

MYLES NA GCOPALEEN

a portrait of the artist as a Joyce scholar

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Even if James Joyce was *persona non grata* for the vast majority of Irish people in the decades before and immediately after his death, the Joycean absent presence on the Dublin literary scene was hard to miss. As Niall Sheridan put it in his 'Brian, Flann and Myles', 'Joyce of course, was in the very air we breathed'.¹ To some extent Brian O'Nolan managed, at least initially in his career, to rise to the challenge of writing successfully despite the massive shadow of Joyce. *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is, for all its debt to *Ulysses* (1922), triumphantly Flann's very own, very unique work. Its initial critical and popular failure is to be blamed far more on World War II than on the various reviews that compared it negatively and with monotonous regularity, with Joyce's work. Undoubtedly, however, it can also be argued that the pre-emptive Joyce presence became an increasingly tough one for O'Nolan to negotiate, particularly during the long silence that followed *An Béal Bocht* (1941), after his own novelistic career hit a wall so early on with the failure to publish *The Third Policeman* (1967; written 1939–40). To a large extent, Joyce became a useful scapegoat against whom O'Nolan could vent his literary frustrations and one to whom critics all too readily rushed in order to do the same in their belated attempts to render Flann some retrospective critical justice.

This essay will not follow the tradition of comparing the two authors with the inevitable conclusion that O'Nolan is a lesser writer, crippled and consumed by Joycean anxiety. A cursory glance at much of the early criticism of his work, written in the 1970s and 1980s, shows that too much of it was cast in these terms. Joseph C. Voelker stated that 'O'Brien must have thought of Joyce as his inescapable brother',² while Thomas B. O'Grady saw *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a wilful

'un-understanding', a 'misreading' caused by the 'high anxiety' of the 'belated' writer who refuses to allow his precursor's view of life and letters to stand unchallenged'.³ M. Keith Booker described O'Nolan as a 'lesser Joyce',⁴ while John Wain claimed that Joyce was O'Nolan's 'ultimate master'.⁵ In a similar vein, Joseph Browne reduced O'Nolan's career to an 'attack, trying to fly beyond his imagined, ineluctable Joycean nets [with] his heart going like mad saying yes I said yes I will yes'.⁶

In this essay I would like to examine Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen's attempts to come to terms with his Joyce inheritance by focusing mostly on Myles's writings in *The Irish Times* in the decades following Joyce's death. But first a proviso. The title which mentions Myles as a 'Joyce scholar' would probably have made him bridle: Joyce's writings, in his view, suffered at the hands of well-meaning but almost invariably misguided scholars. Perhaps a better description of his own role in Joyce reception would be a more variegated 'portrait of the artist as a Joyce reader/promoter/critic/defender/survivor'. O'Nolan played all of these roles and all jostle for position in his musings on Joyce written under a variety of pseudonyms. His *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns express a curiously ambiguous mixture of disdain and admiration for Joyce's writings (if not for Joyce the man), but are almost always hostile towards the growing army of (mostly American) Joyce critics. They were written in a context of general support and appreciation for Joyce in *The Irish Times*. For example, in 1940 'this year of disgrace', an editorial in the paper backed the proposal, penned by Padraic Colum, M. Eugène Jolas and Thornton Wilder, that Joyce should be awarded the Nobel Prize. According to the editorial:

Joyce's contribution to literature is great beyond question and, while the supporters and antagonists of his new styles of expression may be divided as fiercely as any bands of religious fanatics, Joyce undoubtedly, as the recommendation says, has brought a new range of human experience into literature and in presenting that range has created a new technique for the novel. It is to be hoped ardently that a 1940 Prize for Literature will be awarded and we need not say how much we hope that, in these barren days of European culture, the winner will be an Irishman. There are thousands of people of sincere literary taste who regard Joyce as one of the greatest expressive writers of all time, who believe that his work is the first fruit of a new rich harvest in the world's literature; and, if

the Nobel Prize for Literature should be awarded to James Joyce, his honour will be shared alike by all his countrymen.⁷

