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Violence and the Crisis of Identity

in Flann O'Brien & Myles na gCopaleen

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Focusing on the personae of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen, this article examines a seemingly intractable inconsistency in Brian O'Nolan's body of work: the early O'Brien novels are punctuated by extreme, murderous, graphic violence, while the voice in na gCopaleen's *Cruiskeen Lawn* is characterised by an urbane, decorous control. The essay deploys a Freudian understanding of the architecture of the psyche to explore these two opposing impulses within O'Nolan's authorial ego. Reading O'Nolan in light of Freud's comments on the creative process emphasises the extent to which the various personae producing the texts enact a drama of textual and authorial anxiety caused by the repressive and censorious cultural contexts to his oeuvre.

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When, in 1949, Myles na gCopaleen announced in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in *The Irish Times* that he had written ‘an inquiry, conducted in Irish, into Freud’s attempts to dissect the ego,’ the subject matter of his foray into the world of psychoanalysis should not have been too surprising to his readers. Few authors have presented their literary egos in such dissected terms as Brian O’Nolan: Lucas Harriman emphasises the ‘sometimes baffling legacy’ that O’Nolan left for his readers, having published under the names of Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, Brian Hackett, Brother Barnabas, Samuel Hall and others.¹ Such a fissile authorial identity, by which O’Nolan seemed to compartmentalise his output by genre and audience, might even excuse readers treating these personae as separate writers, or considering them an indication that he took some more seriously than others.² This essay will treat the differing voices and personae as distinct but related, and the various texts and genres as working with and against one another within an overall body of work. In fact, the process should be considered a particularly explicit literary example of what Sigmund Freud would call a ‘splitting of the ego,’ which ‘seems so strange to us because we take it for granted that ego processes tend towards synthesis.’³

This article will focus on the personae of Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen, given that the bulk of O’Nolan’s published output (including all of the most celebrated work) was presented under these names, and will examine a seemingly intractable inconsistency in the corpus: the early O’Brien novels are punctuated by extreme, murderous, graphic violence, while the voice in na gCopaleen’s *Cruiskeen Lawn* is characterised by an urbane, decorous control. ‘The [...] synthetic function of the ego,’ Freud writes, ‘has its own particular preconditions and is subject to a whole range of disorders’: this essay will demonstrate that there is no shortage of possible ‘disorders’ which might result in such a discrepancy in the literary output of this particular writer

¹ Lucas Harriman, ‘Flann O’Brien’s Creative Betrayal of Joyce,’ *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 14, no. 4 (2010): 90. Incidentally, perhaps inevitably, ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ is sometimes spelt ‘Myles na Gopaleen.’ In addition, see Maggie Glass’s article ‘Big and Learned and Far From Simple: Intellectual Narration in “The Plain People of Ireland” and *The Third Policeman*,’ in this issue of *The Parish Review* for further discussion of the variety of (and depth of difference between) the personae in terms of ‘diversity of genre [...], the ability to manipulate multiple languages, and the personalities he portrays.’

² In reality, the distinction is not so clear as is perhaps generally assumed. While O’Brien (who wrote only in English) is known primarily as the author of four novels, he also contributed letters and at least one newspaper article to *The Irish Times*. Na gCopaleen (writing in both English and Irish, as well as several other European languages on occasion) is known primarily as the author of both the Irish language novel *An Béal Bocht* and the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in *The Irish Times*, although he also published plays and short stories.

³ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Splitting of the Ego in Defence Processes,’ *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006), 64–65.

publishing under these separate identities.⁴ To put it another way, the splitting of the literary ego seen in O’Nolan’s published writing can be analysed (and even explained) by considering these opposing impulses or characteristics (namely, the violence of the earlier O’Brien novels versus the composed gloss of contemporaneous na gCopaleen *Cruiskeen Lawn* pieces) alongside comments made by Freud on the creative process.⁵ Reading O’Nolan in this way emphasises the extent to which the various voices or personae producing the texts are playing out a drama of textual and authorial anxiety about the repressive and censorious cultural conditions under which the work is being produced.

