

# Translation

Brian Ó Nualláin, ‘Pisa Bec Oc Parnabus Extractum O Bhark I bPragrais le Briain O Nuallain,’ *Ireland To-day* 3, no. 2 (February 1938): 138, 165.

Translated from the Irish by Tobias Harris, John Wyse Jackson, & Thomas O’Donnell

## Translator’s Note

This is a first attempt at a translation of Brian O’Nolan’s ‘Pisa Bec Oc Parnabus,’ which was originally published in a student magazine in 1935.<sup>1</sup> The present translation is based on the version of the text which was published in *Ireland To-day* in February 1938 and is the product of a close collaboration between myself, John Wyse Jackson, and Thomas O’Donnell, with further clarifications kindly contributed by Joseph LaBine. The text itself is a pastiche of James Joyce’s *Work in Progress* and it combines Irish which is sourced from various periods and dialects with neologisms and Greek, Latin, and English materials. My intention with this initial translation has been to produce a version which renders as literally as possible, in English, the meaning of the original, in order to provide scholarly access to the text. For any success I may have achieved in this endeavour, I am indebted to the generous assistance of John Wyse Jackson, who contributed his time to coattempt an initial draft of the translation, and Thomas O’Donnell, a scholar of medieval Irish at University College London who kindly spent some time reviewing and clarifying a later draft of the translation. Inevitably, the result of this attempt at a literal translation is a somewhat flattened version which doesn’t do full justice to the productive ambiguities, wit, and verve of the original text and its mix of languages. Many of the spellings which O’Nolan uses diverge from the extant records of Irish vocabulary and incorporate other possible meanings. Clearly, therefore, a more creative translation which more effectively conveys the true spirit of the piece is both possible and necessary; I warmly and humbly invite those notable others who have successfully engaged with O’Nolan’s early writing in Irish to attempt this task, whether independently or with my assistance. Some final notes on the translation: occasional Latin words and phrases, such as its title, have also been translated into English; some flavour of the shape-shifting original text has been retained by preserving the changing ways in which the names of the various characters are spelled (although they have been put in the proper case where they are not always in the original); and the original sparseness of punctuation to indicate direct speech by the characters has been preserved.

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# A Little Bit by Barnabus<sup>2</sup>

## An Extract from Work in Progress by Briain O Nuallain

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*"This is a fine tale you have told us. Come Broccán, write down this tale." He did so.'*

– Silva Gadelica<sup>3</sup>

Fanny the servant of Barnabus wrote this in the province of Leinster since immensely great age had come to her man, with shaking hands and hindrance of beetles/being drunk. Yet he would get his full health again—if the Creator wills it—and Barnabus would even have a little money if he stopped drinking a little, this much is certain. One day we were in Grogan's Leeson palace, me myself, Barnabas and Pangur Bán.<sup>4</sup> Sainly Grogan was there, he was a druid and a good man for talking, and he was telling us old tales after our drinking and drink-play in the aforementioned sanctuary. Then there came to me, among others, Shem and Seán from Joyce Country in the bay of Galway in the province of Connacht in Ireland, along with a crowd of other men—as the Greeks say in the Rome of Pope Peter 'hoi popolloi'. The whole was five and twenty battalions buying drinks and rubbing together and getting into conversations with each other—a great hullabaloo—and it was making Barn angry. The white-waved porter is our food, said Barnabus. That is good, said Groigín. Do not let our food be shared, said Parnabas. It is bad, what you say, said Groquín. Our food and feast is little, said Barnabs, and yet let it not be shared among everyone. Bad, indeed, said Grojain, since their money is dear to me. Barnabas placed his hand so it was over the strong well of his glass and so he drank the very best drink from the well there, so he said —

This is true, said Barnapos, but still don't let the food be shared. Porter is my new milk or love and the light of my life. It is my favourite alpha and also my omega, it is my top and my bottom. Do not let the food be shared with the men of Ireland.

After this he blessed his horn and he recited these old-stanzas:

*Dear to me the house of sweet Graigín  
Handsome its protection,<sup>5</sup> I think it beautiful  
Pangur bán purrs and meows  
We are wedded to drink like a lover.*

*I drink the drink of the saints  
In the sanctuary where there is the bell of the righteous  
Good the drunkenness there without guidance  
Pleasant are the old-tales of the crooked elder.*

*A mouth, there, purrs and meows  
Truth (in wine) is found  
Me and Pangur the white  
The ways of truth are dear to us.*

—Our meal is scanty, he said, do not let it be shared, in the name of Father Peter.  
I hate the unholy rabble and keep them away.<sup>6</sup>

—I kept away those kept away, I said, that is, Fanny the aforementioned.

—That is right there, oh woman, said Barn, let Shem be killed by yourself; I will do for Seán alone. That is good, I said.

Then we arose, me and Parnus the white, and we put death and short-life to Shem and Seán and to the common generality and we thrust our three swords into the ground. Each of us killed fifty men that night, in the house of sweet Grogan, so the whole number was buried in Leeson Street for fear of the smell and even an epidemic.<sup>7</sup>

*(continued on page 165)*

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**A little bit by Barnabus—*continued from page 138.***

After the spilling of blood there, Barnajus put his head on Grocáin's chest and took his horn in his hand and drank a great drink and then another re-drink.

—This is good food, I said, that is, little Fanny.

—It seems to me its soul is good from what you say, said Parn. And I favour the foolishness of my blood like that of my white-waved porter. For porter is my heaven and my hell and it is my hot and my cold, it is my treasure and my Father Peter in there, my small Cormac. It is my glass and my pot/pet, porter is my confessor.<sup>8</sup>

In the end he made lasting judgements about this and he was not long like this until he lost his senses and until he heard the music of angels and the fairy strings playing and plucking in his head there. He even saw wolves reciting psalms in his presence. So he sung the poems —

*Good to me, my thoughts of folly  
Seeing my green-sided tumbler*

*Confusing little-speech without heat  
As long as my porter is refreshing*

*The voices of angels that I hear  
And the sound of birds in my head  
The verse is dry and very dry  
Without my porter.*

This happened to Quarnapois, he was like this in Groigín's country for a fortnight and a month because of the excellence of the whiskey of that sanctuary and it was more delightful for him to stay there than in anywhere else in the world. This is a certain end. Thus it finishes. Hic!

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### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> See accounts of this publication history in Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 44; and in Breandán Ó Conaire, 'Ó Nualláin, na Scéalta "Meán-Ghaelige" & Sem Seoighe,' *Comhar* 71, no. 12 (Nollaig 2011): 35–6.

<sup>2</sup> Translators' Note: We have kept the versions of Barnabas's name as they are written throughout (corrected into the nominative form where appropriate) in order to keep the original's sense of shifting identity.

<sup>3</sup> Trans. by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Pangur Bán of the eponymous 9<sup>th</sup>-century Irish poem. There is an ambiguity in 'meisi Barnabas.' The first-person pronoun could be self-reflexive 'I, Barnabas' or it could refer to a third character. The logic of the story makes it Fanny, and this identification is later confirmed.

<sup>5</sup> Com is a variant of 'comad.'

<sup>6</sup> Horace, *Odes* III.1.

<sup>7</sup> We have translated *bolad* as *bolad* 'scent, smell.'

<sup>8</sup> The literal translation of *anamcara* would be 'soul-friend.'