

The Prison of Language

Brian O’Nolan, *An Béal Bocht*, & Language Determinism*

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An Béal Bocht was the only novel by Brian O’Nolan to achieve considerable success during the author’s lifetime, and according to Anthony Cronin, also his only work to which he retained a positive attitude until his death in 1966.¹ The situation has changed much subsequently. While O’Nolan’s English-language novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* gained canonical status as important works of European postmodernism and their various interactions with philosophy and science have been explored ever since, matters stood largely differently with *An Béal Bocht*. In English-language criticism, the novel was, until very recently, usually taken as a masterful, but straightforward satire of the Gaelic Revival and its analysis tended to be relatively brief.² Irish-language treatments of the book have been admittedly more nuanced and complex, but still with a proclivity to emphasise the particular over the general. Accordingly, the main focus has been on the source texts and O’Nolan’s variegated parodic treatment of them,³ with the added interest in the social and political relevance of the novel as a poignant critique of the poverty of the Gaeltacht areas.⁴ Even Declan Kiberd, whose staple method is to compare English and Irish language works, sustained the division between *An Béal Bocht* and O’Nolan’s other novels. Consider the following quotation from his influential study *Inventing Ireland*:

He once remarked that a writer needs ‘an equable yet versatile temperament, and the compartmentalisation of personality for the purpose of literary utterance.’ Accordingly, he had resorted as a newspaper columnist to Myles na Gopaleen, as a novelist to Flann O’Brien, as an undergraduate wit to Brother Barnabas, and as a Gaelic satirist to Myles na gCopaleen.⁵

In fact, the division proposed here is so extreme that the passage, interpreted with strict logic, implies that *An Béal Bocht*, published under the last of the pseudonyms, was not written by a novelist. It is clear, however, that such a strict compartmentalisation of O’Nolan’s work is untenable, and the main purpose of this essay is to follow some recent scholarship in supplying underlying reasons why it is so.⁶

'Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh': Early Experiments

In 1933, well before his major novels were written, O'Nolan published the short story 'Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh' (The Journey of Black Peter) in the magazine *Inisfail*. The text, crammed with all the familiar 'Gaelic' clichés, reads as a condensed version of *An Béal Bocht*; that is, until we reach the final paragraphs. It starts with the birth of the protagonist into a destitute Gaeltacht family living in a 'teach beag ceann-toigheadh aolbhán aoibhinn, 'na shuidhe go sásta i n-ascal a' ghleanna' (lovely little thatched lime-washed house, sitting comfortably by itself in the centre of the valley).⁷ From there, the text lists a number of props and situations well-known from *An Béal Bocht* and its Donegal literary sources—such as the encounter with a *seanchaí*, the five-naggin bottle or a night courting scene—and culminates in the description of drownings at sea and wakes of the dead. At this point, the story's circumstances and tone change abruptly. Black Peter utters a loud curse and, after finding out from a priest that he and his dismal world were in fact created not by God but by 'Parthalán Mac an Dubhdha, scríobhnóir, agus Feidhlimídh Ó Casaidhe, file – beirt de mhuintir Bhaile Átha Cliath' (Parthalán Mac an Dubhdha, author, and Feidhlimídh Ó Casaidhe, poet – both natives of Dublin),⁸ repairs to the said place with a shotgun under his coat. His action, referred to in the story as 'drochobair i mBaile Átha Cliath' (bad business done in Dublin) brings normal life and modernity to the Gaeltacht, where now shops abound on the bog, 'agus tá bus-ticket agus cigarette agus daily mail le fagháil ann' (where one can obtain bus-tickets and cigarettes and daily mail).⁹

The revolt of the character against the author as it features in the last paragraphs of the story is familiar to any Flann O'Brien reader of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The 1933 story thus serves as proof that the plots of O'Nolan's texts developed in the author's mind alongside each other and that the division between the novelist and the Gaelic satirist cannot be sustained. In what ways, then, can we bridge the gap between O'Nolan's Irish language writing, permeated as it is with topical satire on the Revival, and the seemingly much broader postmodernism of *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*? This essay undertakes to bridge this gap through the exploration of a principal theme relevant to O'Nolan's *oeuvre* as such—the theme of language and, even more precisely, language determinism.

