. That's another job for the government' (see O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, 177).

³³ Shán Ó Cuív's 1932 handbook, *An eochair chun labhartha na Gaedhilge* [The Key to the Speaking of Irish] is an effective model for the 'Phrasebook' in the story. Shán Ó Cuív, *An eochair chun labhartha na Gaedhilge* (Dublin: Brown and Nolan, 1932).

³⁴ O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!,' 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁶ The view that Irish monks had an essential

role in teaching pagan Anglo-Saxons to write was widely held during O'Brien's student days. Celtic scholars, such as Hugh Graham, describe how the influence of St Aidan and other Irish monks was felt all over England by the A.D. seventh century; the 'Irish style of handwriting was widespread both in Britain and on the Continent. The English borrowed it [...] and so close was their imitation that many years elapsed before a distinctively Anglo-Saxon hand was evolved.' Many Anglo-Saxon Kings also learned Irish. Graham argues that King Ailfrith 'was a Gaelic scholar, as we may infer from a beautiful Gaelic poem [...] which he wrote in praise of Ireland.' Hugh Graham, 'Irish Monks and the Transmission of Learning,' *The Catholic Historical Review* 11, no. 3 (1925): 436.

³⁷ O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!,' 24.

³⁸ Robert Tracy, 'Introduction,' in Flann O'Brien, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994), 3.

³⁹ Flore Coulouma, 'Tall Tales and Short Stories: *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Dialogic Imagination,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (2011): 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Fennell is the first translator to note the loss of the joke – seeing the juxtaposition of Uncial script and Roman type – when the entire narrative is rendered in Roman type. See O'Brien, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!,' 21–2, 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'pin,' 2.

⁴⁵ O'Brien, 'The Irish Question: An Old Tale from an Old Lad,' in *Myles Before Myles*, 163.

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *Best of Myles*, 9.

⁴⁷ Flann O'Brien, *Myles Away from Dublin*, ed. Martin Green (Dublin: Lilliput Press 1985), viii.

⁴⁸ *L'Affaire Blaireau* (1923) directed and adapted for the screen by Louis Osmont; See also *L'Affaire Blaireau* (1932) directed by Henry Wulschleger adapted for the screen by Max Dianville and André Mouézy-Éon, which was released in France on 11 March of the same year.

⁴⁹ O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, 150–2.

⁵⁰ Alphonse Allais, *The World of Alphonse Allais*, trans. Miles Kington (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), 75–9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵² Myles repeats the same Allaisean joke in *Cruiskeen Lawn* when he proposes that the nation move Ireland to 'the middle of the mild blue Mediterranean.' Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 28 July 1945, 3. See Flann O'Brien, *At War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940–1945* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 166–8.

⁵³ *An Broc*, 'From a Correspondent,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 4 October 1940, 4. See Flann O'Brien, *Further Cuttings From Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 13. O'Nolan was responding to both the leading article written by R. M. Smyllie and letters to the editor published in the paper on 1 October 1940. Much of O'Nolan's fodder comes from a letter written by Jack O'Neill, dated 30 September: 'Irish is not the only language that has to keep pace with an influx of new terms as a result of war news bulletins, and its flexibility in this respect is quite equal to the demands placed upon it [...] English itself has been enriched from time to time by the influx of words of foreign origin – to mention a few: yacht, café, trek, garage, etiquette, etc. If we went far enough back we should find that Irish itself was considerably enriched in a similar way from foreign sources. It might prove the height of futility to go hunting for an exact equivalent for the term "Axis." It would be much more sensible if we took over the term as it stands and adopt the language by simple transliteration.' Jack O'Neill, 'Irish in the Home,' letter, *The Irish Times* (1 October 1940): 3.

⁵⁴ *An Broc*, 'From a Correspondent,' 4.

⁵⁵ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn: Extracts from the Daily Labours of the Wise Man Myles na gCopaleen Presented Here Safe from Extinction and Eternal Loss Through the Kindly Leave of the Persons Conducting The Irish Times* (Dublin: Cahill & Co., 1942), 80.

⁵⁶ Cólín Ó Cuanáigh, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' letter, *The Irish Times* (17 October 1940): 3 [the penname is an apparent allusion to Pádraic Ó Conaire's *Cólín Ó Cuanáigh* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1923)]; Oscar Love, 'Cruiskeen Lawn,' letter, *The Irish Times* (18 October 1940): 3.

⁵⁷ Most of the stories O'Nolan published in *The Irish Press* were accompanied by drawings not unlike those in Lear's illustrated limericks. Many similar drawings, some found artworks, and others the author's own handiwork, made their way into the column in the first two years of its existence.