The Early, Violent Flann O’Brien

It is not difficult to find examples of violence graphically described in O’Brien’s novels: the opening of *The Third Policeman* (‘Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade’)⁶ or the ending of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (describing ‘the case of the poor German who [...] cut his jugular with a razor three times’)⁷ are prominent examples. Violent deaths and extreme torture are lingered over repeatedly in both books.⁸ Many methods of murder or execution are suggested for Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for instance, where it is not enough to suggest that he be killed by ‘concrete mixer,’ but rather it has to be emphasised that ‘when you take our hero from the concrete mixer, you put him on his back on the road and order full steam ahead with the steam-roller.’ Steam-rollers, Shanahan and Lamont decide, are too expensive, so ‘a needle in the knee’ is suggested: ‘he kneels on it by mistake, drives it in and then it breaks and leaves nothing to get a grip with. A knitting needle or a hat pin.’ And also, ‘a cut of a razor behind the knee’: Lamont longs for ‘a nice simple story with plenty of the razor. A slash of the razor behind the knee, Oh, that’s the boy!’⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ The Myles na gCopaleen articles I examine in this article are all taken from *The Best of Myles*, which (according to Joseph Brooker) draws on the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns between 1940 and 1945 (see Joseph Brooker, ‘In Memoriam: John Wyse Jackson,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 4.

⁶ Flann O’Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 223. Hereafter CN.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸ Jennika Baines makes a compelling case for murder being a ‘prominent theme’ (Baines, 208) in O’Nolan’s writing: see her chapter ‘The Murders of Flann O’Brien: Death and Creation in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, *An Béal Bocht*, and “Two in One” in *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, ed. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 207–218. For an intriguing consideration of murder in O’Nolan’s writing and how it engages with early twentieth-century crime writing, see Katherine Ebury, ‘New Contexts for Confession: Brian O’Nolan, Golden Age Crime Fiction, and Theodor Reik,’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3351>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165–167.

In *The Third Policeman*, that excess of violence, along with a savouring of the violence itself, is again evident:

I [...] swung the spade over my shoulder and smashed the blade of it with all my strength against the protruding chin. I felt and almost heard the fabric of his skull crumple up crisply like an empty eggshell. I do not know how often I struck him after that, but I did not stop until I was tired.¹⁰

Later, the conversation with Martin Finnucane focuses again on specific methods of murder and physical harm: initially, the narrator thinks that 'if I had my spade with me I knew I would soon make short work of him.' After they bond over the fact that they both have only one leg, Finnucane emphasises that the narrator can count on his protection by telling him that 'If any man looks at you sideways, I will rip his belly.'¹¹

In addition to this coldly described violence dispensed by male characters and narrators on either themselves or other males, some critics have identified an even darker strain of misogynistic violence. Eamon Hughes calls *At Swim-Two-Birds* 'a very masculine text, arguably saved from misogyny only by its misanthropy,'¹² while Keith Hopper insists that 'disturbingly, rape and sexual assault become ongoing leitmotifs in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.'¹³ While the male violence directed at other males has been, relatively speaking, tamed by the time of the publication of *The Hard Life* (in 1961), suggestions of male violence against women remain: 'And men? [...] Sure they don't give a goddam if women were dying in the streets. They have only two uses for women, Father – either go to bed with them or else thrash the life out of them.'¹⁴ Hopper suggests, more generally, that 'in the language and imagery [O'Nolan/O'Brien] employs to represent women the background noises are decidedly misogynistic.'¹⁵ While it is possible to read such instances as examples of O'Nolan exposing the wrongness of such misogynistic ideas, attitudes and actions rather than endorsing them, the extent to which his rhetoric reinforces or lays bare the cultural codes in which it is embedded clearly remains a matter for critical debate.¹⁶

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 259–260.

¹² Eamonn Hughes, 'Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, eds. Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 112–113.

¹³ Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 65.

¹⁴ *CN*, 522–523.

¹⁵ Hopper, *Portrait of the Artist*, 55.

¹⁶ For a full and enlightening discussion of 'O'Nolan's sexism' and 'the wider, institutionalized misogyny operative within Irish society' (Long, 149), see Maebh Long's *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 149–187.