Revival & Language Determinism

In his masterful analysis of *The Third Policeman*, Keith Hopper draws attention to a passage in which the supposed madness of Fox, the titular third policeman, is explained by the fact that he has accidentally seen a card of a completely unknown colour.¹⁰ Hopper connects this episode to the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and to

the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that concerns language relativity – as the division of the continuous spectrum of visible light differs among languages, the colour perception will vary accordingly. An unknown colour can be then imagined as one without a corresponding concept in a given language.¹¹ The ultimate implication of the theory is that our perception of the world is fundamentally shaped by the language that we speak. And it is exactly this idea of language determinism that, in philosophical terms, connects Revival thought with postmodernism and thus provides the building material for an elegant bridge between *An Béal Bocht* and O’Nolan’s writing in English.

It has been well established that language revivals, as they occurred throughout Europe at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century, were significantly influenced by a number of German pre-Romantic and Romantic philosophers, most notably by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). As Joep Leerssen argues: ‘Most of the “national awakenings” that took place in Central and Eastern Europe, from Germany to Bulgaria and from Slovenia to Finland, can be more or less directly traced back to the philosophy and influence of Herder.’¹² While the Irish language revival started later and other streams of thought fed into it, the input of German philosophy has been long acknowledged, at least concerning the establishment of the basic ideological tenet of the Revival, namely, the unbreakable link between language and nationality.¹³ At the same time, thinkers such as Herder are important precursors of 20th-century language determinism, of which the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a prime example – after all, the subject of Sapir’s master’s thesis was Herder’s book *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Treatise on the Origin of Language).¹⁴

An important feature of Herder’s philosophy was a rejection of the Enlightenment view of language as a transparent means of communication.¹⁵ Such a utilitarian approach would be intrinsically inimical to any less used or minority language – if the purpose of language is solely communication, the ideal situation would be, after all, that the whole world speaks only one tongue. Such a perspective explains, for example, the Germanising efforts of the Austrian Emperor Joseph II in Herder’s own time: the underlying idea was not to impose German nationality on his Slavic subjects, but simply to get rid of seemingly unnecessary distinctions among people in order to make the running of the Empire smoother. Herder’s move can be described using Charles Sanders Peirce’s typology of signs as a step away from imagining language as a system of symbols that communicate external reality, which would be the Enlightenment outlook, towards seeing it as an index, a sign metonymically connected to the traditions and views of the people by whom it is spoken.¹⁶ In his passionate criticism of Joseph II’s language policy, Herder writes:

Hat wohl ein Volk, zumal ein unkultiviertes Volk, etwas lieberes als die Sprache seiner Väter? In ihr wohnet sein ganzer Gedankenreichtum an Tradition, Geschichte, Religion und Grundsätzen des Lebens, alle sein Herz und Seele. Einem solchen Volk seine Sprache nehmen oder herabwürdigen heißt ihm sein einziges unsterbliches Eigentum nehmen, das von Eltern auf Kinder fortgeht.

(Is anything more precious for a people, especially an uncultivated people, than the speech of their fathers? Within it dwells the whole wealth of thought on tradition, history, religion, and the principles of life, all of the people's heart and soul. To take away their language from such a people, or to derogate it, means depriving them of their only immortal possession, passed on from parents to children.)¹⁷

In this and numerous other similar statements, Herder makes a strong case for diversity in language and thought, by which he opposed the Enlightenment thrust for uniformity. While we are entitled to commend this view, along with Joep Leerssen, as 'ecological',¹⁸ it already contains pitfalls of essentialism and determinism. Does the equation of language with the 'heart and soul' of a people imply that an individual's thought is predetermined by his or her nationality and language?

For thinkers of the following generation, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), this seems to be the case to a significant degree. Having located the basis of language in 'the spirit of the race',¹⁹ and having proposed that in every language there resides a specific 'world view',²⁰ Humboldt argues that one of the consequences is that this connection of the individual with his nation lies right at the centre from whence the total mental power determines all thinking, feeling, and willing. For language is related to everything therein, to the whole as to the individual, and nothing of this ever is, or remains, alien to it.²¹ Humboldt's strongest, although not absolute statement of language determinism is perhaps contained in the following quote:

When we think how the current generation of a people is governed by all that their language has undergone, through all the preceding centuries, and how only the power of the single generation impinges thereon – and this not even purely, since those coming up and those departing live mingled side by side – it then becomes evident how small, in fact, is the power of the individual compared to the might of language.²²

In other words, Humboldt's statements imply that a person's thinking and perception of the world is largely governed by his or her language, which is, in turn, firmly connected to ethnicity or nationality.

