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Big and Learned and Far from Simple

Intellectual Narration in 'The Plain People of Ireland' & *The Third Policeman*

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Brian Ó Nualláin is a man of many names and many voices. The narrative power he possesses is exemplified when comparing the 'Plain People of Ireland' segments of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns in *The Irish Times*, penned under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen, and the voice of the nameless narrator in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. Within these two works, the position of the intellectual in Irish society is portrayed through quite different lenses: the self-confident, perpetually correct Myles, and the timid, obsessively rational narrator. While both voices are erudite and authoritative, their positioning within the environments they inhabit could not be more different. This article examines the positioning of the 'intellectual narrator' in Ireland, as portrayed by the various voices of Ó Nualláin, focusing specifically on the tone utilised throughout the respective pieces to differentiate the social standing of the narrators from those they encounter. The mastery of language apparent in both 'The Plain People of Ireland' and *The Third Policeman* subverts the expected portrayal of a public intellectual, destabilising the inherent class politics that imbue both works without dismantling them all together.

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Brian Ó Nualláin¹ was an educated man, completing his Masters's degree in Irish at University College Dublin.² Despite working under the tutelage of esteemed Celtic Studies scholars such as D. A. Binchy, Osborn Bergin, and Richard Best,³ his brother Ciarán noted, 'Is léir nach raibh ar a aire ach a chéim a ghnóthú ar son cibé tairbhe a bheadh inti' [It is clear that he did not have anything on his mind except for finishing his degree for whatever benefit it might offer].⁴ He joined the Civil Services in 1935 and never returned to academia. Regardless, he valued his own depth of knowledge and was confident enough in his position as an intellectual to assert the right to pontificate on matters of public concern – despite the prohibitions on publicly stating political opinions that came with his position as a civil servant – and was 'able to claim expertise as [a] promulgator of general cultural values,' and 'to act as [an] arbiter of public morality.'⁵ This intellectual confidence informed the wide breadth of work he published under his various pseudonyms, which is characterised by its diversity of genre and style, its masterful manipulation of multiple languages, and the distinctive personalities it portrays.

As well as being a masterful storyteller in his own right, Ó Nualláin had the ability to reproduce the voices around him, switching linguistic registers with ease, which allowed him to produce very pointed social commentary. The personalities he was able to portray throughout his career were cultivated by his unique position in Dublin society; as Jennika Baines explains, as 'the civil servant, the *Irish Times* columnist, and

¹ Like Rodney Sharkey in his contribution to this special issue of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* ('A Tale of Two Tales: Irony, Identity, and the Fictions of Anthony Cronin and Brian O'Nolan'), I had to make a decision about what to call the author for this piece. Unlike Sharkey, however, I elected not to follow the directive from *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* in which the author claimed that he had never stated that his name was Ó Nualláin, instead of O'Nolan, as this is, of course, untrue. See Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 315. Even if the Irish form of his name was not present on his birth certificate, it was the version many in his family used throughout their lives, and it has been used for his work in Irish, including his Master's thesis from University College Dublin. While for the most part, I will discuss his interrogation of the intellectual in Irish society in his English writing in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Third Policeman*, I will refer to him throughout this article as Ó Nualláin, the name under which his own scholarly work was composed.

² His thesis '*Nádúr-fhíliocht na Gaeilge; Tráchtas maraon le Duanaire*' examined Irish nature poetry. A number of critical works have analysed his thesis, notably, Adrian Naughton, '*Nádúir-Fhíliocht na Gaedhilge and Flann O'Brien's Fiction*,' in '*Is it about a bicycle? Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*,' ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 83–97, and Adrian Naughton, "'More of your fancy kiss-my-hand": A Further Note on Brian O'Nolan's *Nádúir-fhíliocht na Gaedhilge*,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 11–23. Available at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/article/id/2910/>.

³ Despite not remaining in academia, his time spent working with Binchy, Burgin, and Best obviously made an impression on him, as they are the subjects of a playful poem published in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (18 March 1941): 6, and reprinted in Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* (New York: Walker, 1968), 266–7.

⁴ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *Óige an Dearthár*. i. *Myles na gCopaleen* (Baile Átha Cliath: Foilseacháin Náisiunta Teoranta, 1973), 103. Translation mine.

