

# The Bildung Subject & Modernist Autobiography in *An Béal Bocht* (Beyond *An tOileánach*)

**Brian Ó Conchubhair**

*University of Notre Dame*

The Irish Bildungsroman, because it employs the defamiliarising techniques of parody and mimicry, thus functions like the radical modern art that Theodor Adorno describes, which is hated 'because it reminds us of missed chances, but also because by its sheer existence it reveals the dubiousness of the heteronomous structural ideal.'<sup>1</sup>

*An Béal Bocht* can be, and usually is, read as a parody of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish language texts. But it is, in equal measure, an *homage* to them and an appropriation of their stylistic conventions, motifs, and attitudes. The novel's building blocks were assuredly those cannibalised texts, and from them O'Nolan creates a dissonant, hyperreal, but easily recognisable world. No less fundamental, however, is an outdated, hyper-masculine sense of Irishness and a fabricated sense of the cultural nationalist-inspired depiction of lived Gaeltacht experience. This mocking, ironic book is driven by vitriolic enmity to any external prescriptive account of Gaeltacht life and any attempt to stereotype or generalise Irish speakers' experience. As Joseph Brooker observes, its 'greatest significance is not as a rewriting of a particular book, but rather a reinscription of a genre.'<sup>2</sup> As a synthesis of literary conceits, cultural motifs, and nationalist tropes, it marks a cultural moment in Irish literary and cultural history. It remains undimmed by the passage of time, but for all its allusions, parodies, and references, it continues to amuse, entertain, and instruct global readers with little or no Irish, as well as those with even less awareness of the texts from which *An Béal Bocht* is drawn. Its dense allusiveness is neither necessary nor essential to comprehend or enjoy the text.

In as much as it undermines the bulwarks of the imagined Gaeltacht, the novel not only avoids deep engagement with these texts, it also translates and transposes many traditional staples of the international Bildungsroman. This essay considers *An Béal Bocht* in that context: less a parody of Irish language texts and more a text that speaks to, and overturns, expectations of international readers versed in the Bildungsroman genre. For Peter Ackroyd, *An Béal Bocht* is 'a hermetic text, hitherto untranslatable, and one full of archaic formulae,'<sup>3</sup> but despite its enclosed discourse it

appeals in a multiplicity of languages. The novel functions thus: it is extracted from its natural literary and cultural origins and replanted in a variety of European languages, because in addition to drawing on Irish-language literary traditions, it also fits into the mainstream European literary expectations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bildungsroman. *An Béal Bocht* trusts readers to recognise the Bildungsroman's generic markers and patterns as much as its subversive parodic element. It certainly benefits from sources such as memoirs, autobiographies, classical, and fictional texts, but critically, it does not rely exclusively on them. Such trappings add much, but are not essential to its intrinsic modernist strengths, which lie, as much if not more, in the Bildungsroman's structure and motifs. *An Béal Bocht* exhibits scepticism, rejects anthropological realism or naïve mimesis, and breaks with established literary patterns and procedures. Its radical technique actually supplements what truly makes *An Béal Bocht* modernist: its subversion of 'the institutions through which art itself is displayed.'<sup>4</sup> As Christopher Butler has argued of early modernist artworks which 'bewildered their audiences, because their innovations ha[d] left behind those modes of discourse that were previously common to the consumer and the work,'<sup>5</sup> *An Béal Bocht* marks a watershed in the evolution of both Irish-language modernism and the Irish-language Bildungsroman. Irish-language memoirs appeared after *An Béal Bocht*, but the discourse had altered.

### The Bildungsroman Tradition

The endpoint of individualism in the Bildungsroman genre is often a successful socialisation.<sup>6</sup> Largely associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bildungsroman is frequently defined as a 'novel of formation' or 'novel of education'<sup>7</sup>; its subject 'is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences – and usually through a spiritual crisis – into maturity and the recognition of his identity and role in the world.'<sup>8</sup> Through a process of increasing self-questioning, escalating self-awareness, and intensifying self-consciousness, the narrator grows, matures, and ultimately achieves a state of maturity and personal resolution. The work charts, in a linear process of maturation, the character's 'heroic' achievement in navigating obstacles – financial, familial, social, and moral – before ultimately achieving a social status, ethical authority, and a unified, autonomous self. The hero 'develops moral agency and authority in the novel; that is, he proves his capability to become at last a model of behaviour based on his discovery of social, ethical, and personal truths that mirror the beliefs and values of the author, and presumably, of readers.'<sup>9</sup> Characteristically, the narrator undergoes several stages or trials. J. H. Buckley considers 'childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the

larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy' as typical stages or trials through which the narrator progresses.<sup>10</sup> Philosophically implicit in such a progression is a 'Platonic model of an ordered universe where both objective knowledge about the world and a conscious, stable subjectivity are potentially attainable, despite difficulties incurred.'<sup>11</sup> It is a given that the world contains meaning; patterns exist to be discovered and understood.