Cruiskeen Lawn & Language Determinism

O'Nolan's relationship to these philosophical views was ambivalent. Some of his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, despite their jocular style, certainly suggest that he endorsed Herder's 'ecological' plea for language diversity. He occasionally extolled virtues of Irish, such as its extensive vocabulary or its 'precision, elegance, and capacity for subtler intellectual nuances.'²³ An interesting parallel to the Sapir-Whorf argument about the colour spectrum can be found in O'Nolan's half-humorous consideration of the paucity of concepts for sea-going craft in English, which, in his view, merely 'distinguishes the small from the big. If it's small, it's a boat, and if it's big, it's a ship.'²⁴ This he compares with the abundance of related terms to be found in Ó Criomhthain's autobiography *An tOileánach*, thus arguing that the Irish speaker's perception of the phenomenon is, by virtue of his language, richer and more nuanced than that of the English speaker. Therefore, in O'Nolan's view, the survival of Irish would contribute to the diversity of linguistic tools for apprehending reality, which chimes with Herder's basic tenet.

O'Nolan's most outspoken apology of the efforts to revive the Irish language appeared in the autumn of 1943, ironically not long before his decision to abandon writing in Irish entirely.²⁵ It is of definite value for the present discussion as it addresses directly the Herderian/Humboldtian connection between the language and the nation:

There is probably no basis at all for the theory that a people cannot preserve a separate national entity without a distinct language but it is beyond dispute that Irish enshrines the national ethos and in a subtle way Irish persists very vigorously in English. In advocating the preservation of Irish culture, it is not to be inferred *that this culture* is superior to the English or any other but simply that certain Irish modes are *more comfortable and suitable* for Irish people; otherwise these modes simply would not exist.²⁶

Probably the most interesting feature of the passage is its cautious wording. In the first clause, stronger cultural nationalist claims are carefully rejected, yet the statement about Irish enshrining the 'national ethos' unmistakably strikes a common note with both Herder and Humboldt. However, this takes place, in contrast to prevalent revivalist opinion of the time, in a distinctively bilingual, dialogical environment, as

suggested by the mention of the influence of Irish on English spoken in Ireland. Indeed, the column continues in the characteristic jocular statement that 'if Irish were to die completely, the standard of English here [...] would sink to a level probably so low as that obtaining in England and it would stop there only because it could go no lower.'²⁷

While we may conclude that O'Nolan, at least at this period of his life, subscribed to a distinctively liberal, non-chauvinistic version of the language-nation connection, he certainly spared no bullets in vigorously attacking more rigid views, widespread among the revivalists. Whereas O'Nolan, in the passage just quoted, is evasive about the 'national ethos,' others were much less circumspect. As Philip O'Leary has shown, a consensus developed already in the early years of the Gaelic Revival among the nativist camp in the movement concerning what this ethos (usually referred to as '*Gaelachas*') might consist of.²⁸ In accordance with Herder's emphasis on folklore, the traditional culture of the Irish-speaking areas was considered as a vital component. Moreover, '*Gaelachas*' was, in the view of a large and outspoken group of the revivalists, intrinsically connected to Catholic doctrine with its emphasis on purity and morality. In his journalistic attacks on these opinions, O'Nolan mercilessly exposed the greatest weakness of Herder's and Humboldt's arguments: the fact that the putative 'heart and soul of the people' (or 'spirit of the race') represents no discernible entity in the real world but is necessarily a cultural construct. As such, despite its perceived antiquity and immutability, it is not immune from contact with contemporaneous ideas. This led to the paradoxical fact that while the revivalists' goal was seemingly to de-Anglicise Ireland, many facets of the proposed national ethos were derived from English Victorian values rather than from indigenous traditions. The perceived connection of Irish to reinvented folk practices, Catholicism, and Victorian morality was ridiculed by O'Nolan in ironic passages such as this: 'There is also a mystical relationship between the jig, the Irish language, abstinence from alcohol, morality, and salvation.'²⁹ In these jibes, O'Nolan took advantage of his knowledge of earlier Irish historical and literary traditions, which were indeed far removed from the puritanism of the new movement: '*D'ólfadh Pádraig Sáirséal oiread stuif i n-aon oidhche is d'ólfadh comhaltáí go léir an Gallaic Léig le linn bliana. Ní ag moladh an ólacháin atá mé acht ag clamhsáil i dtaobh ain-eolais agus galldachais na nGaedhilgeóirí.*' (Patrick Sarsfield would drink as much stuff overnight as all the Gaelic League members would in a year. I am not praising alcoholism but complaining about the ignorance and foreignism of the Irish language enthusiasts.)³⁰