The Control of Myles na gCopaleen

In contrast to Flann O'Brien's characteristic depiction of graphic physical violence, the caution of the tone employed (for the most part) by Myles na gCopaleen is remarkable. Joseph Brooker has written extensively on the 'unerring poise'¹⁷ with which the tone of 'superiority [...and...] briskness'¹⁸ in na gCopaleen's writing is managed. This extract from the article 'An Emergency Problem' exemplifies the tone of composure often present in na gCopaleen's writing:

Some short time ago the Dublin City manager, the Managing Director of the Gas Company, and the Chairman of the Electricity Supply Board asked me would I meet them to discuss the problem of conserving fuel. They did not know me personally, but a friend etc., etc. Admiration for my ingenious inventions, and great resourcefulness of intellect had prompted them, etc., etc. [...] Take liberty of enlisting great brain, etc., etc. [...] Could I find some way to make a large saving on *public* lighting [...]? Dislike touching on money matters, but directors prepared to authorise generous fee etc., etc.¹⁹

A similar 'cool, crisp'²⁰ tone characterises na gCopaleen's voice in the following passage, in this case modestly highlighting 'the superior aspects of his persona'²¹ in addressing the Plain People of Ireland:

Several people have written to compliment me on my drawings and to express astonishment at the variety of styles I can adopt. [...]

How do I do it?

I cannot say. Genius, take it how you will, is an odd thing. Talent, yes- that can be analysed and explained. But not genius. I am myself as much an astonished spectator of my own work as any reader. When my fingers begin drawing I often find myself giving involuntary gasps of surprise and excitement.²²

Of course, some of the humour of these pieces lies in na gCopaleen's balancing act between simultaneously drawing attention to and distancing himself from his talents and the high regard in which he is held. He foregrounds his achievements and his

¹⁷ Joseph Brooker, 'Myles' Tones', in *'Is it about a bicycle?' Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 17.

¹⁸ Brooker, 'Myles' Tones', 9

¹⁹ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* (London: Flamingo, 1990), 116.

²⁰ Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), 90.

²¹ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 95.

²² O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 79.

modesty at the same time. Ostensibly, though, the pieces quoted above are concerned with promoting the humility of the persona through (in the first passage) the use of the elliptical ‘etc., etc.’ and (in the second passage) an identification with the reader, insisting on how similar his reaction to his own genius is to that of the onlooker. The implication is that the reader is spared any sort of boasting or self-promotion, and the comedy is derived from the performative modesty which, in fact, draws excess attention to itself and, as a result, to his successes.²³ Na gCopaleen’s disproportionate concern for the reader, his excess of etiquette, is a world away from the uninhibited depiction of violent acts that characterise the writing of O’Brien.²⁴

Freud on Creative Writing

Freud produced his paper ‘On Creative Writing and Daydreaming’ for a so-called ‘lay’ audience in 1907. Although it is a short piece, it is undoubtedly what Peter Gay calls ‘a serious contribution to the psychology of creativity,’ in which Freud ‘connects the play of children to the fantasies of creative writers.’²⁵ Freud begins by pointing out the inclinations of writers to ‘lessen the distance between their kind and the common run of humanity; they so often assure us that every man is a poet at heart.’ He goes on to point out the similarities between a child’s play and the work of a writer: ‘[the child] creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way that pleases him.’ The child takes his play ‘very seriously’: ‘the opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. [...] The child distinguishes [his play] quite well from reality.’ ‘The creative writer,’ Freud writes, ‘does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously [...] while separating it sharply from reality.’²⁶ In this way, Freud posits that stories are not about what he calls ‘reality’: they are, rather, about day-dreams and fantasies sharply distinguished from reality.

As the individual ages, ‘the growing child, when he stops *playing* [...] now *phantasies*.’ Play is different to these ‘phantasies’ in that children do not conceal their play, while the adult is ‘ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from other people.’²⁷ These ‘phantasies [...] fit themselves in to the subject’s shifting impressions of life.’²⁸ Freud

²³ [Glass: Is it not our own mark of success to downplay our achievements, while, all the while, shamelessly self-promoting? It is as if na gCopaleen is a public intellectual in hiding.]

²⁴ The Pooka McPhellimy in *At Swim-Two-Birds* embodies a kind of gentlemanly evil that at times, and in terms of the character’s crisp and controlled tone, can resemble na gCopaleen’s innate assuredness and superiority. The Pooka, though, exists in the chaotic and violent world of that novel, which does not resemble the context of na gCopaleen’s writings.