⁵ Liam O'Dowd, 'Intellectuals and Intelligentsia: A Sociological Introduction,' in *On Intellectuals and Intellectual Life in Ireland*, ed. Liam O'Dowd (Belfast: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1996), 3.

the native Irish speaker, he had access to the voices and cultural postures of Dublin like few others ever could.⁶ Ó Nualláin's fascination with how language and wordplay shape perceptions of status and culture is evident throughout his writing.⁷ From the clashes between intellectual authors and the popular tastes of their readers in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to the presentation of James Joyce as an unpretentious Skerries barman in *The Dalkey Archive*, Ó Nualláin's writing regularly draws on comic encounters between the voices of the intellectual and popular classes. Like the real Joyce, Ó Nualláin developed what Joseph Brooker terms a 'fetishisation of Dublin speech,' as the majority of the voices he encountered in the various pubs he frequented were those of 'the working classes, down to the unemployed character.'⁸ However, it was not simply the voices of The Plain People of Ireland that Ó Nualláin encountered or reproduced: Carol Taaffe notes that his *Irish Times* column 'quickly established itself both as the balm and the bane of local intelligentsia.'⁹ The dualisms that Taaffe highlights are apparent both in the 'The Plain People of Ireland' series – a recurring feature of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column published from 1940–66 in *The Irish Times* under the byline Myles na gCopaleen – and in the novel *The Third Policeman*, published posthumously under the pen name Flann O'Brien in 1967. The main voice throughout both texts presents itself as erudite and authoritative; the type of person who is accustomed to being listened to and not questioned, albeit with varying levels of success. Ó Nualláin's decision to forefront and mimic the voice of the intelligentsia in his work is intriguing: due in part to a conservative and consensualist social order of the mid-20th century, public discussions of class and status, and public critiques of societal roles, were taboo in Irish social commentary.¹⁰ This proscription held especially true when discussing the perceived élites, those whose supposed standing in society was heavily reliant not on material wealth or governing power, but cultural capital and social posturing.

The exact social standing of the intelligentsia and the intellectuals in Irish society while Ó Nualláin was active as a writer and columnist has been widely debated. Liam O'Dowd defines members of both parties as individuals who are 'typically accredited professionals or specialists who have acquired credentials within the formal education system and whose activity is regulated and validated by professional organisations and specific institutional environments.'¹¹ He further asserts that the intelligentsia and intellectuals inhabit a class of their own due to their control

⁶ Jennika Baines, 'Introduction,' in Baines (ed.), *'Is It About a Bicycle?'* 12.

⁷ See also Maria Kager, 'Lamhd láftar and Bad Language: Bilingual Cognition in *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 54–70.

⁸ Joseph Brooker, 'Myles' Tones,' in Baines (ed.), *'Is It About a Bicycle?'* 19.

⁹ Carol Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys: The Citizen and the Artist,' in Baines (ed.), *'Is It About a Bicycle?'* 113.

¹⁰ O'Dowd, 'Intellectuals and Intelligentsia,' 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

of specialised knowledge and particular forms of critical discourse.¹² R. W. Connell notes that the public role of the intellectual has two sides. On one side, they play the part of the alienated outsider, the critic and often the victim of powerful interests, the misunderstood scholar whose work is underappreciated; on the other side, they are bound to the existing social order and rely upon ‘their recruitment, their pecking order, their funding, their fights.’¹³ Eva Etzioni-Halevy suggests that the intelligentsia are consistently among the élites in various spheres who have ‘influence but little power over others.’¹⁴ Moreover, O’Dowd notes that ‘recruitment to the intellectual stratum is highly selective in class terms, especially to its upper echelons.’¹⁵ There is a greater distinction between the intellectuals and intelligentsia and the lower and middle classes – yet, there is still a class disparity between the intelligentsia and the upper class. Although the intelligentsia have no actual governmental power, they are still able to command the attention of the social élites who do not necessarily have the same accreditation. The ‘intellectual narrator,’ therefore, sees themself as inhabiting a separate class from the majority of the people who surround them. They command authority based on their (perceived) expertise on specific topics, which is dependent on their ability to make their audience believe that the intellectual’s breadth of knowledge is superior to their own, and therefore that the opinion of the intellectual must necessarily be the most valid. This authority, however, is dependent on the projected confidence of the narrator in their own mental acumen and is easily challenged by a reader who does not have ‘appropriate’ deference to the information the narrator possesses.