Many intellectuals in mid-20th-century Ireland saw no other way of escaping the straitjacket of '*Gaelachas*' but to renounce the Revival entirely and opt for the English language. In contrast, O'Nolan for a considerable time managed to strike a balance between the more extreme cultural nationalist views and the rejection of Irish, the

disappearance of which he, in accordance with the 'ecological' facet of Herder's thought, would perceive as an irretrievable cultural loss. His solution, proposed in various semi-jocular forms, was to dissolve the connection between Irish and 'Gaelachas.' He maintained that a 'knowledge of Irish does not necessarily connote adherence to the social, cultural, or political philosophies of any other Irish speaker'³¹ and insisted that the language should retain its communicative function, rather than be relegated to a mere vehicle for the supposed national spirit. In the latter position, the language would be, in O'Nolan's view, limited to self-reference and solipsism manifested by incessant discussions of themes such as the language question, the state of the language, and the question of the Gaeltacht.³²

From the very start, O'Nolan therefore set out to broaden the range of topics to be treated in Irish – even to include sensitive issues connected to Irish neutrality, as indicated for example by his coining of Irish words for terms such as 'Molotoff bread-basket' in his very first *Cruiskeen Lawn* column.³³ Equally important was his wholesale use of bilingualism manifested in macaronic conversations, the writing of English words in Irish spellings and *vice versa*, as well as his ubiquitous bilingual and multilingual puns. It is therefore clear that he saw Irish as a worthy member of a diverse and dialogical orchestra of languages, whose variety of timbres is a much better instrument for apprehending the world than any single language on its own. In this manner, O'Nolan adopted Herder's plea for variety while remaining wary about the connection between language and nation, thus offering a tentative escape from the deterministic trap set by both German thinkers under discussion.

The Deterministic World of *An Béal Bocht*

This positive thrust is largely missing in '*Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh*' and *An Béal Bocht*. To explain their method in relation to the questions discussed here, one must first explore the class and geographical dimension of the Irish language revival. Its peculiarities derived from the fact that while most of the movement's supporters were city-based, the survival of the language largely depended on the underdeveloped Irish-speaking areas (*Gaeltachtaí*) along the western seaboard. In relation to their inhabitants, the constructs of 'Gaelachas' often took the form of stereotypes imposed by the nation's elites on the rest of their compatriots whether they subscribed to them or not. Accordingly, O'Nolan's satire in these two works is directed against the exclusive connection of Irish with bogs, blind storytellers, potatoes, backwardness, and poverty. In O'Nolan's view, this was not the natural condition of native Irish speakers, but something perpetuated, among other causes, by the stereotypical views of revivalists, exemplified by the fictitious Dublin authors from '*Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh*' or the real

writers from Donegal, such as Séamus Ó Grianna, parodied with such flourish in *An Béal Bocht*. These opinions had often a hypocritical ring to them, as when a certain Mícheál Óg Mac Pháidín, on the pages of *The Star* in 1930, expounded on the simple virtues of the native speakers:

Ní fear sanntach Gael na Gaeltachta. Ní maith leis a bheith ina thocaidhe ramhar bodamhail. Tá sé sásta leis an mheasaracht. Má tá a spleotán beag préataí agus coirce ag teacht 'un cinn go deas agus gan an aicéad a theacht orrtha tá sé ar a sháimhín suilt an bhliadhain sin. Má tá muiseog mhaith phréataí aige, cruach de mhóin tirim agus an cíos agus an gearradh díolta níl i nÉirinn féin fear níos lugha mairg.