²⁵ Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), 436.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘On Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming’ (1907) in *The Freud Reader*, 437.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 438.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 439.

goes on to make some generalisations about the plots created by ‘the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes,’ saying that each of these plots ‘has a hero [...] for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every means possible and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special providence,’ deducing that ‘through this revealing characteristic of invulnerability we can immediately recognise His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and every story.’²⁹

Crucially, Freud characterises the creative writer as an entity inclined to ‘split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part-egos and, in consequence, to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes.’³⁰ Freud, as has already been shown, suggests that writers are not writing about reality: instead, they are writing about their own fantasies. He also proposes, with pointed clarity, that ‘we may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motives of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality.’³¹ The ‘essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others,’ Freud says, ‘and our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds.’³² Extending this theoretical model to the theme of O’Nolan’s heteronyms we might well see that the splitting of O’Nolan’s literary ego into Flann O’Brien alongside Myles na gCopaleen comes about, at least in part, in response to the unhappy barriers and tensions O’Nolan was overcoming when he was producing the texts, which included the obdurate nexus of a hostile readership, combined with an overactive, stultifying and repressive state censorship.

Censorship and Repression in O’Brien and na gCopaleen

Kevin Barry describes the Dublin in which O’Nolan produced his first two novels and the early *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns as follows:

The shabby realities of the newly independent state betray the very dreams that fused it and, as a result, there is a waft of bitterness on the air, and it rises above even the stench of the usual bitteresses. Revolutionary fervour has transmuted into a new

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 441.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 441.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 439.

³² *Ibid.*, 433.

conservatism; the city attaches itself to ideas of the conventional and the respectable almost religiously; and thus it is a place where the boredom is so thick on the air that it might almost seem to have mineral properties.³³

John Coyle, meanwhile, emphasises such a prevailing *Zeitgeist* specifically in terms of its effect on the writers who were writing then:

We have all heard more than enough over the years of the paralysis of Joyce's Dublin at the turn of the Twentieth Century: it would be a lot more truthful and fruitful to think of the Thirties of Kavanagh and MacNeice and Beckett and Flann O'Brien, and to take more seriously the titles of Anthony Cronin's two memoirs of Ireland in that era and of O'Brien: *Dead as Doornails* (originally *Dead as Doornails under Dev*) and *No Laughing Matter*.³⁴

While other Irish writers like Joyce and Beckett did their most adventurous writing after they moved abroad, O'Nolan stayed in Ireland.³⁵ Seamus Deane highlights the 'schismatic divide' between the 'fantasy' of the Irish Revival, which had been replaced in the 1930s by the 'realist' Free State: in the 'division' of himself into O'Brien and na gCopaleen, O'Nolan can, according to Deane, parody 'the excessive solipsism [...] of the modernist author/hero' through his fiction, while attacking the 'ready-made banalities of the contemporary hack writer' by means of his journalism.³⁶ The Free State is described by Deane as 'the little world [...] that has lost faith in the heroic consciousness of the heroic individual and has replaced it by the unheroic consciousness of the ordinary, of the Plain People of Ireland.' The Free State, Deane further stresses, 'relishes [...] limitation.'³⁷

Myles na gCopaleen began contributing regularly to *The Irish Times* in October 1940 at a time when, because of the ongoing Second World War, the paper 'had to submit the entire contents in advance to the censor in Dublin Castle, including the small advertisements.'³⁸ A few days after the end of the war, Robert Smyllie published an

³³ Kevin Barry, 'The Belligerence and Brilliance of Flann O'Brien,' *The Irish Times*, 9 March 2019, 56.

³⁴ John Coyle, 'Flann O'Brien in the Devil Era,' in *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature*, eds. Paddy Lyons and Alison O'Malley-Younger (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 154.

³⁵ For further discussion of the significance of O'Nolan's decision to remain in Ireland, see Coyle, 'Flann O'Brien in the Devil Era' and Keith Hopper, 'The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Flann O'Brien and the Censorship Code' in *Literature and Ethics: Questions of Responsibility in Literary Studies*, eds. Neil Murphy, Brendan Quigley, and Tamara Wagner (New York: Cambria Press, 2009).

