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## A Tale of Two Tales

Irony, Identity & the Fictions of Anthony Cronin & Brian O'Nolan

Rodney Sharkey, Weill Cornell Medical College Qatar, QA, [rxs2001@qatar-med.cornell.edu](mailto:rxs2001@qatar-med.cornell.edu)

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This essay examines two novels by Anthony Cronin in order to argue that a tendency towards either proliferation or subtraction determines late Irish-modernist aesthetics. Having established that the repetition of material in Cronin's texts indicates a tendency towards subtraction, the essay positions Brian O'Nolan's work within a modernist tradition that favours proliferation and concludes by arguing that the role irony plays in proliferation may be problematic for a socialist literary aesthetic.

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In Declan Kiberd's take on *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Brian O'Nolan's narrative gymnastics are the creative expression of a man 'less anxious to say something new than to find a self that is capable of saying anything at all.'<sup>1</sup> Reading O'Nolan's ironised, self-reflexive aesthetic as an attempt to articulate postcolonial Irish identity, Kiberd equates narrative multiplicity with the difficulty of representing a unified subject. Having said that, it is also clearly the case that O'Nolan practices postcolonial writing in the manner Kiberd intends when the latter suggests that 'postcolonial writing does not begin only when the occupier withdraws; rather it is initiated at that very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance.'<sup>2</sup> In this regard, *The Poor Mouth*, to give but one example, is satire in the service of a postcolonial recalibration designed to help a post-independence state see more plainly how official nationalist narratives caricature its citizens.<sup>3</sup>

In Kiberd's iterations of the postcolonial subject, O'Nolan is both lost to postcolonial alienation and capable of producing pointed political satire. Such a contradiction indicates the problem of interpreting the politics of literary identity. In addition to recognizing this duality at the core of postcolonial subjectivity, one needs – particularly in the case of O'Nolan – to accommodate his great appetite for play, gaming and dissimulation; strategies that, arguably, overspill the potential limitations that a postcolonial reading might impose. O'Nolan likes to play games as old as literary gaming itself.<sup>4</sup> He often switches narrators like Cervantes, or employs a pseudo-editor in the manner of Defoe or foregrounds unreliable witnesses like those who populate Swift's fiction.<sup>5</sup> It seems, therefore, like an unnecessary delimitation of his aesthetic approach to read his gaming as either a search for authenticity of expression or as an aesthetic made necessary by

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<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Publications, 2001), 510. Kiberd's position is echoed by Brian Doherty in this issue of *The Parish Review*. Doherty notes that 'the drama that plays itself out in the works of Flann O'Brien, or Myles na gCopaleen, or Brian O'Nolan' arises as 'personae and people battle to know themselves and each other and their surroundings' ('Violence and the Crisis of Identity in Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen'). Although employing a Freudian lens, his analysis identifies an urge towards splitting in O'Nolan's work that can also be considered an abreaction to colonial appropriations that take place at the level of psyche.

<sup>2</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Imagining Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London: Random House, 2009), 6.

<sup>3</sup> [Brian Doherty: Yes, true. Those citizens find themselves literally torn apart, according to Sigmund Freud (and me, see Doherty, 'Violence and the Crisis of Identity').]

<sup>4</sup> On O'Nolan and gaming see Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, and Georges Perec* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For example, O'Nolan's corpus is so diffuse, its authorship such a demonstration of heteroglossia, that I had to pause and consider by which name to call O'Nolan for the purposes of this essay. I decided to follow his declaration in *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* – 'My name is not O Nuallain and I've never said it was. My name is O'Nolan' – even as I recognise that the very playfulness I celebrate here is straitened by such an approach. See Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 315. Interestingly, Maggie Glass proposes to call O'Nolan 'Ó Nualláin,' claiming O'Nolan's assertion – as quoted above – is 'not true' ('Big and Learned and Far from Simple,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 5, no.1 (Spring 2021)). While it may not be true that O'Nolan always went by same, it is certainly the case that he says it plainly in *The Collected Letters* as quoted above. Having said that, what's two fadas and an iou among friends?

postcolonial fragmentation. At the same time, and although it provides much scope for satire, an emphasis on play might conveniently obscure the questions with which Kiberd wrestles, as thorny issues of identity politics give way to the irresistible need to have a good laugh. In short, how does one determine the optimal interpretive framework through which to read O’Nolan’s talents for mischief, reflection and subversion?

To address this question, I propose to analyse the work of O’Nolan’s friend, fellow writer, and eventual biographer, Anthony Cronin. It is the contention of this essay that O’Nolan’s playfulness is first imitated by Cronin and then undone, by a process of subtraction, in the latter’s attempt to achieve an authentic voice in keeping with a broadly socialist aesthetic. I shall argue in my conclusion that as O’Nolan studies enters the most prolific period in its history, Cronin’s embrace of a principle of subtraction presents the opportunity for a moment’s pause. Indeed, Cronin’s work might even constitute a vantage point from where to watch O’Nolan’s current popularity play out in the space between postcolonial discourse, theories of aesthetic gaming and the political implications of these and other methods of critical enquiry.