The hero's cumulative journey is multifaceted: chronological, physical, and psychological as well as social. As the hero ages, they undergo various social rites and learn and accrue emotional, intellectual, and social knowledge. The hero not only internalises the meanings, costs, and privileges of joining society, but balances participation in social union against the creation of a negotiated social and individual identity. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's influential *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship), the character surmounts the disconnect between the individual's concerns and society's needs. Later works, however, such as Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (Lost Illusions), focus on 'the unhappiness that follows when the individual has to accept his or her socialisation. The Bildungsroman after Goethe, in short, mostly teaches European readers to accept their socialisation with resignation, because there seems to be no other choice.'<sup>12</sup> The hero's struggle to steer a path through the gauntlet of challenges which society sets for them provides ample opportunity for misunderstanding, confusion, resentment, and failure before growth, maturity, and ultimate success. Paul R. McAleer suggests that 'The marriage formula, the discovery or cognition scene, a whole host of character types, sexual ribaldry and the portrait of a dystopian society are common features in the comic novel of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.'<sup>13</sup> Consequently, humourists adapted the genre for comic purpose and satirical social commentary:

Comedy in its 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bildungsroman form, whether it ends in a full-blown resolution or with the main character in isolation, is, therefore, an ideologically laden genre. Its structure and content transmit with distilled clarity the 'bourgeois ideology of individualism.' For this reason, it stands as an important source of information about the way in which the self was perceived. It is a gauge, if you like, of an ideologically driven and idealised vision of the self. Of course, all this does not mean that the comic novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are without their inner contradictions. No doubt one would find competing ideologies in each individual text, with the class structure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century being one of the determinant factors of that ideological antagonism, as Alden observes. However, it remains the case that the dominant ideology in the late

18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century comic Bildungsroman, and indeed the Bildungsroman tout court, is one which transmits a certain ideology of individual identity.<sup>14</sup>

The traditional hero, as Anne T. Salvator observes, tends to be male: 'Often, though not always, he is the title character (e.g., *David Copperfield*), but even when a different title is used (e.g., *Great Expectations*), invariably the hero or protagonist is the character receiving the greatest amount of textual space and "focalisation".'<sup>15</sup>

If the archetypal hero was male, he was also young. The radical changes wrought on social relationships resulted in the young man providing the ideal representative of the new opportunities and challenges modernity offered. Such tenderness of years symbolised the novelty effected by modernity: 'a world in flux, a world set adrift on the violent tides of history and emerging into new possibilities, and thus we can see why the genre was so attractive.'<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti argues that the theme of youth was a 'material sign' of the modern age 'because of its ability to accentuate modernity's dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity's "essence," the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past.'<sup>17</sup> And in a similar vein, Mikhail Bakhtin writes that the young hero marks 'the emergence of a new man' who 'emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between epochs, at the transition point between one and the other.'<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging the future's power to organise and frustrate, Bakhtin contends that what is being described is less 'the private biographical future, but the historical future.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in the Irish context, Declan Kiberd contends that 'autobiography in Ireland becomes, in effect, the autobiography of Ireland. To read the autobiographies of Yeats, George Moore, or Frank O'Connor is [...] to be constantly impressed and unnerved by the casual ease with which they substitute themselves as a shorthand for their country, writing an implicit and covert constitution for their republics in images of their very creation.'<sup>20</sup>

Critics distinguish between the socially pragmatic Bildung and the classical aesthetic-spiritual Bildung,<sup>21</sup> but both result in a harmonious union of the individual and the wider social entity. In Germany, the Bildungsroman emerged 'in a climate of intense aesthetic and philosophical exploration and creative production; it emerged not only as the signature narrative expression of the concept of Bildung but also as the 'genre of aesthetics.'<sup>22</sup> Such works arose from the interface of 'Enlightenment humanism, Protestant Pietism, and the new idealism of Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte and G. W. F. Hegel.'<sup>23</sup> Within the English tradition, the genre became associated with the rites of passage, the trials and formative experiences undergone by a young man 'coming of age' and finding his way in society and the wider world. It traced the

contours of his social mobility and gradual, if unsteady, integration into society, before ultimately sublimating his identity within the wider society, state, and nation. Among the fundamental elements of the Bildungsroman are aesthetic education, mentorship, marriage, and self-sufficiency.<sup>24</sup> The genre itself imposes an expectation of social success predicated on sexual initiation, marriage, and the discovery of vocation that promises professional accomplishment and material well-being.<sup>25</sup> McAleer states: 'By celebrating the individual's potential development and by projecting a final harmony between self and society, the Bildungsroman "promised a sunny end to an economic revolution".'<sup>26</sup> By the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, as Moretti contends, the genre was largely exhausted.<sup>27</sup> Yet such 'failures' to fulfil its traditional duties and meet classical expectations can be construed as 'a successful resistance to the institutionalisation of self-cultivation (Bildung).'<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Castle contends, 'it is precisely the breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialisation that gives the *Bildungsroman* a new sense of purpose.'<sup>29</sup> This context of failure provides a fertile setting to discuss the challenging, non-standard, Irish-language Bildungsroman of the early 1940s, specifically *An Béal Bocht* and *Mo Bhealach Féin*.<sup>30</sup>

### Brian O'Nolan's Hard Mouth and Poor Life

In the comic Bildungsroman, a subgenre, we encounter 'a peculiar, hybrid formulation that mimics the expectations of self-cultivation, but then subverts its own narrative trajectory.'<sup>31</sup> Here, the comic hero

may negotiate the perambulations of youth to attain a wise, folly-free maturity, and while he may possess the virtue to succeed, he is typically an inferior being, incapable of heroic effort. Whatever success he achieves is usually attained through happenstance or luck, neither of which is likely to valorise the unstable or absurd environment in which the action is situated.<sup>32</sup>