Back in 1940, Myles does not appear to have had much to say about this proposal. However, some twenty years later, on 25 July 1962, he wondered why Joyce had not received the prize and suggested he would have been glad of it, if, for nothing else, for financial reasons. Furthermore, Joyce might have done the world a good turn and deprived an American of the honour:

Notwithstanding his origin, he was a creature of the European mainland while Faulkner was a nuisance from the Deep South, where one of the accepted sports is shooting niggers. Joyce would have been delighted to get that award, for a greater toucher and bummer never wore shoe-leather, even if his desultory slippers were of canvas.⁸

The following day Myles argued that Joyce was 'of more general world significance than either Yeats or Shaw',⁹ thus seeming to endorse the Joyce claim over those of the two Irish laureates.

What most appealed to O'Nolan was, very simply, Joyce's humour and his 'almost supernatural skill in conveying Dublin dialogue'.¹⁰ However, like many other supporters, he remained disenchanted with much of the later part of *Ulysses* and with all of *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Writing as Flann O'Brien in *The Irish Times* in 1962, he complained:

The supreme act of thumb-nosing, however, is the whole of 'Finnegans Wake'; here the reader is presumed to embark modestly on a course of study, interpretation and humble guesswork, since mere reading does not arise. I seriously doubt whether anybody has got through that book, or earnestly attempted to do so. I personally bought it on publication and had given it away within a fortnight.¹¹

This mixed reaction from Myles needs to be contextualised and can probably be attributed to two principal elements. The first is that not all of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns were written by O'Nolan himself. A significant number were written by his close friend Niall Montgomery. In the article reporting Montgomery's death in *The Irish Times*, the anonymous journalist rather delicately drew attention to this fact by noting his contributions to the *Cruiskeen Lawn*: 'It is a little known fact that he would occasionally write O'Nolan's "Myles na Gopaleen"

column for *The Irish Times* when Myles was indisposed'.¹² As Carol Taaffe shows in her brilliant *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (2008), 'Myles' was a construct of at least two writers – of Brian O'Nolan *in primis*, but also of his friend Niall Montgomery. According to Taaffe, O'Nolan did not write all or possibly even most of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns concerned with Joyce; Montgomery did – although it seems impossible today to apportion precise responsibility for individual columns (15, 163–166). In many ways, Montgomery had far more in common with Joyce than O'Nolan would ever have and he was arguably better equipped to offer criticism of his work. A leading architect as well as a part-time poet and sculptor, he had, like Joyce, been a pupil at Belvedere College S.J. He became president of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland in the mid-1970s and was hugely critical of Irish self-government which had brought, in his words, 'a cultural disaster' for Dublin: 'While hearts and minds are officially dedicated to the oneiric ideal of a Gaelic-speaking Ireland, a blind eye (literally) is turned to the country's sole 40-year old aim, i.e. profit'.¹³ Even more than Myles, he was part of the system in Ireland but at the same time deeply critical of its limits. Under his own name, Montgomery also contributed pieces to *The Irish Times* and beyond, which are written very much in the Myles idiom, such as the following article, which takes issue with American Joyceans:

In fact Ireland is not a poor country and Dublin, though it lacks the Babylonian splendour of Cork, is not quite the leper-haunted shantytown the Joyce pilgrims come to see. ('What ails James?' his father is reported to have asked. 'Is the boy all in it?'). [...] Perhaps Mr Joyce, member of a Cork family which overshot the town and landed in lower Drumcondra, never really saw Dublin. Drumcondra yes and the suburban fields! [...] But nowhere in his writing is a sign that he saw, much less enjoyed, the city's rare architectural quality, its urbanity.¹⁴

While Montgomery was anxious to claim back Dublin from Joyce, he was also anxious, like his fellow Irish Joyce critics and enthusiasts, to treat the author with a certain amount of aloofness, if not disdain, in order to maintain an independent stance which, he felt, American critics lacked in their mixture of scholarly excess and critical adulation. 'Idolatry' is the word used in an unsigned *Irish Times* review of Herbert