Subtraction, in late-modernist aesthetics, is nowhere more apparent than in Samuel Beckett’s *oeuvre*:

All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Unnamable*, the last novel of *The Trilogy*, Beckett’s profoundly deterritorialised narrator proposes that a series of previous narrators have forestalled the inevitability of speaking ‘I,’ implying the possibility of a more authentic articulation beyond mere narrators; indeed, the implication is that narrators postpone the inevitable necessity of speaking the self. For this reason, Alain Badiou proposes that Beckett is the principal author of ‘subtraction’:

For Beckett, writing is an act governed by a severe principle of economy. It is necessary to subtract — more and more — everything that figures as circumstantial ornament, all peripheral distraction, in order to exhibit or to *detach* those rare functions to which writing can and should restrict itself, if its destiny is to say generic humanity.<sup>7</sup>

In order to achieve the articulation of generic humanity, ‘when Beckett presents us with a subject who is at the extreme point of destitution, we are dealing precisely

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 297.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Nina Power, ed. and trans. Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004), 3.

with one who has succeeded — volens nolens — in losing, amidst the vicissitudes of experience, all the disastrous ornamentations of circumstances.<sup>8</sup> For Beckett's (Badiouian) subtractive impulse to manifest itself, it is first necessary that he repeat or revisit characters and/or scenes to illustrate the degree to which his creatures become increasingly more destitute. Two examples spring readily to mind: Moran slowly morphing into a version of the vagabond Molloy and the second act of *Waiting for Godot*. And in O'Nolan, too, repetition in the service of art does important identity work, be it repetition of story, of narrator or of character. But whereas Beckett subtracts towards truth, O'Nolan clearly suggests that repetition undermines authenticity as the measure of truth.

For example, in Myles na Gopaleen's 'The Perfect Crime,' published in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column on 26 May 1953, certain key themes central to all of O'Nolan's literary personae are apparent.<sup>9</sup> He proposes that just as taxidermy produces a more vivid version of a tiger than that which walks the earth — one that 'burns more awesomely bright than any of these tattered and genuine characters you see at the zoo'<sup>10</sup> — so too art transcends nature in its capacity to represent the human. He then proceeds to a story in which two associate taxidermists of archetypal vintage, a Mr Black, with a soul of the same colour, psychologically abuses one Mr White, he pure as the driven snow, such that the latter kills the former and proceeds to wear him; repeat him, as it were. And for a while Mr White enjoys some of the perks of what was Mr Black's more gregarious lifestyle. Soon, however, rumours abound regarding the disappearance of Mr White with the not unexpected result that Mr Black, a.k.a Mr White, finds himself tried and hanged for the murder of 'the hard working, quiet, and inoffensive young man'<sup>11</sup> of paler vintage. The irony is that White can only claim his innocence by admitting his guilt. But in admitting that he is in fact Mr White, in being so, he is not the Mr White the public imagine him to be. One way or the other, Mr White is Mr Black. And so it is with O'Nolan that through repetitions and reversals and false starts, fake conclusions and multiple personae, another truth is often approached, one akin to what Picasso meant when he said 'art is a lie that makes us realise truth.'<sup>12</sup> The literary work that repeats, such that originality loses its privilege, crystallises a constant: words are

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

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the idea behind the story 'The Perfect Crime' seems to have been particularly appealing to O'Nolan given that it is an alternative version of the story 'Two in One' (1954) and also the plot of the play script 'The Dead Spit of Kelly' (1962).

<sup>10</sup> Myles na Gopaleen, 'The Perfect Crime,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (26 May 1953): 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Marius De Zayas, 'Picasso Speaks,' *The Arts* (May 1923): 319. Reprinted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 263. [Maggie Glass: Circularity seems to be a common theme in Ó Nualláin's (or O'Nolan's, if needs must) work. The narrator of *The Third Policeman* would have some things to say about Hell going round and round.]

not lives, but nonetheless they can revitalise identities from which new lives may be derived and lived.

The competing claims of both subtraction and proliferation, as alternate strategies in late-modernist aesthetics, find expression in Cronin's work which is involved, to varying degrees, in both diminution of the Beckettian variety and addition of the O'Nolan vintage. For example, it is an amusing conceit for Cronin to propose in the preface to his first novel that he has discovered Riley's memoirs and published them verbatim as *The Life of Riley* (1964). Before the narrative proper begins, Cronin states that the 'apparent account of about two years of his life was found among the late Patrick Riley's socks, rags, and papers after his death.'<sup>13</sup> He elaborates further:

the task of reading and editing the manuscript has for me been a strange one [...]. I have yet debated with myself whether to add a cautionary, or emendatory, or explanatory word here or there; but have decided, I hope rightly, to let the dead speak for themselves.<sup>14</sup>

In proposing that he has organised the publication of the extant manuscript of a fictional character, Cronin nods his flat cap to the found papers topos of eighteenth-century literary history but also to Beckett's 'Le Concentrisme,' the Trellis papers and to other instances where O'Nolan poses as an editor, such as when Myles na gCopaleen feigns editorship of Bonaparte's memoirs in *The Poor Mouth*. Indeed, O'Nolan's masterpiece, *The Third Policeman*, was published the year following *The Life of Riley*, in 1967, and arguably represents the apotheosis of a novel being told from within a novel, posthumously. In a more modest but similarly appreciable fashion, Cronin, as a modern stylist and contemporary of O'Nolan's, proposes that form, forgery, and identity bleed into each other in decisive ways.