³⁶ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 159.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁸ Joe Carroll, 'How the Irish Marked VE Day,' *The Irish Times*, 10 May 2005, 10.

editorial entitled 'Out of the Shadows' in which he described the censorship as being 'as Draconian and irrational as anything that ever was devised in the fertile brain of the late Josef Goebbels. [...] We have been living and speaking in conditions of unspeakable humiliation.'³⁹ Even bearing these conditions in mind, there are some further practical reasons why, for example, O'Nolan chose such a sophisticated and cultured voice for na gCopaleen in *The Cruiskeen Lawn*: while his new editor Smyllie wanted 'to reduce the dependence of *The Irish Times* on the Protestant Unionist readership,' according to Anthony Cronin, the paper was still at that time 'the journal of Protestant minority, those, mostly Church of Ireland, Unionists who had been left high and dry by the advent of the Free State.'⁴⁰ O'Nolan, publishing as the apparently Irish speaking, presumably Catholic 'Myles na gCopaleen,' was compelled, despite his 'unassailable erudition',⁴¹ to adopt the tones of excessive, superficial modesty and propriety exemplified earlier in this essay in order to address such a readership in a palatable way.

These repressive social orderings and expectations, however, lead to an overly-controlled, overly-conditioned output of language which eventually only succeeds in highlighting what is being repressed: a wish for recognition, an insistence on worthiness, a need for acceptance. As Seamus Deane writes, the mark of the newspaper in the Free State is 'its helpless subservience to the cliché, its thirst for consensus.'⁴² Protesting too much leads to exposure of the truth in the act of denying,⁴³ and even within such a fragmented identity as Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, each separate persona is unstable and liable to show different aspects of itself. Hugh Kenner exemplifies this most effectively in the dialogue between na gCopaleen, self-styled 'sole sane and educated man in Dublin,'⁴⁴ and the Plain People of Ireland:

The Plain People of Ireland: Isn't the German very like the Irish? Very guttural and so on?

Myself: Yes.

The Plain People of Ireland: People do say that the German language and the Irish language is very guttural tongues.

Myself: Yes.

³⁹ R. M. Smyllie, 'Out of the Shadows,' *The Irish Times*, 12 May 1945, 3.

⁴⁰ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter* (London: Paladin, 1990), 122–123.

⁴¹ Brooker, 'Myles' Tones', 12.

⁴² Deane, 159.

⁴³ See Rodney Sharkey's article, 'A Tale of Two Tales: Irony, Identity and the Fictions of Anthony Cronin and Brian O'Nolan' in this issue for a fuller discussion of the twofold effects of repetition on truth. Repetition, Sharkey shows, can lead to the honing of an utterance towards its truth (as in the case of Beckett), or it can draw attention to the artificiality and unreliability of the idea itself (as is the case in O'Brien and na gCopaleen).

⁴⁴ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye* (London: Penguin, 1984), 304.

The Plain People of Ireland: The sounds is all guttural do you understand.

Myself: Yes.

The Plain People of Ireland: Very guttural languages the pair of them, the Gaelic and the German.⁴⁵

‘It’s not fanciful, behind that, to hear his despair,’ says Kenner. This trauma is played out repeatedly, with varying degrees of humour, in na gCopaleen’s column:

The Plain People of Ireland: Who in heaven’s name is that?

Myself: That’s my pal, Mr Claude ffoney. He’s a painter.

The Plain People of Ireland: A house painter?

Myself: O, indeed, no. ‘The Poddle at Blessington,’ ‘Market Place, Tours,’ and so on [...]

The Plain People of Ireland (doubtfully): It’s very hard to be up to you intellectual lads.

Myself (venomously): I think I am going mad! (Getting pale with passion, the voice rising to a scream). Do you hear me? Mad, *mad*, MAD!⁴⁶

The narrator in *The Third Policeman* tells of how de Selby’s ‘humanising urbanity [was] enhanced rather than vitiated by the chance obtrusion here and there of his minor failings,’ and something similar is happening in the column: na gCopaleen is not just a voice or a tone of voice: there are undercurrents of frustration and despair that occasionally surface, implicitly or explicitly, through the characteristic control and the confidence.⁴⁷ The appearances of these different aspects of na gCopaleen as an author are symptomatic of what Freud had identified as the writer’s inclination to ‘split up his ego [...] into many part-egos’ in response to ‘conflicting currents in his own mental life.’⁴⁸

If Myles na gCopaleen was operating under difficult conditions, Flann O’Brien’s cultural context as the author of novels was no easier. Even without those extraordinarily controlled publishing restrictions during the war, Ireland had already, in 1929, put in place the Censorship of Publications Act, described by Robert Graves in 1950 as ‘the fiercest literary censorship this side of the Iron Curtain – and I do not except Spain.’⁴⁹

⁴⁵ O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

⁴⁷ CN, 302.

