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## Mylesean Onomast cs: Games Names Play (Part II)

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Part I of this discussion of onomastic games in Brian O'Nolan's writings concentrated on *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht*. Part II turns to the later writings to appear, especially *The Third Policeman*.

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*The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* were both written to take advantage of the successful republication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1960. As is generally acknowledged, the conservative style of *The Hard Life* (1961) is met by O’Nolan’s extraordinary ambition to be banned by the censorship board. O’Nolan attempted to provoke this not only by lengthy, clergy-baiting discussions but also by naming one of the characters, a German Jesuit priest, ‘Father Kurt Fahrt.’ O’Nolan gleefully anticipated clerical and establishment outrage, the result especially of this daring appellational exercise. ‘The name,’ he wrote to Timothy O’Keeffe, ‘will cause holy bloody ructions here.’<sup>1</sup>

The would-be provocation was rather less than original: Francis Sylvester Mahony (1804–1866), poet and favourite son of Cork as author of ‘The Bells of Shandon,’ and something of a forerunner of Myles na gCopaleen, had published his *Reliques of Father Prout* as early as 1837, more than a century before *The Hard Life*. While the Father Prout whose persona Mahony adapted to his own humorous purposes was an actual local parish priest with a name that is merely a Cornish variant of the English surname Proud,<sup>2</sup> many of Mahony’s readers will undoubtedly also have noticed the serendipitously available pun on the colloquial French *prout* (‘fart’). The intended implication of Father Fahrt’s name is clearly also ‘fart’ – more specifically, given the name Kurt, a ‘curt fart.’ (Meanwhile, the wholly innocuous German noun *Fahrt*, which is not normally used as a family name, merely means ‘journey.’) Father Fahrt is onomastically complemented in matters both clerical and flatulatory by two Christian Brothers called Brother Cruppy and Brother Gaskett, the name of the former suggesting a horse’s crupper or hind-quarters, and that of the latter the inadequately restrained passing of gas, as in the case of a faulty gasket. No doubt much to O’Nolan’s chagrin, however, this daringly imaginative combination of provocations was ignored by clergy and censors alike, and the novel remained, entirely disappointingly, unbanned.

*The Dalkey Archive* (1964), unusually, contains relatively little of onomastic interest, other than the name of the character De Selby, borrowed from the manuscript of *The Third Policeman*, and to which we shall return. Regarded by many readers as his true masterpiece, O’Nolan’s *The Third Policeman*, which was put on paper during 1939, finished by January 1940, and rejected (not surprisingly, perhaps, in the wartime Britain of 1940) by Longmans, who primly recommended, given the tenor of the times, that he should turn his talents to a more realistic subject matter. O’Nolan, obviously shattered, hid the manuscript away for the rest of his life, claiming to his

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<sup>1</sup> Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. by Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 283.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Hanks, Flavia Hodges, A.D. Mills, and Adrian Room, *The Oxford Names Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 505.

friends that it had been lost in a variety of improbable scenarios. It was eventually published posthumously in 1967.

The novel abounds in happy onomastic finds. Many fictional narrators remain unnamed, but *The Third Policeman* goes a sizeable step further, for in this case the narrator also does not know his own name – though, as he observes, he can, if necessary, always find one: ‘Doyle or Spaldman is a good name and so is O’Sweeny and Hardiman and O’Gara. I can take my choice. I am not tied down for life to one word like most people.’<sup>3</sup> He idly compiles a list of names that – ‘for all I knew’ – *might* be his, including Hugh Murray, Constantin Petrie, Peter Small, Signor Beniamino Bari, the Honorable Alex O’Brannigan, Bart., Kurt Freund, Mr. John P. de Salis, M.A., Dr. Solway Garr, Bonaparte Gosworth, and Legs O’Hagan (41). Keith Hopper aptly notes the resemblance to the story of Rumpelstiltskin here.<sup>4</sup>