*An Béal Bocht* is an example of this comic subgenre with a modernist bent, one in which the character is bereft of all positive luck and good fortune. If the premise of the Bildungsroman is an ordered universe where stable subjectivity is attainable, despite difficulties,<sup>33</sup> this text questions the very notion of stable subjectivity; patterns do exist, but they are prescriptive and defined by *na dea-leabhair*, the oft-cited 'good books.' It is these foundational, almost sacred, texts and their prescriptive theories that dictate the universal order. Knowledge is not acquired through experience but by familiarity with these unnamed texts and acquiescence to their authority on all matters. This inversion of manifest destiny by a repeating cycle of collective misfortune and dysfunctionality

is dominant throughout the novel.<sup>34</sup> In Corca Dorcha, the defective concepts which guide behaviour and attitudes dictate a passive acceptance of fate and submissive abdication of responsibility and agency, which in some ways echoes the *gefügiges Mißgeschick* (submission to misfortune) exhibited by Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. If Manifest Destiny in the United States represented the idealistic vision of social perfection through God and the church, the opposite is true of Corca Dorcha, where *An Béal Bocht* is the fictional abandonment of Irish speakers by God, the state, and liberal independent thought. As in many post-Joycean coming-of-age narratives in Ireland, the combination of social, political, domestic, educational, and religious forces inhibits the protagonist's development and successful integration into society. In *An Béal Bocht*, Bónapárt's catastrophe results from a failure to assimilate: he rejects education, his wife and child die, and his efforts to emigrate fail. Bónapárt's indifference and apathy ensures the typical process of maturity is never complete, 'either because of the ineptitude of the hero or, more likely, because of the failure of his social environment.'<sup>35</sup> His hindered development and postponed maturity are, in Bolton's analysis, a consequence of a 'colonial setting' in which 'protagonists will undergo paralysing conflicts with adult authority,' a condition attributable 'to the instability of the social and domestic environments, leading to a persistent intrusion of the grotesque and the fantastic in the lives of their protagonists.'<sup>36</sup>

While the classic Bildungsroman is a story of formation, *An Béal Bocht* is a cyclical tale of stasis, failure, and frustration. Ackroyd equates the novel's style to imagining 'a whole nation anticipating the theatre of the absurd.'<sup>37</sup> Bónapárt's narrative commences conventionally with his birth. But this beginning occurs in the middle of the night at the end of the house. As readers, we are denied any sense of origin or beginning: all is repetition, a ceaseless cycle which cannot be broken. The narrator is already in jail as the narrative begins. Just as the novel is subject to the preface and editorial intrusion, Bónapárt's life is subject to fate and the prescriptions of the governing texts, *na dea-leabhair*. If the rationale for committing one's life to print is the belief that those experiences are unique, salutary, and instructive, then this narrative parodies such expectations by subverting the reader's expectations of a miraculous (or at least extraordinary) birth or childhood. This narrator recalls nothing of his first six months. He knows neither his birthdate nor the circumstances of his birth. Ironically, he explains such lack of knowledge by the belief that sense comes gradually, but the following chapter demonstrates that such is not the case given that every character is in thrall to the philosophies of *na dea-leabhair*.

The account of his birth is set in mock-heroic terms. On the night prior to his birth, his father, Mícheálangaló Ó Cúnasa, and Máirtín Ó Bánasa – every character's surname ends in some form of *-asa*, suggesting a closed community and closed

discourse with no external influence or input – sit atop a hen house, star gazing. The name of the narrator's father and the situation of this scene evokes the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian Michelangelo, who stared upwards at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and envisioned scenes from the Book of Genesis, including the creation of Adam, while his Irish namesake perches on the roof, stares upwards but predicts only horror and misfortune. In contrast to his Italian antecedent, the Irish Mícheálangaló is unaware of his son's creation, as is, allegedly, his mother. Thus, Bónapárt's birth is not only exceptional, it is almost miraculous. However, Bónapárt is no saviour of mankind. His very name further underscores his pathetic character. Napoleon Bonaparte, the French military and political leader, dominated European and global affairs for more than a decade; he championed meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, and sound finances. The Irish Bónapárt, 'a moron of considerable proportions [trapped in] a nightmare of Irishness,'<sup>38</sup> mirrors him only in two aspects: his abandonment in a desolate place, Saint Helena in the southern Atlantic Ocean, and imprisonment. Despite his grandiose name and miraculous birth, it is the house in which he lives that confers distinction on Bónapárt rather than anything he achieves.

The family's piglet offers a counter-narrative to Bónapárt's non-descript childhood. If the sow Sarah corresponds to the Old Grey Fellow,<sup>39</sup> the piglet that escapes only to return with a waistcoat and money represents the opportunity and typical narrative plot twist that Bónapárt eschews. Unlike Bónapárt, the piglet acts and displays sufficient shrewdness to escape the foul-smelling conditions. He benefits through good fortune and makes something of himself before returning home a successful prodigal son. Rather than develop socially by means of escape, Bónapárt seeks maturity and socialisation in Chapter 3 through the education system. The hero's experiences in public schools and universities are ubiquitous in the Bildungsroman tradition, as the state school system offers opportunities for acculturation, social advancement, and integration into wider society. However, any expectation that school and education will offer Bónapárt an opportunity to develop an individual identity or expand his horizons by encountering different and competing models of social identity and personalities is violently crushed. The teacher, Aimeirgean Ó Lúnasa,<sup>40</sup> insists on renaming each pupil identically, thus replicating the similarity hinted at in the suffix *-asa*, an Old Irish contraction of *as + a*, meaning 'out of his/her/its/their,' by branding each pupil 'Jams O'Donnell.'<sup>41</sup> Thus ends Bónapárt's interaction with formal education, a typical means of growth and development within the genre. Yet, despite his lack of education or linguistic ability, he nevertheless benefits from the English-language promotional effort by the fact that he can enunciate

his name as Jams O'Donnell. Paradoxically, the education system which fails him also rewards him.