*The Life of Riley* paints a particular picture of Cronin and the *milieu* of the Irish man of letters circa the 1950s; it is a portrait steeped in ironic distance and willed intellectual disengagement. Cronin's *Dead as Doornails: Bohemian Dublin in the Fifties and Sixties* (1976), on the other hand, returns to the same material some twelve years later and constitutes a more 'faithful' recollection of the lives of Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan, and O'Nolan (amongst others) by subtracting the former novel's privileged playfulness. This later work genuinely attempts — through a degree of narrative transparency in which events are reported without self-conscious artistry — 'to let the dead speak for themselves.'<sup>15</sup> It is marked by a far less acute ironic distance

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony Cronin, *The Life of Riley* (Dublin: New Island, 2010), xii.

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

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* In 'Scenes in a Novel (Probably Posthumous) by Brother Barnabas' O'Nolan produces arguably the *sine qua non* of

and so produces greater fidelity to the recognisable natures of its subjects; indeed, the palpable sense of honest truth accompanying some of the anecdotes recounted in *Dead as Doornails* is so painfully revealing of the writers in question that one could imagine Behan *et al.* feeling wronged by the disclosures. Thus, in Cronin's case, the repetition he employs in retelling the same material across both books indicates much about how he consolidated his own artistic voice. He follows a trajectory, slow and deliberate, in realising a persona that Dermot Bolger characterises as being 'devoid of falsehood.'<sup>16</sup> The pertinent question then is whether this final voice achieves authenticity through its own volition, or only as a result of its contrast to other voices, other Cronin personae, for whom plain truth was not necessarily an objective. Indeed, in order for Cronin to finally get it right, did he first have to tell it wrong? And in terms of a quest for truth, did he succeed in relinquishing falsehood, as Bolger suggests, through proliferation or subtraction? If achieved through subtraction, what does this say about O'Nolan's career-long preoccupation with proliferating avatars that pull the literary landscape out from under readers' feet? Or, on the other hand, is it Cronin's repetitions that allow his subtractions to open onto truth?

On a first read, *The Life of Riley* is a riot. The narrative follows Riley from his underground activity in the Catacombs or 'Warrens' — where drink is drunk all night long and subsistence money is made from returning the empties — to his ill-fated role as a grocer's assistant, to fraternising with the Big House caricature, Sir George, who likes to spontaneously traverse the land of other well-endowed homeowners in his 'jalopy,' to Riley's emigration to London and beyond. The eponymous protagonist works as an assistant to the Irish northerner, Pronshious McGonaghy, on the literary magazine *The Trumpet*, where the latter exhorts the former to get 'wurred in' to contemporary politics in order to appreciate the cut and thrust of 'the diolctic.' Then we reconnect with Riley in London and a band of Gaelic Twilighters who are looking to make it big by having an Irish 'piece' commissioned for the BBC Third Programme (an honour bestowed on O'Nolan whose 'Letter from Dublin' was broadcast on 12 August 1952). And, finally, we sympathise with him as the unwilling beneficiary of Amelia, his literary patron, in exchange for whose financial support he must withstand her dilettante pseudo-psychoanalytic character assassinations. Framing Riley as exhausted and disillusioned with this *milieu*, but also destitute and incapable of taking care of himself, the narrative breaks off in the wind and rain and quickening dusk, leaving its protagonist 'with absolutely no place to go.'<sup>17</sup> It is a bold conclusion to cut off one's character with neither

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posthumous characters, the deceased narrator, Brother Barnabas, yet composing his tale in the present tense. See *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Campaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 49–53.

<sup>16</sup> Dermot Bolger, 'Anthony Cronin: A Life in Books,' *Sunday Independent* (1 January 2017): 19.

<sup>17</sup> Cronin, *Life of Riley*, 187.

direction nor prospects, and yet Cronin's ending lacks either the brutality of *The Grapes of Wrath* (which closes on the Joad family in a scene of biblical desperation), or the more comic indeterminacy of Beckett's *Molloy*, who collapses, more or less resignedly, into a ditch. Part of the reason for a relatively relaxed read on Riley's dilemma, based on the previous 140-odd pages, is that a dry pub and fresh pint are the most likely destination for this picaro who has steadfastly refused to settle down anywhere other than the Irish public house. 'Truth' be told, given that the narrative we read has sprung from Riley's pen, as Cronin establishes in his preface, there must be respite from the destitution that befalls the former at the conclusion of his intra-diegetic narrative. And given that most of Riley's time is spent in pubs drinking, it is reasonable to assume his manuscript proper was completed in one or other of the hostelries he frequents. Indeed, in completing such a task, a trip to the pub, extra-diegetic or otherwise, has been well earned.