(The Gael of the Gaeltacht is not a greedy man. He does not want to be a fat, churlish man of means. He is content with moderation. If he has his little patch of potatoes and oats coming along nicely unaffected by the blight, he is at his ease that year. If he has a good heap of potatoes, a stack of dry turf, and the rent and the taxes paid, there is not a man in Ireland less worried.)³⁴

We may safely assume that precisely these views, together with his growing impatience with the more extreme voices within the revival movement, ultimately led to O'Nolan's gradual abandonment of Irish in his writing. Significantly, his unpublished manuscript 'Pathology of Revivalism,' most likely written in 1947,³⁵ indicates that he ultimately lost belief in the viability or, indeed, desirability of the effort to revive the language. Apart from the usual deploration of the artificial connection of Irish with ludicrous elements of 'Gaelachas' as described above, O'Nolan put forward an argument concerning the Gaeltacht speakers – while English offered them a path to modernity, Irish, due to its limited use, curtailed their economic opportunities and kept them in 'the prison of a language.'³⁶ This statement may be rightly criticised as reductive – in contrast to what has been stated about the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, it does not allow for the beneficial effects of bilingualism, but what is more, it effectively ignores the value of the native speakers' indigenous culture. Nevertheless, it has definite relevance for the discussion of O'Nolan's treatment of language determinism.

Indeed, *An Béal Bocht* may be related precisely to this image of 'the prison of a language,' although its implications here, as will be shown, achieve a much more general scope. In the novel, O'Nolan exaggerates language determinism to its limits by taking clichéd expressions literally and by turning the notion of *mimesis* on its head – in the world of Corca Dorcha, language and literature (another repository of the putative national spirit) do not mirror reality but create it. Significantly, as in

O'Nolan's English-language novels, the only element that breaks through the constructed nature of the world is, from the reader's point of view at least, the reality of physical or mental pain. Consider, for example, the violent blow inflicted on the protagonist Bónapárt by his teacher,³⁷ the injuries he suffers during his fall from Cruach an Ocráis (Hunger Hill),³⁸ or the scene that features the death of his wife and son.³⁹ The result is, despite all the laughter it provokes, a nightmarish world not entirely dissimilar from the version of hell portrayed in *The Third Policeman*. Events run their course according to absurd laws that cannot be changed, and the fates of the characters cyclically repeat themselves in the course of generations, as exemplified by the scene of Bónapárt's meeting with his father, who has just been released from the same prison to which Bónapárt is being escorted.⁴⁰

In fact, the whole world of Corca Dorcha resembles a prison and there seems to be no way out. As indicated by the solipsistic speech of the President of the Feis,⁴¹ Irish in the novel always takes itself as its subject. It is thus unable to communicate external reality, so cannot assist the novel's characters to escape their dismal fate. Even the heroic retrieval of Maoldún Ó Pónasa's legendary treasure does not improve the protagonist's situation as it, due to the perennial laws of Corca Dorcha, ultimately causes his imprisonment.⁴² Significantly, even this adventure contains a linguistic dimension – Bónapárt's prompt flight from Ó Pónasa's mountain is caused not so much by the awakening of a seeming corpse, but by the fact that it starts to recite, in Middle Irish, the self-same story Bónapárt heard from a Donegal storyteller a few episodes earlier.⁴³ Even reaching back into the deep past does not, therefore, bring the much-needed linguistic refreshment. The only character able to escape the dismal fate of the Gaels is thus the beggar Sitric Ó Sánasa, who abandons human language entirely, opting for an underwater life among the seals.⁴⁴ While this passage has its clear basis in the episode of the seal-hunt in the main source of O'Nolan's novel, Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*,⁴⁵ further insights might be gained if we consider another literary parallel, Pádraic Ó Conaire's short story 'Páidín Mháire,' which is built upon a contrast between the alienating forces of the modern world and an idealised (but unattainable) life according to nature. The eponymous protagonist is a Connemara fisherman, attached to his traditional way of life. Poverty causes him, however, to engage in public works where he is injured in an explosion. As a consequence, he loses sight and eventually is forced to enter a workhouse. Unable to bear the oppressive atmosphere of the institution, he walks away, but gets lost and becomes terminally ill after a night spent in the open countryside. When dying, he imagines a fictitious underwater world where he would spend a careless life in the company of seals, a species with legendary connections to his family.⁴⁶ There is no such idealisation in *An Béal Bocht*. Sitric, having already regularly contended in winters with stray dogs over a

'*cnámh caol cruaidh*' (narrow hard bone)⁴⁷ becomes literally an animal, '*féachaint mhongach fhiadháin ar nós na rón féin air*' (wild and hirsute as a seal).⁴⁸ Becoming one with nature in the Romantic sense has no place in Corca Dorcha, and the only escape from the omnipresent power of language is to become an animal with all its attendant attributes.