In Chapter 4, Bónapárt, having failed to experience wider society and advance socially *via* the education system, experiences his first significant contact with those other than his immediate family and village on the occasion of the *feis*. In the build up to the event, his education is furthered by his mentor and guide, the Old Grey Fellow, who participates in criminal underhand dealings. As an example of sly social commentary, the *feis* marks not only his socialisation but also his introduction to theft, social commerce, dance, and alcohol. All of these rites of passage are those typically experienced by a narrator in the Bildungsroman. The *feis* also marks the Old Grey Fellow's acquisition of a watch and with it, the introduction of an awareness of time and its passage, which, as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, will have significant repercussions. Having been introduced to society, Bónapárt now begins to partake in other rites of passage and social activities. In Chapter 5 he participates in a hunt in the Rosses, attends a storytelling session, and meets a great man of action. On his unaccompanied return trip from the Rosses, he narrowly escapes the Ireland-shaped Cat Mara. This escapade marks his first solo adventure and a coming of age. These incidents and his 'escape' represent his extended isolation from reality, mainstream society, and maturity.

In line with the traditional coming of age rituals, Chapter 6 sees Bónapárt through the rite of marriage: the classic act of social integration and acceptance of responsibility. Upon marriage, from which his wife cannot escape, he repeats the cycle in which his father participated: he unexpectedly and unknowingly becomes a father. Also in keeping with family tradition, he names his son in the Italian fashion, Lanárdó. Whereas the Italian Leonardo da Vinci produced the Mona Lisa, thus ensuring his fame and reputation, the Irish Leonardo, and his mother, die a year and a day after his birth and are never spoken of again. The Irish Leonardo leaves neither legacy nor trace. Such a tragic event in the classic Bildungsroman might spur a narrator to madness or exile. In this work, it is not Bónapárt but his acquaintance Sitric Ó Sánasa who cannot bear life and chooses self-exile. As in the classic Bildungsroman, Sitric repudiates his community and realises that life is best regarded from the perspective of the self. In Chapter 7 he rejects the stifling conditions, inhospitable environment, and paucity of Corca Dorcha for the splendid isolation and undisturbed bliss of a submarine cave on Sceilig Mhichíl, much like St Augustine in *The Dalkey Archive*. Submersed but alive, he is satisfied; safe from hunger and rain, just as Bónapárt is content in prison. The persistent recirculation of patterns, beliefs, and explanations is given comic effect in the episode involving the foul-smelling pig Ambrós, who dies from constantly inhaling his own self-produced odours and essences. The inhabitants of the most Gaelic House on Corca Dorcha are also ultimately driven from their homes by this



putrid odour which is made all the worse by a lack of a clean, external supply of fresh air. If the constant recirculation of odours kills the creator, the constant recourse to failed theories and dominant beliefs threatens the inhabitants of Corca Dorcha.

After Sitric's escape, Bónapárt learns of Maoldún Ó Pónasa, who escaped Corca Dorcha by boat with anything of value during the great deluge. He now resides at Cruach an Ocráis, atop the White Bens – a geographical feature not noted on the famous kaleidoscopic map accompanying the text.<sup>42</sup> Here, Bónapárt finally commits to rejecting his family and undertakes the outward voyage from his village. He recognises the limitations of life in Corca Dorcha; in climbing the mountain, he begins a process of discovering his inner self. This expedition is the great adventure in which he risks all and, in the process, repudiates community and collective identity and matures. *'B'fhearr duine marbh ón uisce-spéire agus ón gcruatan ar an gCruaich ná beo ar an gorta sa bhaile i lár na míntíre taise'* (It were better for a man to die on the mountain from celestial water than to live at home famished in the centre of the plain).<sup>43</sup> He faces the mountain of destiny, his ominous unknown objective. Describing his trials and the realisation that he 'was nigh to eternity and that I had little opportunity to better my lot, I continued...,' he is transformed.<sup>44</sup> He stumbles upon Maoldún, also 'living' in a cave 'spending his life, free from all want, as Sitric Ó Sánasa had long ago among the seals.'<sup>45</sup> When the corpse speaks in Old Irish he references the Caiftín, previously encountered in Chapter 5 when the storyteller Feardanand Ó Rúnasa from Cill Aodha<sup>46</sup> recounts his adventures, imprisonment, and tragic death. Bónapárt slips and falls back to Corca Dorcha. In his tumble, he is transfigured and transformed. *'Má bhíos suaite sáraithe, bhíos sásta [...] chuireas an mála óir i dtalamh agus annsin ghluais liom ag baciaíocht fá dhein an bhaile. Ba an t-airgead agam agus é lán fá cheilt. Bhí agam agus bhí liom'* (If I was fatigued and exhausted, I was satisfied [...] I buried the gold and set off for home limping. I had the money! I was in possession and had won!).<sup>47</sup> Despite his victory, his appearance contradicts his new-found development, as the Old Grey Fellow observes: *'Tamal ó shoin d'imigh muc ar seachrán uainn agus nuair d'fhill sé bhí culaith fiúntach éadaigh uime. D'imigh tusa uainn lánghléasta, agus táir tagaithe arais anois, tú co lomnocht is bhí tú an chéad lá'* (A pig rambled off on us a little while ago and when he returned, he had a worthwhile suit of clothes on him. You went off from us fully dressed and you're back again as stark-naked as you were the day you were born!).<sup>48</sup>