And the pub is ubiquitous in *The Life of Riley*. In fact, throughout the course of the novel, changes in his public house routine are intended to reflect changes in his understanding of the social. For example, of London he testifies:

I began, after my diffident fashion, to make acquaintance with pubs and circles other than those in which I had previously spent my days, pubs and circles subtly different indeed from any I had hitherto frequented, from The Stork, from the hostelries of Grafton Street, from O'Turks even, where other attitudes flourished.<sup>18</sup>

Progress is measured in terms of exposure to 'publics' very different to those usually inhabited by the likes of Riley. In this regard, *The Life of Riley* is at one with David Lloyd's observation that the pub can be 'defined otherwise than by paternity, labour and economic prudence, not just a delusory compensation for anomic life, but a deliberate interruption of the constraining rhythms of modernity.'<sup>19</sup> For Riley, the social diversity found within pub culture functions as an antidote to the standardising impulse of twentieth-century society. Furthermore, through the ironic distance that life on the inside of the pub window affords the drinker, the dominant ideologies of the day are more easily understood. Once back in Dublin, Riley quietly lampoons the unitary purity of Celtic antecedence, the agenda of Marxist revolution, and tiresome notions of petty bourgeois decorum (Riley is pursued throughout part of the novel by a recently bereaved widow). From within the warm glow of the welcoming bar, the notion of Dublin as a place geared towards consolidating conservative Catholic attitudes, now

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 88.

allied to institutional and economic efficiency, is gently turned inside out and upside down. Moreover, in moments of ironic detachment, Riley struggles with and rejects the demands of this society careening between tradition and modernisation, personified in the character of Pronshious McGonaghy. One memorable encounter has Riley first recount a McGonaghy exhortation and then narrate its comic aftermath. As editor of *The Trumpet*, McGonaghy tells him:

‘I want to feel from your writing that you feel you’re part of the dialoctic process. I’m going to rescue you. I’m going to make you part of the mainstream of Irish life, so that your mind will become as infollible a guide to the forward-looking elements in the prosent historical, dialoctic situation as .... as MacMurkagaun’s,’ he concluded, naming a minor peasant novelist of the day. He paused, flung out an arm and caught a passing parish priest. Was mother church to be enlisted to aid this project? I wondered, but it was only an exchange of pleasantries of the cloth, lay and clerical, dialoctic and theological, and of tips for the dogs at Harold’s Cross.<sup>20</sup>

This is superb satire, learned from the pages of Swift and at the side of O’Nolan. Riley, for his part stewed in stout, notes ‘The cutting edge of my mind had in fact long since given up my problems in despair, and nowadays it confined itself to making faint gnashing noises in the middle of the night.’<sup>21</sup>

This is the problem with booze; it giveth and it taketh away. Cronin did not have to learn this lesson as comprehensively as Behan and Kavanagh, coming relatively quickly to an understanding that as he watched great writers diminished by alcohol, he would be well served to temper his appetites and try to imagine another voice, as an opening to another mood, if he were to do greater literary justice to his friends and fellow writers. Despite the fact that both *The Life of Riley* and *Dead as Doornails* revolve around pubs, alcohol, and its consequences, Cronin told Caroline Walsh ‘I have known no person in Ireland whose potential hasn’t been distorted or wasted through drink.’<sup>22</sup> In trying to communicate the essence of this epiphany, what he needed was a voice without the inflection of the distance that irony provides; a voice that could put the reader at the coalface of drinking, its attendant pleasures and perils, dispassionately; a voice that could represent this two-headed beast accurately and without either judgment or pathos. And so *Dead as Doornails* begins:

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<sup>20</sup> Cronin, *Life of Riley*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Walsh, ‘Anthony Cronin,’ *Sunday Independent* (1 January 2017).



Although this is a narrative, it is not an autobiography, except in so far as all the seven men remembered in it played some part in my life and are seen through my eyes. There is no significance in the number chosen, outside the fact that they are all dead; they all died within a short space of time of each other; all of them were acquainted with some of the others; and I was acquainted with them all.

A.C.<sup>23</sup>

‘A.C.’ rather than Anthony Cronin, opens *Dead as Doornails* in a mode that is neither autobiography nor lyrical memoir. Instead, *Dead as Doornails* is a self-conscious experiment in allusive first-person narration executed with a remarkable directness of style. And these allusions place Joyce and Beckett in close proximity. A.C. notes of Kavanagh as a victim of gossip that ‘his situation was an appalling one for a middle-aged man who had contributed deeply to the unformulated consciousness of his country and his race,’<sup>24</sup> thus aligning the Monaghan man favourably with Joyce’s vision for a young Dedalus. And whilst attempting, in the company of Behan, to enjoy a free summer sojourn in Europe, and so masquerading as religious pilgrims to Rome and back, he notes that ‘there remained the problem of where to sleep. In our end, Brendan seemed to feel, should be our beginning.’<sup>25</sup> The echo of Hamm, from Beckett’s *Endgame*, who tells Clov ‘The end is in the beginning and yet you go on,’<sup>26</sup> resonates here and elsewhere throughout the tale.