Curiously enough, moreover, while not knowing what his own name may be, he is capable of confirming at some length that it is definitely *not* Mick Barry, Charlemagne O’Keefe, Sir Justin Spens, Kimberley, Bernard Fann, Joseph Poe or Nolan, Rosencranz O’Dowd, O’Benson, Peter Dundy, Scrutch, Lord Brad, Jenkins, Roger MacHugh, or Sitric Hogan. Nor, he further confirms, is he one of the Garvins or Moynihans, the Quigleys or Mulrooneys, the ‘Hounimen, Hardimen, or Merrimen,’ the O’Growneys, O’Roartys, or Finnehys, the Conroys or O’Conroys – or even the Byrnes (100–01). The narrator’s soul, assigned, ‘for convenience’ (25), the name Joe, more than once suggests that the mislaid name is actually ‘Signor Beniamino Bari’ (41), alias ‘the golden-throated budgerigar of Milano’ (101), but Joe appears to have a distinctly Mylesean sense of humour, for as a verb, the Italian *bari* means ‘you are cheating,’ while as a noun it refers to a plurality of ‘cheats’ and ‘swindlers.’

The nameless narrator is a self-professed private scholar who has devoted his entire life to the works of the eccentric ‘physicist, ballistician, philosopher, and psychologist’ (166) de Selby, a watered-down version of whom had already appeared in 1964 in *The Dalkey Archive*, a pursuit to which he subordinates all else and to finance which he will go to any lengths, including murder. Etymologically, the English name Selby is a habitation name from a place in Yorkshire, so called from Old Norse *selja* (‘salley, willow’) and *býr* (‘farm, settlement’),<sup>5</sup> and thus suggesting something not too far from Yeats’s ‘salley gardens.’ O’Nolan gives the originally English name a spurious French flavour by prefixing the particle of nobility, a combination that also permits a translingual

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<sup>3</sup> Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Hopper, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Postmodernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Hanks et al, 558.

pun on the German pronoun *derselbe*, literally 'the same' or, in Irish English usage, 'himself.' The pun thus teasingly identifies de Selby as yet another Mylesean alter ego, while offering a nod also to the memory of James Clarence Mangan, a number of whose poems, translations, and pseudo-translations appeared under the pseudonym 'Selber,' where the German pronoun *selber* likewise means 'the same, himself.'

De Selby can certainly be counted among the direct progeny of Brian O'Lynn, not just of Brian O'Nolan or Flann O'Brien.<sup>6</sup> He experiments, for example, with diluting water, refuses to acknowledge the existence of sleep, and is incapable of distinguishing between men and women.<sup>7</sup> He is of course also close kin to the Myles na Gopaleen of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and while the philosopher's first name is unrecorded, it would not be too surprising if it turned out to be either Brian or Myles. The narrator, though unremittingly obsessed with de Selby, joins the celebrated philosopher's other commentators, who are numerous, in invariably treating his theories with barely restrained ridicule. The satire of mindlessly industrious scholarship devoted to an obviously laughable subject matter – reminiscent of Swift's portrayal in *Gulliver's Travels* of the ludicrously pointless endeavours of the scholars of Lagado – can certainly also be read as a Mylesean satire on the Joyce industry, already long since burgeoning.

O'Nolan's penchant for onomastic games is given very free rein in the case of de Selby's commentators. They fall into two groups, the plodders and the oddballs. In the first group we find 'the little-known Swiss writer, Le Clerque,' characterized as 'usually inoffensive,' his name a variant of the French *clerc*, which in older usage meant 'scholar, learned man' in addition to 'cleric' and 'clerk,' thus in all cases a harmlessly meek and mild man of letters.<sup>8</sup> We encounter Le Fournier, a 'reliable' and 'conservative' commentator, whose name originally designated a 'baker' in Old French, one who transforms raw dough into digestible bread: Le Fournier's task as critic is clearly to transform raw data into digestible arguments.<sup>9</sup> And we also meet Bassett, whose name literally means 'of low stature,' from the Middle French *basset* ('short') – a form most familiar in English in relation to the basset hound, which my *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* happily defines as 'any of an old French breed of short-legged slow-moving hunting dogs with very long ears and crooked front legs.' Bassett's physical characteristics are left undisclosed, but the image of the short-legged big-eared

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<sup>6</sup> See Patrick O'Neill, 'Mylesean Onomastics: Games Names Play (Part I),' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 3.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 147, 166, 167.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 171.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 166.

slow-moving hunter doggedly pursuing his scholarly prey is not at all inappropriate for a member of his high calling.