While comparisons have already been drawn between the presentation of *faux* expertise in Myles na gCopaleen’s *Cruiskeen Lawn* and Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, notably in Paul Fagan’s examination of paranoia, misreading and hoaxes within both texts,¹⁶ the following analysis advances this critical conversation by drawing on the framework of the ‘intellectual narrator’ to explain the distinct personalities that are staged throughout Ó Nualláin’s work in relation to social class. I argue that the tone utilised for and by the intellectual narrators in both *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Third Policeman* differentiates them from the other voices they encounter, many of whom are treated with contempt by the intellectual.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ R. W. Connell, *Which Way is Up? Essays on Class, Sex, and Culture* (London: George Allan and Unwin, 1983), 234.

¹⁴ Eva Etzioni-Halevy, *The Knowledge Elite and the Failure of Prophecy* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 11.

¹⁵ O’Dowd, ‘Intellectuals and Intelligentsia,’ 11.

¹⁶ Paul Fagan, “Expert diagnosis has averted still another tragedy”: Misreading and the Paranoia of Expertise in *The Third Policeman*, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 12–41. Available at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/article/id/3118/>.

The character of Myles na gCopaleen appeared for the first time in *The Irish Times* after Ó Nualláin orchestrated a two year long ‘guerrilla attack’ on the paper’s letters page. As Taaffe notes: ‘A constant theme of these incursions was a clash between the public and the self-styled public intellectual.’¹⁷ In many ways, na gCopaleen embodies Connell’s profile of the public intellectual; indeed, per Taaffe, the persona of na gCopaleen was ‘a comic symptom of Ireland’s culture wars.’¹⁸ Everything about his character is modelled to celebrate his own depth of knowledge, down to his very identity: his name and the name of his column serve as ironic indications of his own cultured literacy as they are direct references to Dion Boucicault’s play *The Colleen Bawn*.¹⁹ He is entirely sure of himself and unafraid to present his opinions to the public of Ireland, with the expectation that he will be taken as the authority on any subject about which he chooses to pontificate, however irreverent the topic or his presentation may be. Yet, na gCopaleen’s interactions with *The Plain People of Ireland* tend to be somewhat tumultuous, even though the voice of ‘The People’ to whom he is responding is another of Ó Nualláin’s personas. His tangents and flights of fancy are rudely interrupted with some regularity by demands for more jokes. Despite these interruptions of his lectures, the relationship between na gCopaleen and *The Plain People* ranges from passive aggression and strained deference to bemused curiosity. Throughout the series, *The Plain People* are given an occasional chance to have casual conversations with him, which he permits with varying degrees of tolerance:

The Plain People of Ireland: Talking of cards, there is nothing to beat a good game of solo, best game of the whole lot, hear young slips of girls talking about their bridge and all the rest of it make you sick.

Myself: Pray continue, you interest me strangely.

The Plain People of Ireland: To be stuck inside there in the back room of an evenin’ with a few of the lads, a couple dozen stout in the corner and ten to fifteen bob in the middle of the table, Lord save us, what more could a man ask?

Myself: Personally, I am never happy when I am away from my beloved books.

The Plain People of Ireland: And not a word spoken, every man for himself, every card counted, a trump down on the ace of spades as often as you like.

Myself: Ay indeed.²⁰

¹⁷ Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys,’ 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Joseph Brooker, ‘Irish Mimes: Flann O’Brien,’ in *A Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Julia M. Wright (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 180.

²⁰ Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Another Problem Solved,’ *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* [hereafter CL] (15 December 1941): 2. See also O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 90.