However, working in conjunction with this allusive intertextuality is a certain directness of description and interpretation. Despite the fact that A.C. is always present in the narrative, as narrator he serves the story, and the story, although shot through with humour, is told plainly and in the service of his characters.<sup>27</sup> In this way, A.C. also distances himself from any suggestion of competing in literary stakes with his subjects. He notes that Kavanagh ‘had an idea knocking around in his head that there was a sort of arch-poet position which only one man could occupy, that being of course himself.’<sup>28</sup> Of this preoccupation, A.C. records:

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<sup>23</sup> Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails: Bohemian Dublin in the Fifties and Sixties* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber 1958), 44.

<sup>27</sup> Doherty, in this issue, describes a splitting of O’Nolan’s literary ego into two opposing authorial personae. Similarly, the Cronin who wrote *The Life of Riley* and A.C. can be imagined as different people based on a marked difference in tone, characterised by the latter’s move away from irony as a form of subjectivised, symbolic power. A good question is whether the splitting Doherty attributes to O’Nolan is subtractive towards truth in the interests of keeping a distance from power, or is it, rather, in the service of the truths psychoanalysis equates with resolution? The issue (literally and metaphorically) is complicated by Freud’s veritable pathologisation of creative writing in the famous but rather humourless essay to which Doherty refers.

<sup>28</sup> Cronin, *Dead as Doornails*, 87.

There is, I can see on reflection now, something infinitely comic and grotesque about the idea of a battered, penniless and jobless man, and a man of enormous range, imaginative sympathy and talent, spending so much time and energy on the pursuit of a crown which did not exist, and on the discomfiture of the fellow writers with whom he chose to swap hatreds.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas in *The Life of Riley* great fun is derived from accentuating such foibles, here vanity is to be regretted rather than ridiculed. Another welcome aspect of this greater transparency is to be able to put names to what were, in *The Life of Riley*, caricatures. So it becomes clear that Ralph Cusack is the Sir George who befriends Riley and terrorises Anglo-Irish garden parties with his 'souped up motor.'<sup>30</sup> It is Peadar O'Donnell, editor of *The Bell* and a man 'who hated drink with a fierce puritanical hatred,'<sup>31</sup> that is presented in Cronin's first novel as the Rabelasian Pronshious McGonaghy, demanding that the denizens of Grafton Street adopt the ways of the 'dioloctic.' In *Dead as Doornails*, O'Donnell is presented as both ideologue and idealist but also, importantly, as someone with faith in the writer to articulate a positive future for Irish identity. And three such writers, committed to forging that identity, stand at the centre of the work: Brian O'Nolan, Patrick Kavanagh, and Brendan Behan.

At first, A.C. ably presents the complexity of O'Nolan's psyche in both physical and enticingly panoramic figures:

Brian O'Nolan was a small man whose appearance somehow combined elements of the priest, the baby-faced Chicago gangster, the petty bourgeois malt drinker and the Dublin literary gent.<sup>32</sup>

Over the course of the unfolding, overlapping tales, O'Nolan slowly becomes more malt drinker than gent, and in this transformation inheres a possible reason for the change in Cronin's narrative voice from *The Life of Riley* to *Dead as Doornails*. During the salad days of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, A.C. notes of the na gCopaleen style: 'the fact that it was humorous in intent and that he could and did adopt any one of a multitude of ironic levels, saved him to some extent from becoming the cantankerous preacher.'<sup>33</sup> Of his own younger and impressionable self during the same period, A.C. adds: 'When I knew him first I used occasionally be driven to fill up the pages of *The Bell* with portentous rubbish, which, I am afraid, at the time I took all too seriously. I had

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

<sup>30</sup> Cronin, *Life of Riley*, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Cronin, *Dead as Doornails*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

failed to develop any ironic devices or protections of my own and the tone of voice was all wrong.’<sup>34</sup>