Among the oddballs, Hatchjaw, it emerges, was once arrested for the less than usual crime of impersonating himself: his fellow commentator du Garbandier once even implied that ‘Hatchjaw was not Hatchjaw at all but ... another person of the same name.’<sup>10</sup> Be that as it may, Hatchjaw, who eventually comes to an unhappy if undetermined end under indefinitely sensational circumstances, bears a name that can be read as combining *hatch* (Old English *hæcce* ‘gate’) and *shaw* (Old English *sceaga* ‘thicket, copse’), onomastically characterizing his work on de Selby as a portal into an intellectual thicket. Such etymological considerations notwithstanding, we may also note that at one point one of the titular policemen, Sergeant Pluck, ‘took out an enormous pipe and when he stuck it in his face it looked like a great hatchet.’<sup>11</sup> A little later the narrator ‘saw him take the hatchet from his jaws in surprise and knot his brows into considerable corrugations.’<sup>12</sup>

Then there is du Garbandier, ‘the mordant Frenchman,’ characterized also as ‘eccentric’ and ‘sardonic,’ who is suspected by Hatchjaw of being ‘merely a pseudonym adopted for his own ends by the shadowy Kraus.’<sup>13</sup> Readers may choose to see du Garbandier’s name as being a derivative of the Old French *garbe* (‘wheatsheaf’), thus designating a person who gathered and bound wheat into sheaves, mirroring the scholar who gathers miscellaneous items of data and arranges them into structured arguments. Finally, there is ‘the credulous Kraus,’ ‘usually unscientific and unreliable,’ whose name is derived from the German adjective *kraus*, which on one level means merely ‘curly-haired’ but on another ‘confused, muddled.’<sup>14</sup> Bassett, for his part, suggests that ‘the shadowy Kraus’ did not in fact exist at all, ‘the name being one of the pseudonyms adopted by the egregious du Garbandier.’<sup>15</sup> So much for scholarship, scholars, and, by heavy implication again, the ridiculous Joyce industry.

Among the narrator’s own peculiarities is the fact that he is dead. Having savagely murdered old man Mathers for his money (to finance the publication of a scholarly study on de Selby), and having been murdered in his turn by his own villainous accomplice Divney (who has less scholarly ambitions), the unnamed narrator enters, all unaware of his own demise, into an *Alice in Wonderland* world whose reality is drastically different

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 171, 172.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 92, 93, 168.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

from that of the world he has unwittingly left. For example, to repeat, he now no longer seems to *have* a name.

'All people have names of one kind or another,' he reflects, having just discovered that he has completely forgotten his own. 'Some are arbitrary labels related to the appearance of the person, some represent purely genealogical associations but most of them afford some clue as to the parents of the person named and confer a certain advantage in the execution of legal documents.'<sup>16</sup> Namelessness also has its advantages and disadvantages. As Sergeant Pluck explains, 'if you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist.... On the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you.'<sup>17</sup> By the same token, of course, you can also be hanged whether you are guilty or innocent, and nothing will officially have happened – in fact, you cannot die.<sup>18</sup> De Selby, unsurprisingly, has 'an interesting theory' on names, regarding the earliest names as deriving from 'crude onomatopaeic association with the appearance of the person or object named – thus harsh or rough manifestations being represented by far from pleasant gutturalities and vice versa.'<sup>19</sup> Like all of de Selby's theories, this one seems to hold neither in the real world nor in the world of *The Third Policeman*.