Within this sequence, na gCopaleen asserts his intellectual superiority over The Plain People of Ireland and demonstrates his cultural capital in his stated preference for books over playing cards. While the act of playing cards for money is not inherently prescribed to the lower classes, the specification of the game happening in the back room of a pub with ‘the lads’ in complete silence, with low buy-ins and pints of stout, stands in stark opposition to the glamour of high stakes games in posh casinos with expensive cocktails and banter that may attract a well-read, well-off clientele. Na gCopaleen’s stated preference for books over cards, then, situates him within the cohort who would prefer the latter over the former.

Brooker describes na gCopaleen as a figure who ‘seems to know an immense, intimidating amount. He expounds and opines on architecture, painting, music, philosophy, and politics as well as literature; his ability to turn up one day in Latin and the next in Irish must have sealed the sense of unassailable erudition.’²¹ Na gCopaleen uses this perception fully to his own benefit; after opining about the electric chair, and discussing the logistics of a theoretical prison break to avoid that fate with The Plain People, he digresses to point out a mistake he has discovered while reading:

PROBABLY A MISTAKE

I was looking into an English Dictionary (yes – the other day) and came across this mistake:

‘Intelligentzia: the part of a nation (esp. the Russian) that aspires to independent thinking.’²²

Na gCopaleen ponders why there would be an ‘assumption that every nation has two parts, one being Russian?’ in line with what Fagan describes as the persona’s ‘primary mode of pedantry masquerading as connoisseurship.’²³ The columnist then concedes that Ireland does have a population that holds itself apart from the rest of the country, pointing to ‘that introspective crowd from Cork.’ The passive-aggressive aside toward Corkonians advances the conceit: while even now the county is commonly referred to as the ‘People’s Republic of Cork,’ with various levels of seriousness,²⁴ a Dublin-based author dismissing Cork as analogous to Russia in 1943 reinforces his own position of supposed cultural

²¹ Brooker, ‘Myles’ Tones,’ 27.

²² Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Probably a Mistake,’ *CL*, 28 April 1943, 3. See also O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 107.

²³ Fagan, ‘Expert diagnosis,’ 12.

²⁴ There is a satirical website entitled the People’s Republic of Cork (<https://peoplesrepublicofcork.com/>), as well as several more serious articles that have cropped up in the last several years that argue that Cork should become independent from the rest of the country. There is also a brand of jokes that run parallel to common jibes at vegans – ‘How do you know someone is from Cork? They will tell you.’ [Hamilton: Corkadorkians are quite vocal of their geographical preferences. ‘You can pop the person out of Cark, but you can never pop the Cark out of a person.’]

superiority. He finishes the segment stating: ‘A bad business, opening dictionaries; a thing I very rarely do. I try to make it a rule never to open my mouth, dictionaries, or hucksters’ shops.’²⁵ This pedantry allows him to position himself firmly in the stereotypical role of the public intellectual; the type that, despite his own protestations, not only will open a dictionary, but will also take umbrage at what he finds there. The performance displays an aspiration to ‘independent thinking,’ which, ironically, aligns na gCopaleen with the very definition of the ‘Intelligentzia’ he is ridiculing.

Na gCopaleen is familiar with his audience, both the fabricated Plain People of Ireland and the actual readers of *The Irish Times*, and with their depth of knowledge, or lack thereof. It is unclear, however, whether he is making jokes at the expense of his audience or himself; either case would be consistent with his persona. The inclusion of The Plain People serves to deflate na gCopaleen’s ‘literary grandiosity’ and, at the same time, is ‘deliberately pointed to a band of readers out there who would never get the joke.’²⁶ Nevertheless, na gCopaleen attempts to appease The Plain People, at least occasionally, with his asides, although he is occasionally met with some vitriol:

I WISH to take the opportunity of wishing all and sundry a happy new year and many happy returns

The Plain People of Ireland: It’s a bit late in the day.

Myself: If my simple and heartfelt greeting is to be questioned or discussed, I’ll withdraw it.

The Plain People of Ireland: Go ahead and withdraw it.

Myself: It is now withdrawn.