The reference to his birth here is ironic: Bónapárt is in fact reborn. He may have fallen Lucifer-like from an idyllic location, but he has returned to Corca Dorcha a new man, having successfully negotiated his challenge and become self-aware. His unstoppable descent marks his eventual ascent to individuality. After the fall he is a man apart, a different person: mainly a better one. This newfound maturity and perspective resonates in his non-reply to the Old Grey Fellow's typical gnostic

statement. For perhaps the first time in the narrative, he does not refer back to the 'good books' for context, meaning or approval. He is now producing his own knowledge and interpretation of events. He no longer accedes to the 'immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern'<sup>49</sup> which find expression in *na dea-leabhair*. As Matthew Arnold observed in his reflections on 'modern times,' in his essay on Heinrich Heine:

In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that for them it is customary not rational. That awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.<sup>50</sup>

In lieu of submitting to these controlling, socially conformist, prescriptive texts, Bónapárt withdraws, partially, from the communal consensus and turns inward to self-analysis and subjective self-reliance.

The fall is as tragic as it is transformative. This transformation occurs on multiple levels as Bónapárt is now a prototypical Mylesian character. He suffers a dilemma not dissimilar to *The Third Policeman's* young unnamed narrator, shadowing John Divney and feigning friendship in order to locate the murdered Mather's gold; or Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, who is tried, found guilty, and viciously tortured by his own fictional characters; or the taxidermist's assistant Murphy in 'Two in One,' who disguises his boss's murder by wearing the deceased's skin, eventually fusing with it, only to be imprisoned for the crime of killing himself. Bónapárt's dilemma is that of perverted capitalism: he has recourse to hidden gold but nothing to purchase. An injury to the Old Grey Fellow's feet – a mock-heroic scene where Atlas bears the world on his shoulders – convinces Bónapárt to travel to an urban centre to purchase a pair of boots for the Old Grey Fellow's benefit. This act of kindness, to improve the material lot of his fellow citizen, proves his undoing. His fear of breaking rank with his peers – boots had not graced Corca Dorcha since the *feis* – leads him to hide the boots. Despite wearing the boots only under cover of darkness, his tracks are discovered. The marks engender fear among the locals, who believe the Cat Mara is about to strike and that their collective destruction is nigh.<sup>51</sup> Bónapárt is not afraid though and finally appears on the cusp of maturation; he thinks independently and distinguishes himself from the herd. '*Bhíos-sa go suaineach i rith an ama so, mé slán ó h-eagla agus ag baint aoibhnis as an eolas fá leith a bhí agam im chroí*' (I was relaxed during all this time, free of fear and enjoying the special information which I carried in my heart. Many persons congratulated me on my courage).<sup>52</sup> Acting alone, thinking independently, possessed of unique knowledge, and performing singlehandedly, he is now an individual and a

reluctant participant in the community and group-think. The divided subjectivity evident in *Bónapárt* replicates the tension between a society where moral judgements, as derived from the 'good books,' are inviolable, and a society where the individual has to reach his/her own decision. He is potentially a threat, a challenge to the established order as articulated by the Old Grey Fellow and enshrined in *na dea-leabhair*.

Devastation, finally, appears in the form of the state legal system. On emptying his pockets, nineteen pieces of gold convince all that he did in fact murder an unnamed gentleman in Galway. After a trial, he is sentenced to 29 years imprisonment, presumably in Sligo Jail, the only such institution identified on the map.<sup>53</sup> The hero's conflict is not with social authority but with the superimposed ideology to which society fully consents. At the finale, there is neither autonomous self-formation nor a compromised negotiation but the state's suppression of the individual, *Bónapárt's* removal from his community, and his seclusion within the state's apparatus. If his community cannot educate him to behave in accordance with the rules, structures, and ordinances of other great books, the state will assume responsibility for his conformity to another set of rules and regulations. Ironically, in *An Béal Bocht* the narrator suffers punishment for a crime he did not commit. Such is the reverse in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where crime 'is avoided and so too is its punishment (in contrast with the eternal recurrent Hell in store for the narrator of *The Third Policeman*).'<sup>54</sup> *An Béal Bocht* appears closer in this regard to *The Third Policeman* than *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

In transit to prison, *Bónapárt* – now awakened and self-aware – meets his father for the first time upon his release from the same prison after serving a similar 29-year sentence.<sup>55</sup> Suddenly, the concept of time, as represented, but never comprehended, by the Old Fellow's watch, becomes relevant. In *Corca Dorcha*, time does not pass or move as everything is cyclical. However, time and duration matter in the city and the world beyond *Corcha Dorcha*. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the Nephew silently accepts a second-hand watch from his uncle. According to Henry Merritt:

The gift of time leads both O'Brien and the narrator to silence and conclusion. The narrator now can end his text. His earlier ranging throughout time and traditions has been marked by rebellion, through anachronicity, against clocks and what they represent [...]. the Nephew, in accepting time, moves towards his own, different silence suffused with intimations of another kind of death. He has been free under the license of adolescence; now he has become voluntarily constrained [...] The Nephew's response to the circularity represented by the gift of a watch is to make his text linear, to end it. Ireland, time and adulthood have been accepted.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, unlike *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Bónapárt does follow in his father's footsteps,<sup>57</sup> but like *The Third Policeman*, in which 'the teleology of the Bildungsroman is bent out of shape,'<sup>58</sup> he is trapped in a cycle of repetition, and never more so than when he asks his father to inform his mother that he'll 'be back.'<sup>59</sup> At the novel's conclusion, Bónapárt, born in the middle of the night at the end of the house, has become a concern of the state. He has gone from the margin to the centre; he is now fully absorbed in the centralised state system as one of many, as one who will be compelled to follow the state's prison rules and regimes. As such, his behaviour will be subject to another set of books: rule books. *An Béal Bocht* tracks his experiences and development from his childhood – governed by books, rules, and expectations – to his adulthood, now also governed by books, rules, and expectations. *An Béal Bocht's* narrator undergoes the expected rituals and rites but negotiates no social or individual identity. The narrative is not his own; it is edited and censored on his behalf. Here is yet another inversion of the traditional Bildungsroman. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century hero's journey concluded after a protracted, conscience-stricken maturation, and the modernist hero's journey concluded with the threat of disintegration, but *An Béal Bocht* sees the hero's integration into the state system, into the prison population.

*An Béal Bocht* is not O'Nolan's only foray into the genre. Jonathan Bolton considers *The Hard Life* a superb example 'of this comedy of failure, Bildungsromane that dramatise the sufferings and botched maturity of youthful comic figures whose failure produces a kind of mirthless laughter.'<sup>60</sup> The similarities and reuse of material from *The Third Policeman* in *The Dalkey Archive* are well established. Less obvious, but no less pertinent, are the similarities between *An Béal Bocht* and *The Hard Life*, a work in which 'O'Brien's first-person narrative depicts a culture of neglect, alcohol dependency, and an absurdly unstable surrogate family environment, which leads to criminality, inertia, and initiation into drinking.'<sup>61</sup> And in another echo of *An Béal Bocht*, 'The Hard Life offers no means of escape. Its humour functions as a form of supercritical comedy, a cynical representation of a culture and way of life that is beyond reform or hope of change.'<sup>62</sup> Corresponding to *An Béal Bocht*, *The Hard Life* also illustrates 'the manner in which the conventions of the Bildungsroman, with its generic expectations of social integration, merge with the comedic mode's resolution of social conflict, to create insightful representations of failed maturity in Irish youth.'<sup>63</sup>

*An Béal Bocht* explores many of the typical experiences found in a Bildungsroman: childhood, growth, ordeals, trials, moral issues of personal conduct, love, and struggle for survival. Written chronologically with a linear storyline, *An Béal Bocht* 'involves the principle of crisis, revelation, and change leading to the formation of personality.'<sup>64</sup> *An Béal Bocht*, as well as Mac Grianna's *Mo Bhealach Féin*, may be read as modernist interventions that seek, in different ways and styles, to critique the

Gaeltacht Bildungsroman by highlighting the gap between lived reality and imagined experience. Their narrators' ultimate 'failure' to integrate socially and assimilate harmoniously into the wider society sheds revealing light on the warped nature of Irish society and cultural politics in the interwar years. Both *An Béal Bocht* and *Mo Bhealach Féin* can, as with much modernist literature, target bourgeoisie culture and aspirations and can also be seen as subverting middle-class nationalist aspirations of experiencing and replicating 'authentic' Gaeltacht experience through day trips or rigorous reading of State-published memoirs. Such memoirs, invariably, serve up little more than a dehumanised, rationalistic, desacralised world.

As in *The Third Policeman*, 'O'Brien's narrator is a figure unable to follow his best perceptions because he relapses into conventionality. In this way, O'Brien shows how we avoid seeing the fundamental falsifications and denials that make up ordinary reality (the reality that gives orders).'<sup>65</sup> And while he concedes that Jacques Lacan was unknown to O'Nolan, nevertheless Shelly Brivic contends that:

The central figure of *The Third Policeman* loses his knowledge of reality because he is enthralled by theories. He is a slave insofar as the life he supposedly 'leads' follows orders from a source he cannot comprehend. As the narrator, he creates virtually all of the novel, which is all projection from the second chapter, in which he dies, to the last; yet everything that appears seems amazingly out of his control.<sup>66</sup>