Gorman's *James Joyce: A Definitive Biography* (1941). The reviewer complains of 'an adulatory and uncritical approach to Joyce's work' – with, it must be said, some justification in this case.¹⁵ In a later piece, written in 1962, Montgomery concluded:

Mr Joyce is misnamed; he is joyless, despite the fun, sensorial not sensual. [...] Wilde speaks of those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing; Mr Joyce knew the meaning of everything and the enjoyment of nothing. To him, Dublin was people, but Dublin's Dublin is something more than the singing pub-crawlers and the economy-type brothels he describes. And so he can write of '... the grey block of Trinity on his left ... a dull stone set in a cumbrous ring'. And there I love him.¹⁶

Montgomery made a significant contribution to *Cruiskeen Lawn's* opining on Joyce and many of the more negative takes on Joyce seem to be in the columns he wrote rather than those penned by O'Nolan himself. At the same time, O'Nolan presumably never disapproved of Montgomery's views to the extent that he felt the need to correct them. In short, it seems that Montgomery, although he would go on to write critical scholarship explicating Joyce, was actually the more anti-Joycean of the pair. As early as 1941, Montgomery was praising Seán O'Faoláin, 'whose prose has done so much to lead literature out of the *cul-de-sac* which James Joyce built for it',¹⁷ an opinion that O'Nolan, with all his open antagonism towards O'Faoláin, was most unlikely to have endorsed. Myles's treatment of Joyce, it should be remembered, is positively benign when compared with his opinions on his closer contemporaries, Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin.

The second reason for the mixed reaction to Joyce in *Cruiskeen Lawn* is that the column was to some extent the fruit of O'Nolan's discussions with his intimate circle of Dublin friends, all of whom had axes to grind with Joyce. More often than not the ideas that would appear in Myles's columns had their initiation in the pub or were honed in conversation there. To a man (and they were all men), O'Nolan's drinking colleagues held deeply mixed feelings over Joyce and all his works. Even John Garvin – secretary of the Department of Local Government (where he was also O'Nolan's superior) but also one of the first Irishmen to pen a book of Joyce criticism¹⁸ – is riddled with doubts over Joyce, whom he believed had a 'talented but sick mind'. Anthony Cronin captures Garvin's attitude well:

the most remarkable thing about his first book on Joyce should be the (to all appearances life-long) hostility it exhibits towards its subject. He illustrates his criticism with reminiscences and anecdotes which he has evidently been at pains for a very long time to collect and not one of them is intended to do other than degrade Joyce in the reader's eyes. His favourite word for the author of 'Ulysses' is 'solipsist': and nowhere does he show any clear realisation of what Joyce's stature as an artist was. [...] Dr Garvin is at positive pains to show that Joyce was not only a misguided writer who merely indulged his own 'association mania' but in some ways a very unpleasant one as well.¹⁹

Cronin quotes Garvin:

My own opinion accords with that of Stanislaus who wrote, 26th February, 1922: 'I suppose "Circe" will stand as the most horrible thing in literature . . . Everything dirty seems to have the same irresistible attraction for you as cow-dung has for flies'.²⁰

It would be wrong, however, to reduce Garvin to the role of a purely puritan critic of Joyce. He was, as Donal Foley pointed out, 'a man of Victorian taste and temperament' but one, like his friends in 'literature-minded groups, particularly in the Smyllie club – a sort of Johnsonian coffee-house', nevertheless fascinated by the ghost of Joyce, which 'was an inescapable quarry for debate and disorder'. Garvin's attempt to come to terms with Joyce's works was life-long, 'there was no stopping John on his journey into the labyrinths constructed by an extraordinary genius'.²¹ Although Brian/Flann/Myles never took the trouble Garvin took with Joyce, much of this description fits him well: the Victorian taste and temperament that was so much part of his make-up often clashed with its counterpart, the devilish amusement he derived from stoking debate and creating critical disorder.