As mentioned in Part I in the discussion of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the name Sweeny is an anglicization of the Irish *Suibhne*, where *suibhne* means 'pleasant'<sup>20</sup> – and is the opposite of *duibhne*, meaning 'surly,' which in turn is the origin of the name Divney. And John Divney is the narrator's evil genius – appropriately the root adjective *dubh* includes among its meanings not only 'black' but also 'malevolent, morose, bigoted' – for it was Divney who encouraged him to murder Mathers and 'was personally responsible for the whole idea in the first place. It was he who told me to bring my spade. He was the one who gave the orders on the occasion.'<sup>21</sup> The tempter Divney's name even shares its opening syllable with the devil of demotic Irish English, the *Divil* himself.

As for the three titular policemen, 'there is Sergeant Pluck and another man called MacCruiskeen and there is a third man called Fox that disappeared twenty-five years ago and was never heard of after.'<sup>22</sup> The first of the three to be encountered by the narrator is Sergeant Pluck. While the surname Pluck can be found in larger telephone

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Edward MacLysaght, *The Surnames of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1980), 281.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

directories (an internet search revealed 166 persons of the name listed in the United States, but none in Ireland), the name is relatively uncommon. In a Mylesean context the proliferating possible meanings of the sergeant's name seem to partake of the mad logic of the proliferating lists of possibilities so favoured by the sergeant and his associates.

To begin with, the name suggests perhaps most obviously the kind of moral fibre, courage, and fortitude an officer of the law should ideally have – but it also denotes the interior organs of slaughtered animals, especially when served as a culinary delicacy. In addition, the *OED* helpfully adds that the noun *pluck* can also refer *inter alia* to the fact of failing to pass an examination; to a small rope attached to a bell-rope; to a particular kind of fish; or to a two-pronged fork with teeth at right angles to the shaft, used for moving dung. In colloquial Irish English, *pluck* refers to a chubby cheek (as of a baby) for kissing. In Irish, *pluc* (similarly pronounced) refers not only to a cheek but also to a swelling, bulge, or knot; to a flock or herd; to a mouthful of something; to a pull or drag on a cigarette; or to the calf of the leg<sup>23</sup> – as well as to a cheeky expression; to the bows of a boat; to a heavy swell on the sea; or to a pucker in a piece of cloth.<sup>24</sup> In Scottish Gaelic, the corresponding noun *ploc* (again similarly pronounced) can refer variously not only to a cheek once again, especially if chubby or swollen, but also to a large clod of earth or turf; to a club or bludgeon with a round or large head; to the head of a pin; to a block of wood; to the short stump of a tree; to a bung or stopper; to a block or pulley; to the hump of a hunchback; to a potato-masher; or to a blockhead.<sup>25</sup> Or to a case of mumps.<sup>26</sup> All that's missing is any reference to a bicycle – though even here the herniated bulge of an inner tube through a damaged tyre would presumably qualify as an Irish *pluc*.

Policeman MacCruiskeen, our second constabulary stalwart, is stamped by his (invented) name as literally the 'son of a cruiskeen,' which one might take either as indicating congenital familiarity with the tools of the publican's trade or else as suggesting his mad inventions as the product of an intoxicated imagination, a drunken fantasy – with an implied nod, of course, to *Cruiskeen Lawn* and its author Myles, as well as to de Selby, for the narrator observes that the writings of de Selby 'have a heart-lifted effect more usually associated with spirituous liquors.'<sup>27</sup> Appropriately,

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla. An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1927), 849.

<sup>24</sup> Niall Ó Dónaill ed. *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla. Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair*, 1977), 959.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*. Eleventh Edition (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1993), 727.

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm MacLennan, 1979. *A Pronouncing and Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* (1925: Stornoway: Acair; 1979), 258.

<sup>27</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 92. See too O'Neill, 'Mylesean Onomastics (Part 1)'

MacCruiskeen the inventor thus has something of the nature of a genie from a bottle, capable of performing amazing feats but always on the verge of teetering out of control, and thus needing to be treated with great care if disaster is to be averted – as Policeman Fox could presumably testify. As it happens, of course, the narrator, the narrator's father, and the narrator's father-substitute and evil genius John Divney are all associated with the public house in which the narrator spends his boyhood years, a 'son of a cruiskeen' himself, surrounded indeed by cruiskeens, lawn and otherwise. An onomastic link is thus established between the narrator and MacCruiskeen, whose literally unbelievable inventions are also strongly reminiscent of the outlandish ideas of de Selby, with whom the narrator is in turn obsessed. Onomastically, in other words, de Selby is not necessarily alone in being *derselbe*, 'the man himself.'