The hellish nature of Corca Dorcha is further enhanced by the simple fact of the prominent presence of a devil in the story. Its role is taken by the legendary monster '*an cat mara*,' whose origin can be located in one of the synonyms for the evil spirit in Donegal folklore.⁴⁹ When Bónapárt meets it on his return from Donegal, he is, apart from the unbearable smell, struck by its peculiar appearance, described in the following way in a footnote:

Bhéarfaidh an caoinléightheoir fá ndear go bhfuil géar-chosamhlacht eadar chuma an chait mara mar tharraing Ó Cúnasa é agus cuma an tírín aoibhinn is dúthchas dúinn go h-uile. Tá a lán neithe ar an saoghal so nach dtuigtear dúinn acht ní'l sé ar fad gan tábhacht go bhfuil an cruth céadna ar an chat mara is atá ar Éirinn, agus go bhfuil ceangailte leo araon a raibh againn riamh den drochchinneamhain, an droch-shaoghal agus an mí-ádh.

(The good reader will kindly notice the close resemblance between the Sea-cat, as delineated by O'Coonassa, and the pleasant little land which is our own. Many things in life are unintelligible to us but it is not without importance that the Sea-cat and Ireland bear the same shape and that both have all the same bad destiny, hard times and ill-luck attending on them which have come upon us.)⁵⁰

As Breandán Ó Conaire has suggested, the Sea-cat may be taken as a parody of the visionary woman of *aisling* poetry, who also appears to wanderers in the Irish countryside.⁵¹ While the *aisling* woman represents Ireland, in O'Nolan's book the symbol transforms into a nightmarish reality in which the Sea-cat does not merely represent but *looks like* the country. The abominable Sea-cat may thus be seen as a metaphor of the method of *An Béal Bocht* – the putative spirit of the nation, resident in language according to Herder and Humboldt, becomes real and appears as a hideous monster, haunting the Gaelic inferno of Corca Dorcha.

Conclusion

Even the language determinism of Humboldt, strong as it was, did not foresee such ends – because first, in spite of the disparity of power, he still saw the relationship between language and the individual as reciprocal,⁵² and, secondly, he was able to imagine a fruitful, mutually supporting relationship between the national spirit and

individual growth, as his writings about the Basques show.⁵³ O'Nolan's pessimistic view, influenced by the excesses of cultural nationalism during the Free State era, found its parallel only in the thought of the second half of the 20th century, constructed after much worse nationalist excesses in the European context. A case in point might be the theory of discourse proposed by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which disposes of real-life referents and concentrates on objects existing only in discourse,⁵⁴ thus offering, in a way, a solipsistic image of language. In a similar manner, Foucault dissolves the link between utterances and the traditional human subject, which is replaced by mere 'modalities of enunciation.'⁵⁵ The dismal conclusion of the analysis is that discourse is governed by impersonal rules which allow little room for freedom.⁵⁶ As in the world of *An Béal Bocht*, for Foucault language is also an oppressive force, the escape from which borders on the impossible.

The connection made between the 'founding fathers' of cultural nationalism, Herder and Humboldt, and latter-day proponents of language determinism, such as Sapir or Foucault, amply shows some of the underlying reasons why *An Béal Bocht* should be regarded as an important precursor to postmodernism in exactly the same way as O'Nolan's English writing is seen today. The undeniable topicality and satirical thrust of the novel should not be seen as an obstacle to this interpretation – it is worth noting that the tendency of language to self-referentiality becomes significantly stronger in certain types of discourse, of which the inward-looking revival rhetoric might serve as a good example. The Gaelic inferno of Corca Dorcha, as described by O'Nolan, helps us to see that in a certain sense, all of us live in the prison of language.

Notes & references

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¹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990), 144.

² The notable exception to this trend until the current decade is M. Keith Booker's masterful Bakhtinian reading of the novel in his *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 66–84.

³ An exhaustive and detailed treatment of all the sources may be found in Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* (Dublin: An Chlóchomhar, 1986).