Here A.C. freely admits to irony as a form of protection; a mask to hide behind, or a foil from behind which to propose shortcomings in the state of things, whether through a parodist’s exaggeration or by means of pseudo-serious counterpoint. But in A.C.’s view, irony only saved O’Nolan ‘to some extent’ because the more he drank the more he succumbed to a sense of righteousness. Sticking fast to his scrupulous honesty, A.C. believes that as drink took hold, in the transformation from O’Nolan to ‘Myles,’ ‘the fate of the licensed jester had befallen him. He existed in and through the responses and understanding of his audience.’<sup>35</sup> As a result of O’Nolan having held a civil service job, A.C. felt ‘a tone of pained and angry surprise became almost habitual with him’<sup>36</sup> which stands in marked contrast to the ironic tone na gCopaleen employed in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* itself. Here, Cronin counterpoints the humorous and the serious, drawing attention to the difference between appearance and reality as they pertained to O’Nolan’s many personae. In contrast, A.C. tries to articulate a third way in his own prose, in which neither defensive irony nor disillusionment are allowed to cloud the subject at hand. Of O’Nolan, he notes: ‘He was, I think, a true alcoholic, which is more than I think Behan was, or Kavanagh either.’<sup>37</sup> The emphasis here is on the ‘more.’ For O’Nolan, drinking was not part of an act, dramatic or dancehall, as it was for Behan, nor part of a mythology as it quickly became for Kavanagh, but a daily staple, a necessity.

There are occasions when A.C.’s emergent candour is surprisingly dismissive, hostile even, as toward the typescript of *The Dalkey Archive*:

it was boring. The central joke, De Selby’s experiments with time, did not work. The sergeant was mildly humorous padding. The hero’s relationship with his girlfriend and the manner of describing it would have been prim and false in 1939. What was I to say about it all?<sup>38</sup>

But where there is decisive and often harsh judgment on that which aspires to achieve artistic transformation, there is also real generosity of spirit when it comes to identifying the little doubts and insecurities that often make the man. For example, on Kavanagh and Catholicism, A.C. remembers:

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

The Catholic religion, he often said, was ‘a beautiful fairy story for children’ and it didn’t really do most people much damage because they didn’t really take it seriously, whatever they might think. Sensitive, imaginative people like himself took it seriously, however. In adolescence he had been fool enough to think that everybody did. In reality, he was alone in doing so and it did him ‘immense damage.’<sup>39</sup>

A.C. is quick to understand this dilemma, noting:

It is almost impossible for sensitive, intelligent, over-imaginative people not to make a hames of their development anyway, and then only two responses are really open to them; they can believe themselves the ultimate oddity, or they can suggest that everyone else is lying.<sup>40</sup>

His relationship with Behan, and the latter’s relationship with the bottle, is at first the most hilarious and finally the most depressing of the stories. Of Behan’s decision to write drama, A.C. notes, favourably:

The elaborately developed, situation novel, with classified, ambition-motivated characters in a developing societal relationship, does not in any case suit the native genius, nurtured as it has been in anarchy, or in classless, largely property-less, sloth, cheer, and despair; and Brendan was more anarchic than most, and even less disciplined.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the course of *Dead as Doornails*, A.C. and Behan carouse, travel to France and back, fall out, fight, make up, fall out again and then, finally, watch their friendship fall asunder. Poignantly, and although long estranged, A.C. nonetheless offers Behan much room in the narrative to perform his particular Irish jig. Even with the sound of Behan’s admonishments ringing in his ears throughout various Dublin hostelries as their relationship hit rock bottom, A.C. is respectful of his old friend and critical of the many ‘leg men’ who feed off the increasingly famous and increasingly incapacitated playwright. On one of the last occasions on which A.C. and Behan meet, the former recalls returning from an abortive attempt to buy a second-hand car to the Bailey pub where he had left his wife, Thérèse, in the company of Behan, who is to be heard serenading her as A.C. reenters. Despite years of cantankerous disagreement and abuse on Behan’s part towards his old pal, A.C. records that ‘at my request he sang again, several of the old songs that I remembered from what was now the long ago. Then the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

waiter came over and told us news had just come in on the radio that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas.’<sup>42</sup> What makes this moment so memorable is that A.C. recalls earlier in the narrative that neither O’Nolan nor Kavanagh were invited to the garden party thrown for JFK at the Aras in June 1963 (Behan, too, was snubbed). Of the oversight, deliberate or otherwise, A.C. muses:

It would not have mattered much in an assembly of a couple of hundred people who shook his hand, and matters the less now that all three parties are dead, but it might have cheered Myles or Paddy up a bit to have been invited to such a function, and I recount the story now as evidence of how the writer was regarded as outside social converse altogether in the Ireland of those days.<sup>43</sup>

Within five months of that garden party, JFK had also gone down among the dead. In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus proposes that a ghost is ‘One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners.’<sup>44</sup> Poignant, then, that as the ghost of Hamlet’s father haunts Shakespeare in Stephen’s theory, in an echo of how the ghost of Elpenor haunts Odysseus (until he promises, upon his return from the underworld, to formally bury the body of his dead crew member), so *Dead as Doornails* too is haunted by an extraordinary, related synchronicity: that on the day following the first Bloomsday recreation in 1954, during which O’Nolan and Cronin and Kavanagh visited the Martello Tower (on what O’Nolan described as ‘the jant’<sup>45</sup>), a horse called Elpenor won the Gold Cup at odds of 50–1. More than simply ‘Throwaway,’ in this instance life so completely mirrors art that the underworld, Odysseus, the reenactment of Paddy Dignam’s funeral and the growing list of writers’ ghosts gathered here all commune as a fiction that generates a very powerful form of truth; a truth which, magnificently, exceeds the remit of what the rationalists call coincidence.