This slavish adherence to false inherited theories links the nomadic narrator of *The Third Policeman* to the long-suffering narrator of *An Béal Bocht*. While the contradiction of having hidden treasure which he cannot access is a trope common to both *An Béal Bocht* and *The Third Policeman*, Bónapárt in *An Béal Bocht* also fails to marry this subjective or inward reality with the physical and social reality because of his belief, indoctrination, and subservience to the 'good books,' whose theories define the appropriate behaviour of an Irish-speaking person living in an Irish-speaking district. The control such books exert over the characters' actions, lives, and behaviour mirrors that of *At Swim-Two Birds*, which Todd A. Comer reads as 'an incisive analysis of "soft" colonial oppression – the ideological control that operates through England's books and publishing houses.'<sup>67</sup> In addition, this subservience to fate may be traced back to Goethe's portrayal of Wilhelm's belief in fate. As T. P. Saine observes: 'At crucial points in the odyssey from his parents' home to Natalie's castle, whenever he stands at a crossroads and must choose a course of action, he looks to the heavens for guidance and is strengthened in his determination by omens which he interprets according to his present desire.'<sup>68</sup> In the worlds of O'Nolan's novels, it is less a theocracy or an

ecclesiocracy, than a mimeocracy. The immutable cultural and social laws that govern reality in Corca Dorcha are no less deluded than those expounded by de/De Selby in both *The Third Policeman* and *The Dalkey Archive*. Both books' narrators adhere loyally to flawed theories and philosophies but fail to perceive their apparent absurdities. This acquisition and resolute adherence to fallacious theories and false prophets chimes with R. W. Maslen's theory that, in O'Nolan's fictional world:

The acquisition of—or rather, the appearance of possessing—arcane knowledge is the supreme goal of every man, woman, and child in his densely populated pages. [...] Knowledge in O'Brien's work is used only to make its possessor look big. And it rarely if ever achieves this objective; partly, no doubt, because everyone is familiar with the rules by which the know-all or egg-head operates and is therefore forearmed against his grandiose pretensions. In a nutshell, O'Brien's rules are these. Facts, both historical and physical, may be freely distorted, compressed, expanded, inverted, or invented, but they must always be stated with absolute confidence. This confidence is best attained by persuading yourself that you believe everything you say, however absurd. Your conviction of your own veracity may then infect your hearers, and from them the infection may spread to the physical and historical environment you inhabit, which will find itself transmuted, forced, or twisted into conformity with any item of information you have chosen to vouchsafe.<sup>69</sup>

*An Béal Bocht*'s style commands the reader to respond. The Ireland depicted here, for Brooker, recalls that seen in *Blather* and *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 'an alternative Ireland, a ludic place which is the distorted mirror of the Free State and its post-colonial constraints.'<sup>70</sup> As Donna Wong correctly cautions, 'If readers approach O'Nolan's books as willing to think as to laugh, they will realise that their ability to see what is amiss in such worlds and such fates aligns them with the tormentors rather than with the victims.'<sup>71</sup> It engages readers to interpret the logic and rationale expressed, and derided, in the text. Brivic asserts that 'Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien each insist, at various points, that the certainties of reality we take comfort from are in fact fantastic distortions imposed on us by an empire of oppression.'<sup>72</sup>

In *An Béal Bocht*, Corca Dorcha represents a Peter Pan-esque Neverland, a fantastic distortion offered to middle-class cultural nationalists seeking an Irish-speaking world. In writing this Bildungsroman that confronted the unspoken ideological constructions of his time, O'Nolan 'made it possible for humanity to free itself more completely than had ever been imagined.'<sup>73</sup> *An Béal Bocht* is the antidote to Neverland: it rudely awakens readers to their illusions and delusions. It challenges

readers to be Peter Pan or Wendy. The growth and maturation of a nation, like that of an individual, is an incomplete, undetermined narrative that defies prescription. *An Béal Bocht* recognises this as much in its rejection of the standard tropes of the Bildungsroman as in its perverse riffs on the tradition. There is no resolution, no epiphany. As long as we are held in thrall to external prescriptive constructs, failure and disappointment are the inevitable ends. In the absence of rebellion or revolt, we can either lament or laugh. *An Béal Bocht* invites us to do both.

---

### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien: Writers and Their Work* (Devon: Northcote House, 2005), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Ackroyd, 'In Flight Three Novels,' *The Spectator* 1 (December 1973): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe 1900–1916* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Boes credits the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey, who died the same year that *An Béal Bocht* was published, with first using the term Bildungsroman in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher. See Tobias Boes, 'Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends,' *Literature Compass* 3, no. 2 (2006), 231.

<sup>7</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1993), 121.

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

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 155–6.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Anne T. Salvator, 'Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*,' *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 155–6.

<sup>12</sup> Enrique Lima, 'The Uneven Development of the "Bildungsroman": D'Arcy McNickle and Native American Modernity,' *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 296.

<sup>13</sup> Paul R. McAleer, *Hybrid Identity and the Utopian Impulse in the Postmodern Spanish-American Comic Novel* (Tamesis, Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Salvator, 155–6.

<sup>16</sup> Lima, 294.

<sup>17</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, New Edition, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), 5; see also Lima, 294.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),' *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 23; qtd. in Lima, 294.

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

<sup>20</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 119.

<sup>21</sup> Castle, 250.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 249

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Bolton, 'Comedies of Failure: O'Brien's *The Hard Life* and Moore's *The Emperor of Ice Cream*,' *New Hibernia Review* 12, no. 3 (2008), 120.