Despite the title, the first two policemen occupy far more textual space than the third, Policeman Fox, whom the narrator meets only in the final chapter. Fox, in fact, is rarely seen by anyone and, according to the Sergeant, carries out his constabulary duties only under cover of darkness.<sup>28</sup> According to the Sergeant again, he has been 'as crazy as tuppence-halfpenny and as cranky as thruppence' since looking into one of MacCruiskeen's little boxes many years ago and losing his reason as a result of what he saw there, namely a colour previously unseen by any mortal eye and impossible of rational apprehension by any mortal brain.<sup>29</sup> Fox has a name that refers playfully to his nocturnal lifestyle, to his having gone to ground, to his role as a hunter (if mainly of stolen bicycles or their accoutrements), and to his craftiness and cunning, the latter a characteristic associated with foxes in fable and folklore from Aesop to Beatrix Potter and beyond. Policeman Fox's craftiness is evident in the fact that when the narrator finally meets him for the first time, Fox is operating a private police station whose existence is suspected by nobody, including his constabulary colleagues, and which is situated not *in* Old Mathers's house but literally 'inside the walls' of it.<sup>30</sup> His role as a hunter is evident, at least for the narrator, in the fact that, to the latter's horror, he also has the face of the murdered Old Mathers himself. This particular Fox, however, as Sergeant Pluck asserts, is himself 'as mad as a hare,' a comment that gestures simultaneously to the March Hare of *Alice in Wonderland* and to the *Uncle Remus* stories of the 1880s by Joel Chandler Harris.<sup>31</sup>

A fourth policeman, an Inspector O'Corky, puts in a two-page cameo appearance in the seventh chapter, momentarily tempting the reader, as Keith Hopper observes,

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 154.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

to conclude (erroneously) that he is the anticipated titular third policeman.<sup>32</sup> Only a transient visitor, however, O’Corky’s name humorously suggests that he may have temporarily strayed from Corca Dorcha and the world of *An Béal Bocht*, onomastically stamped as a constabulary scion of a race (Irish *corca*) dwelling in a bog (Irish *corcach*) – and possibly not too far distant in his origins from the boggy county of Cork (Irish *Corcaigh*).

J.C.C. Mays has pointed out the degree to which characters and locations in *The Third Policeman* continually merge into one another – as they had already done in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: ‘Policeman Fox into Mathers, most obviously, but both of them partially into the controlling, contriving narrator, just as the pub merges into the barracks into Mathers’s house, the narrator into de Selby into Policeman MacCruiskeen.’<sup>33</sup> And indeed, ‘the third policeman contains the first two just as the narrator of the whole book moves within a universe of de Selby.’<sup>34</sup>

One fundamental question remains unanswered concerning this swirling through-the-looking-glass world of intermingling identities and its shape-shifting denizens: if the narrator is indeed irrevocably trapped in a hell that ‘goes round and round,’ how and where and when does he find the time to write his story, and for whom is that story intended?<sup>35</sup> In narratological terms, one answer has to be that the apparent narrator is not the real narrator at all, but merely – and MacCruiskeen would certainly approve – a ventriloquist’s dummy in the hands of a hidden narrator manipulated in turn by the implied author (alias the man himself, alias *derselbe*). Which might help to explain why the figure we have so far taken to be the narrator seems to feel in his soul (otherwise known as Joe) that his name needs to be just as exotic as de Selby’s and contain the elements *beniamino* (roughly, ‘his father’s favourite son’) and *bari* (literally, ‘you are cheating’).

<sup>32</sup> Hopper, ‘Portrait,’ 130.

<sup>33</sup> J.C.C. Mays, ‘Brian O’Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination,’ in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan*, ed. by Timothy O’Keeffe (London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe, 1973), 90.

<sup>34</sup> Mays, ‘Brian O’Nolan,’ 91.

<sup>35</sup> O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 200.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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