The Plain People of Ireland: The cheek of some people.²⁷

Na gCopaleen seems to be very satisfied with his position: the ability to pontificate to the masses and critique the élites suits him well. His voice will be heard, and someone will listen. He is in complete control of his situation and his persona, operating, like so many intellectuals, within a ‘flagrant projection of his own intelligence, not a humble submission to registering the quiddity of the real.’²⁸

The persona of Myles na gCopaleen in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the nameless narrator of *The Third Policeman* use the same crisp sentences and excessively erudite rhetoric to signify their social standing and learnedness, and both share a knowledge base and

²⁵ Na gCopaleen, ‘Probably a Mistake,’ 3.

²⁶ Taaffe, ‘Plain People and Corduroys,’ 117.

²⁷ Myles na gCopaleen, *CL*, 23 January 1942, 6. See also O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 86.

²⁸ Brooker, ‘Myles’ Tones,’ 28.

tendency toward elaboration.²⁹ Indeed, the commissioning of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in 1940 occurred shortly after *The Third Policeman* was rejected from multiple publication houses. Taaffe directly equates na gCopaleen's and the de Selby scholar's voices and traces them to a common period of creativity: 'Myles's peculiar brand of pedantic chaos was already present in the abandoned manuscript [*The Third Policeman*].'³⁰ While 'The Plain People of Ireland' is a series of satirical sketches that stage comic clashes between the distinct voices and mannerisms of the intellectual and popular classes, *The Third Policeman* takes an absurdist stance on life in rural Ireland. It is quickly established that the narrator is an educated individual, simultaneously a criminal and a scholar, with 'elaborate diction,'³¹ but he lacks the confidence of opinion that defines na gCopaleen's writing. Like na gCopaleen, the narrator views himself in the position of public intellectual, but his alienation from the social order is striking. Brooker's claim that many characters in Ó Nualláin's fiction tend to lack the quality of a 'veteran of many decades of experience and learning'³² holds true for the narrator of *The Third Policeman*. He lacks any formal qualifications; despite every intention, he was unable to attend university after leaving school at the age of nineteen due to familial obligations. He channels his thirst for knowledge and desire to understand the world around him by devoting his entire life to the study of the theories of the philosopher de Selby, much in line with the activities of an active academic; however, he is not socially protected by the symbolic capital of titles and degrees.

It is, perhaps, this lack of formal higher education that allows the narrator to become the self-appointed leading expert on de Selby, as he had not received the formal analytical training to dissuade himself of the advisability of, or his suitability to, the project. He was first introduced to the philosopher's theories in secondary school, and 'spent some months in other places broadening [his] mind'³³ before returning home to spend years working on a book to disprove what he believes to be misconceptions about de Selby's work. All this, despite the fact that the philosopher's absurd theories make no sense either within the logic of Ó Nualláin's text, or without it, as observed by nearly everyone but the narrator himself:

All [de Selby's] works – but particularly *Golden Hours* – have what one may term a therapeutic quality. They have a heart-lifted effect more usually associated with

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and the Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 69.

³¹ Brooker, 'Myles' Tones,' 29.

³² *Ibid.*, 27.

³³ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 9.

spirituous liquors, reviving and quietly restoring the spiritual tissue. This benign property of his prose is not, one hopes, to be attributed to the reason noticed by the eccentric du Garbandier, who said ‘the beauty of reading a page of de Selby is that it leads one inescapably to the happy conviction that one is not, of all nincompoops, the greatest.’¹ This is, I think, an overstatement of one of de Selby’s most ingratiating qualities. The humanising urbanity of his work has always seemed to me to be enhanced rather than vitiated by the chance obtrusion here and there of his minor failings, all the more pathetic because he regarded some of them as pinnacles of his intellectual prowess rather than indications of his frailty as a human being.

[...]

¹ ‘Le Suprême charme qu’on trouve à lire une page de de Selby est qu’elle vous conduit inexorablement à l’heureuse certitude que des sots vous n’êtes pas le plus grand.’³⁴

The narrator’s obsession with de Selby becomes the focal point of his personality and is his driving motivation throughout the text, leading him to commit his ‘greatest sin’: the murder of old Mathers for his fortune to fund the narrator’s further studies.³⁵ The narrator is so charmed with de Selby that he cannot accept any criticism toward the philosopher, immediately dismissing du Garbandier as an eccentric, instead of reflecting upon the absurdity of such inventions as de Selby’s ‘tent-suit.’³⁶ While du Garbandier is able to make himself feel superior to de Selby in calling out his nincompoopery, his opinions hold no authority for the narrator.