<sup>26</sup> McAleer, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Moretti attributes the genre's exhaustion to both the new psychology's work 'to dismantle the unified image of the individual' and to the widespread destruction of the First World War, which created a sense of the insignificance, rather than the significance, of the individual and traduced the archetype of 'the rites of passage'; 228–30. See also Castle, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Castle, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> For the 'failure' of the Bildungsroman in the Irish Revival, see Castle. The cult of biography in modern Irish commences in 1903 with *Beatha Aodha Uí Néill*, Mícheál Ó Ruaidhrí's biography of Hugh O'Neill. Published by Conradh na Gaeilge, it sold sufficiently well for the Gaelic League to report the following year that it was indicative of a market and a demand for biographies of famous Irishmen. Peadar Ó Laoghaire's *Mo Scéal Féin* (1915) marked the next intervention, but the late 1920s brought a slew of Gaeltacht memoirs and life stories: Séamus Ó Grianna, *Caisleáin Óir* (1928); Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *An t-Oileánach: Scéal a Bheathadh Féin* (1929); Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *Fiche Blian ag Fás* (1933); Peig Sayers, *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (1936); *Machnamh Seanmhá* (1939); Dubghlas de hÍde, *Mise agus An Conradh* (1937); Liam Ó Rinn, *Mo Chara Stiofán* (1939); Seosamh Mac Grianna, *Mo Bhealach Féin* (1940); and 'Myles na gCopaleen,' *An Béal Bocht* (1941). Nor did the appearance of *An Béal Bocht* deter authors from recounting their experiences in the vernacular; soon after followed Cathal Brugha, *Seán Ua Ceallaigh* (1942); Séamus Ó Grianna, *Nuair a Bhí Mé Óg* (1942); Colm Ó Gaora, *Mise* (1943); and Mícheál Mag Ruaidhrí, *Le Linn M'Óige* (1944). More recent contributions include Pádraig Ó Ciobháin's *An Gealas i Lár Na Léithe* (1992) and Mícheál Ó Conghaile's *Sna Fir* (2009).

<sup>31</sup> Bolton, 118.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Salvator, 155–6.

<sup>34</sup> Jane Farnon observes that 'inversion' is 'a key element in *An Béal Bocht*.' Jane Farnon, 'Motifs of Gaelic Lore and Literature in *An Béal Bocht*,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute for Irish Studies, 1997), 103.

<sup>35</sup> Bolton, 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Ackroyd, 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose, Sarah's son, may be seen to correspond with Mícheálángaló in that he exerts little influence on Bónapárt and is largely absent.

<sup>40</sup> A none-too-subtle reference to Osborne Joseph Bergin/Ó hAimhirgín (1872–1950), a member of the Irish Faculty at Ó Nualláin's *alma mater* University College Dublin, from which institution the author graduated with an MA.

<sup>41</sup> See M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 72–4, and Maebh Long, 'An Béal Bocht, Translation, and the Proper Name,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 77–92.



<sup>42</sup> Some mountains and hills appear in the map refashioned by Steadman in the English language translation but the only hills or mountains that appear in the original map occur *thar lear*.

<sup>43</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1999) [hereafter abbreviated as *ABB*], 93.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>46</sup> While most place-names in the text are thinly disguised, Cill Aodha appears to be a reference to a village in Waterford.

<sup>47</sup> *ABB*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Heinrich Heine,' in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. III: Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 109.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Whether intentional or not, this confusion is ironic as Napoleon Bonaparte was also known as 'Puss in Boots.' Here Bónapárt Ó Cúnasa's boot marks are misread for An Cat Mara/The Sea Cat.

<sup>52</sup> *ABB*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Also, a possible reference to Seán Ó Ruadháin's popular 1932 novel *Pádraic Mháire Bhán (nó An Gol agus an Gáire)*, republished in 1934, 1935, 1937, and 1938.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Merritt, 'Games, Ending and Dying in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *Irish University Review* 25, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter, 1995): 308.

<sup>55</sup> Relevant here, perhaps, is the fact that Michelangelo, the artist, is credited with four incomplete and unfinished statues: 'The Awakening Slave,' 'The Young Slave,' 'The Bearded Slave,' and 'The Atlas (or Bound).' Referred to as '*non-finito*' (incomplete), they capture man's struggle to free the spirit from matter. Collectively they are known as 'the prisoners' and were intended to be an allegory of the Soul imprisoned in the Flesh, slave to human weaknesses.

<sup>56</sup> Merritt, 315–6.

<sup>57</sup> It may well be that there is a disguised confessional dimension here. Ó Nualláin had followed his father into the civil service and on his death in 1937, replaced him as the head of the family.

<sup>58</sup> Brooker, 48.

<sup>59</sup> And a reversal of Ó Criomhthain's famous concluding line.

<sup>60</sup> Bolton, 119.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> See Kaijun Guo, Maurice Yolles, Gerhard Fink, Paul Iles, *The Changing Organisation: Agency Theory in a Cross-Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 233.

<sup>65</sup> Shelly Brivic, 'The Third Policeman as Lacanian Deity: O'Brien's Critique of Language and Subjectivity,' *New Hibernia Review* 16, no. 2 (Samhradh/Summer 2012): 132.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Todd A. Comer, 'A Mortal Agency: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 104.

<sup>68</sup> T. P. Saine, 'Was *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* Really Supposed To Be a Bildungsroman?,' in *Reflection and Action: Essays in the Bildungsroman*, ed. James N. Hardin (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 128.

<sup>69</sup> R.W. Maslen, 'Flann O'Brien's Bombshells: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*,' *New Hibernia Review* 10, no. 4 (2006): 86–87.

<sup>70</sup> Brooker, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Donna I. Wong, 'Following the Law of the Letter: Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht*,' *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 4, no. 3 (Autumn, 2000): 106.

<sup>72</sup> Brivic, 114.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*