⁴ See, for example, Louis de Paor, 'Myles na gCopaleen agus Drochshampla na nDealeabhar,' *The Irish Review* 23 (Winter 1998): 24–32.

⁵ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 500.

⁶ For a re-evaluation of O'Nolan's use of his Irish sources from a postmodernist perspective, see Neil Murphy, 'Myles na gCopaleen, Flann O'Brien and *An Béal Bocht*: Intertextuality and Aesthetic Play,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 143–55. Similar conclusions are reached in Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'An Béal Bocht and *An tOileánach*: Writing on the Margin—Gaelic Glosses or Postmodern Marginalia?' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 4 (October 2011): 191–204.

⁷ Brian Ó Nualláin, 'Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh,' *Inisfail* 1, no. 1 (March 1933): 63. The English translation comes from Flann O'Brien, 'The Journey of Black Peter,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 42. The adjective 'thatched' was added to maintain a greater correspondence to the original.

⁸ Ó Nualláin, 'Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh,' 64; O'Brien, 'The Journey of Black Peter,' 44.

⁹ Ó Nualláin, 'Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh,' 64; O'Brien, 'The Journey of Black Peter,' 45. The title 'the *Daily Mail*' in the translation was changed to the generic 'daily mail' to maintain a greater correspondence to the original.

¹⁰ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 159.

¹¹ Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 138.

¹² Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 97.

¹³ Brian Ó Conchubhair, *Fin de Siècle na Gaeilge: Darwin, an Athbheochan agus Smaointeoireacht na hEorpa* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009), 13–50.

¹⁴ John Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities: Language Diversity and Modern Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011), 133.

¹⁵ Leerssen, 99.

¹⁶ This connection was made, in the analysis of the Czech language revival, in Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu: České obrození jako kulturní typ* (Jinočany: H&H, 1995), 44.

¹⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität,' in *J. G. Von Herder's Ausgewahlte Werke in einem Bande* (Stuttgart und Tübingen: J.W. Gottascher Verlag, 1844), 1122. Translation my own.

¹⁸ Leerssen, 99.

¹⁹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. Michael Losonsky, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

²³ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), 278, 282.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁵ See Carol Taaffe, "'The Pathology of Revivalism": An Unpublished Manuscript by Myles na gCopaleen,' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 30. Extensive information concerning O'Nolan's changing attitudes towards revivalism can be found in Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 91–125.

²⁶ O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

- ²⁸ Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 14–6.
- ²⁹ Qtd in Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, 79.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74. Translation my own.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 76.
- ³³ Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass*, 96.
- ³⁴ Philip O'Leary, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State: 1922–1934* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 556. The translation comes from *ibid.*, 95.
- ³⁵ Taaffe, 'The Pathology of Revivalism,' 27.
- ³⁶ Brian O'Nolan, 'The Pathology of Revivalism,' 3. This material is quoted with the kind permission of the John J. Burns Library, Boston College.
- ³⁷ Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Dublin: An Press Náisiúnta, 1941) [hereafter cited as *ABB*], 25–6.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98–9.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110–1.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 107–8.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59–61, 98.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁴⁵ Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An tOileánach* (Dublin: Cló Talbóid, 2002), 118–22.
- ⁴⁶ Pádraic Ó Conaire, 'Páidín Mháire,' in *Scothscéalta* (Dublin: Sáirséal Ó Marcaigh: 1982), 133–45.
- ⁴⁷ *ABB*, 77. The English translation comes from Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick. C. Power (London: Flamingo, 1993), 89.
- ⁴⁸ *ABB*, 86; O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 98.
- ⁴⁹ Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, 188.
- ⁵⁰ *ABB*, 66; O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 77.
- ⁵¹ Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge*, 189.
- ⁵² Humboldt qualifies his deterministic views in the following way: 'Only through [the individual's] uncommon plasticity, the possibility to assimilate [language] forms in very different ways without damage to general understanding, and through the dominion exercised by every living mind over its dead heritage, is the balance somewhat restored.' Humboldt, 63.
- ⁵³ A thorough analysis of these can be found in Brian Vick, 'Of Basques, Greeks, and Germans: Liberalism, Nationalism, and the Ancient Republican Tradition in the Thought of Wilhelm Von Humboldt,' *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (December 2007), 666–73.
- ⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2001), 47.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 54–5.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.