Cronin will be remembered for revelries such as the first Bloomsday celebration and for forging space for the Irish writer on the national agenda: the story goes that it was as a result of Cronin pointing out the JFK invitation omission, dispassionately, to the then taoiseach, that Haughey invited him to help formulate a government policy that would take account of the contribution of Ireland’s writers to the country’s national self-image.<sup>46</sup> However, his writer’s voice should also be heard more

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>44</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Vintage, 1986), 9.

<sup>45</sup> Cronin, *Dead as Doornails*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Arguably, it is at this moment that Irish writers begin their ascension – ‘like a shot off a shovel’ – to the ranks of the intelligentsia as foretold by the Glass (overflowing) in ‘Big and Learned and Far from Simple.’ Glass notes ‘The exact social standing of the intelligentsia and the intellectual in Irish society has been widely debated’ but in the case of O’Nolan

frequently in assessment of Irish literary tradition. For example, unimpressed with literary salons, boaters, and bullshit, the A.C. of *Dead as Doornails* concludes without sentiment: 'May [Brendan] and the others commemorated in this book enjoy at last, in Elysium or elsewhere, whatever the innermost nature truly seeks. If it be oblivion, so be it.'<sup>47</sup>

As a man who gave up the drink, Cronin escaped early oblivion. However, stylistically, and in a manner similar to the impalpability of Stephen's Shakespearian spectres, he did ghost himself from *Dead as Doornails* to let words do the talking, to let the dead speak for themselves. This ghosting in turn produces a candid narrative voice characterised by an absence of knowing irony, or pretence. Subsequently, the type of high irony that characterises *The Life of Riley* continues to get short shrift in Cronin's later work. Instead, an unscrupulous voice begins to inform his poetry, one that denies the vanity of self-congratulation. Cronin operates as a sedulous gatekeeper when it comes to uncovering delusions born of either over-identification or of proposed non-identification. Consider this example from his long poem 'The End of the Modern World' (1986) in which fidelity to the terms of socialist political intervention are simultaneously restated and interrogated, the implication being that righteousness has slipped imperceptibly into self-righteousness:

The speaker is smart. No doubt at all of that.  
 His glasses glint. His punch lines are quite punchy,  
 And smart or not his heart's in the right place,  
 Which is to say, exactly where ours is.  
 Then why this vague unease one knows so well?  
 When the unanimous resolutions start  
 And everybody bleeds for a good cause  
 Why is one guilty, with them or against?  
 I listened at the NUJ, the protests,  
 Apartheid, Solidarity, the lot.  
 They applauded, right on cue, with righteous faces,  
 And laughed, with righteous glee, at easy sallies.  
 Why does being right seem wrong? I wondered,  
 Or protest seem so like complacency?<sup>48</sup>

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surely he is to be found *sitting* at the right hand side of James Joyce? Standing room only for the likes of Roddy Doyle and whoever else thinks *Ulysses* needs a good edit.

<sup>47</sup> Cronin, *Dead as Doornails*, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Cronin, 'The End of the Modern World,' in *The End of the Modern World* (Dublin: Raven Arts, 1986), 76.

In recent years, Slavoj Žižek has begun to re-emphasise a type of blindness embedded in contemporary critical thinking that he first noted in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). In that influential work, and in trying to come to an understanding of contemporary ideological conditioning, he suggests that

the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form; the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form [...] but, on the contrary, the ‘secret’ of this form itself.<sup>49</sup>

The secret he is proposing to uncover here is that deliberate collective repression is the necessary trigger that allows ironic form to perform in a manner that most embodies ideological function. For instance, when it comes to modernist fiction, the self-reflexive or meta-narrative moments that draw attention to the form’s own artificiality (examples of which are to be found in this essay gathered from O’Nolan, Beckett, and Cronin himself) all employ a deliberately detached ironic distance. And irony is attractive for this very reason: it provides a voice that allows for critique, but also appears to afford the ironist a place outside of the judgment being employed. In critiquing this aloofness, Žižek proposes that the protective cocoon of ironic distance is the new false consciousness *par excellence*. Moreover, this false consciousness is one that requires a deliberate ‘forgetting’ to take place:

This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishistic disavowal: ‘I know but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know. I know it but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so I can continue acting as if I didn’t know it.’<sup>50</sup>

It is precisely this compromise that Cronin draws attention to in ‘The End of the Modern World.’ Those who seek socially just solutions, and pursue the appropriate avenues the nation state provides for realising such goals, often do not stop to consider that it is the state itself which most mitigates against the justice sought, such that true justice would involve nothing less than the dissolution of the state in its current format. Protest is complacency for the characters in Cronin’s poem because, despite their earnest convictions, state power remains undisturbed.