During an encounter with the now deceased Mathers, the narrator is joined by a voice that only he can hear, helpfully dubbed Joe, who seems to be the true critical thinker of the pair. Joe is something of a spirit guide for the protagonist, reminiscent of the complete self-confidence of the Mylesian-style, guiding both the reader and the narrator through the more baffling aspects of the text. The discussions between Joe and the narrator echo those of *na gCopaleen* and *The Plain People*, however the roles are subverted. Instead of taking the dominant role in the conversation, the self-styled intellectual narrator plays a passive part. While the narrator considers the names he may encounter in his journey as he is lacking one of his own, Joe begins an extended bibliographical explanation for every name listed, filling almost two pages of the text. While this recital initially amuses the narrator, he loses patience with the polemic exposition and interrupts Joe:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

... A lady in blue at the back of the hall begins to sing O Peace Be Thine and the anthem, growing in volume and sincerity, peals out into the quiet night, leaving few eyes that are dry and hearts that are not replete with yearning ere the last notes fade. Dr Garr only smiles, shaking his head in deprecation.

I think that is quite enough, I said.

I walked on unperturbed.³⁷

Joe appears shortly after the introduction of the extensive footnotes through which the narrator discusses de Selby's works, which are presented as an 'extra-textually authentic'³⁸ framework through which the narrator attempts to understand the world he has fallen into. The content of the footnotes serves as 'a formal marker of scientificity, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness'³⁹ through which the narrator firmly positions himself, at least in his own mind, as a learned persona possessing true intellect. It is only after the appearance of Joe and the footnotes that the narrator begins to assume an air of superiority over everyone he encounters.

Evocative of Alice's fall down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, the internal logic of the world in which the narrator has found himself is far beyond his comprehension. Upon meeting Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen, the narrator's air of superiority develops into a desperate need to prove that he is, in fact, 'learned and far from simple,'⁴⁰ as his own belief in his intellectual superiority is challenged by the surprisingly erudite rural policemen. He does not contradict MacCruiskeen when the policeman assumes, incorrectly, that the narrator holds a university degree and reacts with horror when he is presented with the policeman's stunning and impossible innovations. Furthermore, upon realising that the Sergeant takes nothing he says seriously, his demeanour turns to a cold condescension:

You appear to be under the impression [...] that I have lost a golden bicycle of American manufacture with fifteen jewels. I have lost a watch and there is no bell on it. Bells are only on alarm clocks and I have never in my life seen a watch with a pump attached to it.⁴¹

It does not take long for the narrator to decide 'without any hesitation that it was a waste of time trying to understand the half of what [Sergeant Pluck] said.'⁴² His

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁸ Fagan, 'Expert diagnosis,' 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 68.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 62-3.

consistent dismissal of the policemen is congruent with his own intellectual posturing. In the end, he completely rejects Policeman Fox's use of omnium to create the Parish's Eternity as an 'oafish underground invention [which] was the product of a mind which fed upon adventure books of small boys.'⁴³ It is, however, his 'innocent superiority' and intellectual conditioning that prevents him from being able to truly grasp the gravity of the situation in which he finds himself.⁴⁴

Later, after he is sentenced to 'a stretching'⁴⁵ for the murder of old Mathers, the legality of the sentence is questioned, as the narrator cannot satisfactorily provide a name for himself, with the Sergeant stating, 'if you have no name you possess nothing and do not exist.'⁴⁶ The narrator is then cheerfully informed that the last time the parish had a hanging, the criminal in question was a bicycle, which had taken on human qualities and must therefore atone for the crime committed.⁴⁷ After it becomes clear that the narrator will not be acquitted and spared his fate of hanging, there is an attempted rescue by a band of one-legged men who tie their legs together to create the illusion of one man for every two, and who then suffer an implied derangement from a colour that is so bizarre that it would 'blast a man's brain to imbecility by the surprise of it.'⁴⁸ Oddly, throughout the entire discussion that would ultimately conclude in his death, salvation by way of one-legged men aside, the narrator seems to be incredibly blasé about the whole ordeal, and passively yields to the inevitability of his fate. Brooker notes that the narrator is 'describing a personal catastrophe in the most inappropriately dry terms,'⁴⁹ as though he were simply describing a day in his family's pub. Taaffe agrees, commenting that the humour in *The Third Policeman* 'depends for its effect on the narrator's pained reasonableness in the face of an incomprehensible world.'⁵⁰ However, as the world around him grows increasingly surreal, the narrator retreats deeper into the theories of de Selby, trying to make sense of what is happening to him in the form of increasingly frantic footnoted analyses which punctuate the text with enough rigour to placate even the most citation happy academic.⁵¹ However, to add to the nightmare, 'the more meticulously his theories and achievements are catalogued, the more their pathetic misguidedness is revealed.'⁵² It is almost as if