⁴⁸ Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 441. This assertion is complicated if we consider ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ as a character-narrator, created by Brian O’Nolan. My point, though, that the reader is witnessing the rupture in the surface of the ego that, Freud predicts, takes place under ‘disturbances,’ still stands.

⁴⁹ Robert Graves, *The Irish Times*, 22 June 1950, cited in Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1968), 250.

Peter Martin states that ‘even when put in the context of other liberal democracies, Irish censorship was notable for its harshness and rigidity.’⁵⁰ While numerous authors and critics (the older O’Nolan, in the comparatively relaxed atmosphere of 1960, among them)⁵¹ report amusedly on the advantages of being a banned author in terms of publicising and marketing the book in question, the ‘sources of reading for the majority of the population were local libraries and bookstalls, and these were affected by the censors.’ Of those writers who were banned, ‘some reacted angrily, others were upset, but very few welcomed the decision’ writes Martin.⁵² The older O’Nolan (with a career’s worth of writing already published in *The Irish Times*) may have joked about the advantages of being banned in order for his books to be sold, but the younger O’Nolan would have been aware that a ban would have been disastrous for the potential of his books to be read.

All of which might provide a reason why the violence in *The Third Policeman*, while on the one hand being graphically described and relished, is on the other hand presented at a curious distance, a distancing which is achieved through many different rhetorical techniques. That first sentence (‘Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers’) is the prelude to a long digression (‘first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney’), and it takes ten pages to get back to the murder itself.⁵³ In the description of the murder and the eventual retrieval of the box of money, the narrator seems to be denying responsibility, or at least not recognising the aspect of himself that could commit such acts: he repeatedly uses the word ‘mechanical’ to describe his actions (‘I went forward mechanically,’⁵⁴ ‘The fingers of my right hand [...] had closed mechanically,’⁵⁵ ‘I noticed several things in a cold mechanical way as if I was sitting there with no worry’).⁵⁶ Later, when he speaks to Finnucane and thinks to himself ‘If I had my spade with me I would make short work of him,’ he actually pulls back from any course of physical violence, deciding that ‘the wisest thing to do was to humour him and to agree with everything he said.’⁵⁷ The narrative itself seems to be splitting under the opposing tensions of, on the one hand, enacting and savouring the depiction

⁵⁰ Peter Martin, ‘Irish Censorship in Context,’ *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 379 (2006): 263.

⁵¹ In joking about the possible censorship of *The Hard Life*, see Cronin, 254 and Hopper, ‘Dismemberment of Orpheus,’ 121.

⁵² Martin, 266.

⁵³ CN, 223.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

of violence and, on the other, the distancing of violence. To describe all this in Freud's terms, not only has Brian O'Nolan split into Myles na gCopaleen and Flann O'Brien, but na gCopaleen and O'Brien are splitting too.

The Third Policeman, produced at the high point of Freud's influence in Europe, is clearly amenable to a Freudian reading: the character names, for example, indicate a possible Oedipal theme as early as the first sentence; Mathers, murdered in the first sentence, is a pluralised mixture of 'mother' and 'father.' When Mathers is speaking in Chapter 2, the conversation focuses on the virtues of the principle of saying 'No,' rather than saying 'Yes': the mothers and fathers teaching the dispossessed son repression and denial.⁵⁸ Silence, repression and denial, in fact, are consistently aligned with parents: he says of his mother 'I knew her well,' while 'my father and I were strangers.'⁵⁹ An Oedipal/Freudian reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is available too: Orlick sets out to write the doom of his father, Trellis, who, in turn seems aligned with the student's uncle, upon whom the narrator takes his (displaced) revenge by damning him to be the writer of a novel whose characters are self-determining. Regarding *The Third Policeman*, though, even more interesting is the fissile nature of the characters, many of whom split throughout the novel at a dizzying rate: there is the symbolic presentation of two Sergeant Plucks when he first appears to the narrator, doubled by his reflection in the mirror,⁶⁰ or of the 'three similar brothers' O'Feersa who are all turning into the same bicycle,⁶¹ or of de Selby's theories of mirrors producing other (younger) selves. Even MacCruiskeen's 'ornamental and well made' chest (described as being 'nearly too nice to talk about [...]. [U]nmentionable'), is filled with smaller versions of itself.⁶² Sgt. Pluck's famous presentation of atomic theory ('Everything is composed of small particles of itself [...]. These diminutive *gentlemen* are called atoms')⁶³ can be considered alongside the focus on internalising and interiority throughout the novel: the narrator thinks of Joe's body, 'a body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other, receding to some unimaginable ultimum.'⁶⁴ Sgt. Pluck talks about making 'mental comparisons inside the interior of my inner head.'⁶⁵ Most important is the narrator himself, 'inseparable' from Divney after the murder: then, when he is killed