Through the type of aesthetic strategies outlined in this essay, Cronin sought a literary voice free from smug self-satisfaction, cant, and hypocrisy; free, in the final instance, from the wrong words. At his funeral, his partner, Anne Haverty, shared the

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<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 27.

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 46.

knowledge that his last words were ‘Have I done enough to justify?’<sup>51</sup> I, for one, contend that he did, and, as a result, whether he cares or not, his legacy, like that of the great writers he recounted, is a destiny other than oblivion. In working by subtraction, Cronin spoke volumes about the *milieu* that produced him and about the generic humanity of the writers whom he knew and admired.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that a degree of ironic distance might be at work in contemporary literary studies. Perhaps today’s intellectual socialist who criticises capital cultural imperialism is, at the same time, troubled at the emerging possibility that the proliferation of discourses and accompanying books and conferences in his or her field might represent the outpourings of obsessional neurotics? According to Žižek (after Freud), the neurotic takes control of the discourse and fills it up with empty chatter ‘in order to prevent the awkward moment of silence that would compel the participants to openly confront the underlying tension.’<sup>52</sup> The tension in this case is the growing awareness that increased academic productivity inhibits the revolutionary capacity of fiction and its role as the agent of transformative change. Literally tons of publications help postpone ‘the question that truly matters.’<sup>53</sup> The solution, in such a situation, is to make ironic play with the proliferation in order to avoid the more painful reality. To give an example from literary academia, perhaps there is awareness within the community of scholars, but disavowed, that a special interest author like Joyce or Beckett is, finally, exhausted by critique such that the enterprise of academic proliferation must necessarily cease. Someone, literally, should be recognised as having said the last relevant word. But ironic knowingness is a comfortable hiding place from such hard truths. And in the *business* of academia, is it not the case that fateful conclusions are devoutly to be avoided?

Unquestionably, much remains to be written on O’Nolan as his legacy is further assessed. As *the* author who embraces multiplicity, proliferation, and play, he deserves the accolade (with a nod to the title of Cronin’s biography of Beckett) of ‘The Last Postmodernist’ in the sense that his work, representative of that abandoned theoretical frame, nonetheless demands significant further study to properly tease out the ramifications of his gaming (perhaps such that the qualities that gave rise to the term postmodernism might themselves be re-evaluated in a positive contemporary light). In recent years, diligent and tireless O’Nolan scholars have established the International Flann O’Brien Society, a biennial conference series, a book series with Cork University

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<sup>51</sup> Walsh, ‘Anthony Cronin.’

<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 277.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



Press, new monographs, collected editions of his short fiction, plays, and letters, and the open-access peer-reviewed journal in which you are reading this essay. The stage is now set for an extensive, focused engagement with O’Nolan’s work and it is interesting to consider what direction, and interpretive framing, this engagement might take. In this regard, perhaps the proliferating scholarship about De Selby’s Codex in *The Third Policeman* might be an ironic reference point for O’Nolan scholars, as are the Flann O’Brien Society’s (wonderfully self-deprecating) Big and small Fahrt awards. At the same time, it is also important to recognise the wider institutional context in which these ironic commentaries function and above all to interrogate the purposes to which irony and play are put in the twenty-first century.

Regarding the difference between his own style and that of Joyce, Beckett noted:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.<sup>54</sup>

Beckett’s distinction also describes the essential difference between the literary paths of Cronin and O’Nolan and throws up a further parallel in that just as Beckett’s Irish biographer knew well his subject, O’Nolan as a kindred, playful spirit walked a similar path to Joyce. Funny then that O’Nolan was so incensed by the idea that James Joyce might have used Stanislaus as a biographical avatar. Encountering *The Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce* in August 1962, O’Nolan wrote to Niall Montgomery: ‘I can’t say outright that the “diary” is bogus but can in sorrow (and in sham sympathy with the editors and publr.s.) suggest it is an imposture.’<sup>55</sup> His reasoning was as follows:

The supreme argument for holding that this diary is a phoney resides in the fact that Stannie regards JAJ as a ‘genius’ (although elsewhere a drunken toucher) before JAJ had written anything except items of the awful *Chamber Music* which prove, if anything, that he was a complete ballox.<sup>56</sup>

However, O’Nolan then finishes his tirade against the authenticity of Stanislaus’s composition by noting ‘I’d say he writes [it] down and gravely presents it from time to time for grave inspection of JAJ,’<sup>57</sup> and in the double use of ‘gravely’ and ‘grave’ mimics

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<sup>54</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 352.

<sup>55</sup> O’Brien, *Letters*, 312.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

how Joyce employs the same adverb twice on the opening page of *Ulysses*. In nodding to Joyce's talent while decrying the possibility of a pseudo-author at work in Stanislaus's memoir — even as he himself profitably engages in producing pseudo-narrators all of the time — O'Nolan is doing as he always does: adding, shape-shifting, proliferating. It is a hard act for scholars to follow, and perhaps an impossible one to exhaust.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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