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁴ Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 72.

⁴⁵ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 101.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁹ Brooker, 'Myles' Tones,' 29.

⁵⁰ Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 64.

⁵¹ Stated with no reference at all to the author of this article, of course. [Hamilton: Of course not.]

⁵² Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 64.

Ó Nualláin has identified the deepest fears of his academically minded readership and is gleefully mocking them for it.

Ó Nualláin's prose is undeniably hilarious; his use of puns and wordplay lend to the readability of the text, but the story itself finds its humour in the consistent subversion of readers' expectations regarding the characterisation of the narrator. In more traditional narratives, when a socially established and well-educated character is introduced, that character tends to lead the story to its triumphant conclusion. *The Third Policeman*, however, rejects the standard convention, putting the calculating pseudo-intellectual in a position where he is placed at a disadvantage by the unexpected knowledge of the rural policemen. While they likely have no formal education beyond what was compulsory at the time, they are still able to understand and eloquently expound upon the finer points of 'Atomic Theory,'⁵³ an elegant, if peculiar, theory that makes the narrator's interpretations of de Selby's ideas look like the babblings of a child. As Fagan notes, the 'footnoted citations repeatedly sabotage the terms of this critical debate by challenging the authenticity and sincerity of almost all texts canonical to the de Selby archive.'⁵⁴ The narrator is similarly dominated and outsmarted on multiple occasions by John Divney, his 'lazy and idle-minded'⁵⁵ employee, turned housemate and, ultimately, murderer. When taking into account Ó Nualláin's own background within the Irish academic system and his contempt toward 'highbrow esoterica,'⁵⁶ it is easy to read the characterisation of the narrator as a commentary on the tendencies of the Irish literati, academics, the 'public and self-styled public intellectual'⁵⁷ to eschew theories outside of their *oeuvre*.⁵⁸

Both na gCopaleen and the narrator of *The Third Policeman* are linguistically set apart from the parochial dialect of most of the characters with whom they come into contact, as both typically use a cultured, standard manner of speech.⁵⁹ Language difference is commonly used to denote class standing: the most common way to identify and control the social strata is to identify members of speech communities and classify them accordingly. Ó Nualláin plays on this throughout his work, using phonetic rendering

⁵³ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 86.

⁵⁴ Fagan, 'Expert diagnosis,' 22

⁵⁵ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 7

⁵⁶ Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys,' 114.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113

⁵⁸ [Doherty: Being, as it is, outside of my *oeuvre*, I for one eschew this theory.]

⁵⁹ Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*, 4th edn (Penguin, 2000), 30-1. Na gCopaleen, however, does have a tendency to spout absolute gibberish, especially when The Plain People become particularly frustrating for him. See O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 92. [Sharkey: I have heard the plain peepul of Eyerland say 'yeou knaow,' particularly the chap who impersonates Eamon Dunphy on *Après Match*. The question is how O'Brien imagines we should pronounce 'Proust?' As J. M. Fitzgerald would have it (on behalf of The Plain People of Ireland), or as the 'Pruust' beloved of Beckett?]

to drive home the exact linguistic tone his various characters are meant to embody, frequently to denote lower classes. However, na gCopaleen turns this expectation against his readers, applying it to more ‘intellectually ambitious’ characters:

CHAT

- Does Proust affect you terribly? Emotionally, I mean?
- Nao, not rahllly. His prose does have that sort of ... glittering texture, rather like the feeling one gets from the best *émaux Limousins*. But nao ... his peepul ... thin, yeou knaow, thin ... dull, stuppeed.
- But surely ... surely Swann ...?
- Ah yes ... If all his geese were Swanns ...⁶⁰

In this instance, the pronunciation, if spoken aloud, is reminiscent of upper-class British diction.⁶¹ Ó Nualláin rarely applies a phonetic rendering to the speech of The Plain People, instead allowing his Irish readership to interpret their accents for themselves. This practice departs from the wider anglophone literary tradition of only marking phonetic variation of characters from less prestigious dialect groups.⁶² In the same way, Ó Nualláin gives his traditionally rural characters the ability to subvert their expected language use through educated language. Sergeant Pluck is quickly established as a fount of knowledge essential to surviving the strange otherworld he inhabits. Upon meeting the nameless narrator, Pluck asks him first for his ‘pronoun,’ and when he is not given an adequate answer presses on, asking for his ‘cog.’ When the narrator is again left baffled, he clarifies that he is after losing his ‘surnoun.’⁶³ It is entirely unexpected for someone of Pluck’s social standing to be aware of Roman onomastic conventions, let alone to try to mitigate confusion by switching to Anglo-Norman.⁶⁴ Pluck is allowed the same eloquence and sense of humour as regularly afforded to na gCopaleen, effectively removing the narrator from the role of the singular intellectual of the text. The policemen in *The Third Policemen* have a similar narrative purpose as The Plain People of Ireland: they exist to challenge the perceptions of the over-confident

⁶⁰ Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Chat,’ *CL*, 10 June 1942, 2. See also O’Brien, *The Best of Myles*, 111.

⁶¹ Brooker, ‘Myles’ Tones,’ 21. It should also be noted that in this case, the respondents are not explicitly marked as being Plain People themselves; however, this conversation comes on the heels of another exchange with The Plain People of Ireland.

⁶² See, for example, the speech of characters such as the moles in Brian Jacques’s *Redwall* series of novels (1986–2011).

⁶³ O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 58.

⁶⁴ A *cognomen* is the third name in standard naming conventions for free Roman males and is frequently considered to be a nickname. *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy*, eds Christopher Bruun and Jonathan Edmondson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 799. Similarly, while *surnoun* sounds initially like ‘surname,’ the word is Anglo-Norman, meaning ‘nickname.’ Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle* (Paris: Ministère de l’Instruction Publique, 1881).

intellectual type with whom they are forced to interact, although na gCopaleen is much more competent than the nameless narrator.

While Ó Nualláin himself was fond of playing the plain man,⁶⁵ as Myles na gCopaleen he portrays himself as a cultured figure with an expertise in all things, in contrast to *The Plain People* as well as to the *Corduroys*,⁶⁶ despite the occasional parodic moment. This duality allows him inimitable insight into the intricacies of Irish society, and with it the ability to critique and reproduce the voices of those he encounters across the class structures. The tones utilised by na gCopaleen and the nameless narrator of *The Third Policemen* situate them within the expectations of the intellectual class in mid-20th century Ireland: learned and separated from the rest of the community. However, these characters are not at an equal level within the hierarchy of the intellectual. Na gCopaleen, protected by his presumed accreditation, wields influence over his readership, both the fictional Plain People of Ireland and their real-world counterparts. His grandiose tendency toward elaboration pokes fun at Ó Nualláin himself,⁶⁷ the university scholar and civil servant with notions of superiority. The timid, oblivious narrator of *The Third Policeman*, on the other hand, destabilises this relationship: his lack of formal accreditation places him firmly within Connell's description of the intellectual as an alienated outsider.⁶⁸ In both cases, Ó Nualláin takes as a given an implicit superiority of intellectuals over lower and middle classes, earned through mastery of the linguistic arena. In the domain of language, he destabilises that hierarchy, although he does not entirely dismantle it – the author is an intellectual after all, regardless of the name.

⁶⁵ Taaffe, 'Plain People and Corduroys,' 124.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 113

⁶⁷ Brooker, 'Myles' Tones,' 29.

⁶⁸ Connell, 'Which Way is Up?,' 234.

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