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 236–50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 266 (a scene which, notably, occurs again on 403–4).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 282.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 294 [emphasis added].

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

himself, he can speak to his soul and even externalise it by naming him Joe.⁶⁶ And since he does not have (or cannot recall) a name, he can be anyone from a list of Hugh Murray, Constantin Petrie, Peter Small, Signor Beniamino Bari, Alex O’Brannigan among many others.⁶⁷ Identity, the text insists time and again, is unstable, multi-layered and prone to split and disintegrate under pressure.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Finn Fordham, discussing *Finnegans Wake*, claims that

‘curtailment,’ the cutting off or suppression of [...] ‘primitive’ behaviour, in the cliché of Freudian theory, is a means of civilization being able to proceed and progress. Civilization is continually predicated on acts of cleaning up and censorship, at specifically personal and broader cultural levels.⁶⁹

O’Nolan’s writings, produced in a climate of severe state censorship and suppression, are voiced and populated by personae whose conflicting motives and actions are dramatised in order to highlight the effect of the extreme nature of the ‘cleaning up and censorship’ in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. To complicate matters further, the author, in his insistence on splitting himself into different component parts, was driven by varying contrapuntal social and creative needs and desires (most importantly the anxiety between play and seriousness, the need for financial security versus artistic freedom). Kenner (among many others) was tempted to relate all this back to O’Nolan himself, judging and pathologising his career arc in the surroundings in which O’Nolan found himself, and emphasising a perceived link between personal disappointment, alcoholism and unfulfilled artistic potential.⁷⁰

It is, however, unsatisfying to draw such a limited, localised and personalised inference from the drama played out between the voices and personae in these texts. Colm Tóibín surveyed Twentieth Century Irish writing and came to the following conclusion:

We look as well at the sort of fiction we have produced; we find that, except in a few short stories by Frank O’Connor and Seán O Faoláin and a few novels by Liam O’Flaherty which deal with the excitement of war, almost nowhere between 1920

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 229, 233.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 254–255 (Incidentally, an allusion to Freud is present in the name of ‘Kurt Freund’ in that list.)

⁶⁸ [Glass: With so many identities, who can really blame him? It is hard enough with one or two.]

⁶⁹ Finn Fordham, *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 102.

⁷⁰ Kenner, 324: ‘for [O’Nolan], only serious slow drinking, self-destruction decade by decade, a respectable Dublin suicide.’

and 1960 is this society and its relationship with the individual destiny seriously examined or dramatised, explored or exploited in works of fiction.⁷¹

Tóibín is overlooking the drama that plays itself out in the works of Flann O'Brien, or Myles na gCopaleen, or Brian O'Nolan, where fissile voices, personae and people battle to know themselves and each other and their surroundings, and feel the pressures of all these in return. O'Nolan, as usual, is not only joking when he has the student-narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* declare that 'It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living.'⁷² His 'perpetually elusive, determinedly multiple quality [of] self-identification'⁷³ suggests that O'Nolan knew the potential damage that can be caused to both an individual and an entire culture when a society is subject to the kind of state-regulated oppression that was in place in mid-Twentieth Century Ireland. In his fiction and journalism, in his presentation of the instability of authors, narrators and characters operating under these conditions, O'Nolan is providing a demonstration of what happens to a population living in such a system. In this way he warns against and denounces such repression.

⁷¹ Colm Tóibín, 'Martyrs and Metaphors,' in *Letters from the New Island*, ed. Dermot Bolger (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1991), 51.

⁷² CN, 21.

⁷³ Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sacha Morrell, eds., *Flann O'Brien and Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

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