If, on the one hand, there is an openness, on the other, there was a conservative, anti-intellectual resentment among these Irish Joyceans, who were almost inevitably middle-class, Dublin-based, Church-going and all very much part of the power élite in the country, even if they were often critical of and at odds with, the crushing political closure of the times. Men like Donagh McDonagh, a district justice, Denis Devlin, a civil servant in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Garvin himself, were all inherently conservative. Joyce, it might be argued, was probably not well served by these 'supporters', who were conscious of

his significance on the world stage, but were riddled with doubts and prejudices arising from a collective annoyance at Joyce's self-containment, his obsession with his authorial self, his voluntary exile from Ireland and the increasing difficulty and supposed obscenity of his works roughly from the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses* on. Montgomery, for instance, spoke for many when he declared that he found 'the Nighttown episode and the Molly Bloom interior monologue shocking',²² by which he meant dirty and licentious.

Whatever their doubts, Montgomery and Brian O'Nolan were amongst Joyce's most important supporters in Dublin. In 1954, they supported the founding of the James Joyce Society, which had been initially proposed in a letter to *The Irish Times* by R. Shelton Scholefield. Scholefield was, in the words of Seamus Kelly in his *Irish Times* Quidnunc column, 'a decent Dublinman called Sam Suttle'.²³ Kelly encouraged this appeal in his column and received 'a most heartening response'. Those interested enough to write inquiring about the projected society covered Ireland from Clonakilty in Co. Cork to Castleblayney in Co. Monaghan. Oddly, there were no letters from north of the border – probably the only writer recognised there is the great and late Amanda M'Kittrick Ros'.²⁴ Within months, a group had been assembled to organise and participate in Dublin's first Bloomsday celebration. In the words of *The Irish Times* journalist, the

oddest 'pilgrimage' Dublin has ever seen took place on June 16. [...] In a vintage cab Joyce devotees and one distant relative of the writer visited all the places mentioned in the book to mark the 50th anniversary of 'Ulysses day'. The rest of Dublin took no notice.²⁵

According to Quidnunc:

The original Council, as far as I remember, was made up of Suttle; Niall Montgomery; the blushing violet who writes authoritatively about Joyce over the nom-de-plume of Andrew Cass; Dr C.P. Curran, Joyce's friend and contemporary; Lennox Robinson; the present writer [Seamus Kelly] and a transient called Ernie Anderson. Anderson, an American who had spent a great many years in Europe, was included because he was one of the few Americans who had ever come to Dublin without claiming that he knew Joyce well in his Paris days. Again from memory, I'm pretty sure that another member of the first council was the hydra (or malta) headed monster who calls himself Myles na Gopaleen, Flann O'Brien or Brian O Nualláin.²⁶

Brian O'Nolan was there, but, like the rest of the coterie, he had his doubts. Doubts that stretched back to this group's formative years in Dublin. There is a sense of a disoriented generation of writers and intellectuals who, in the thirties and forties, looked to later Joyce as the only light at the end of the tunnel, but a light that blinded as much as it illuminated. A light that was dazzling in both senses of the word. In UCD during the 1930s, something of a cult of Joyce formed, led by figures such as Charles Donnelly, Donagh MacDonagh, Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey, Niall Sheridan, Liam Redmond and Brian O'Nolan.²⁷ These writers had few models at home capable of expressing anything like an alternative to the vision of a Catholic-Nationalist Ireland that was increasingly predominant, but in Joyce and especially in the biting humour of the Joyce of *Ulysses*, they found a writer who gave expression to their own desires to mock and rebel. They did not, however, engage in any kind of simplistic hero-worship and were very much engaged in finding their own space and form as writers while at the same time leading public attempts to celebrate their great predecessor in Ireland. It could well be argued that part of the difficulty of Joyce's reception in his own country lay in the fact that those same figures willing to celebrate him – all writers attempting to establish themselves – were also suffering in his shadow, a shadow they themselves did much to lengthen.

A repeated trait of the criticism of Joyce by this 1930s generation was its assault on the Joycean cult of personality, of individual achievement. In 1962, Flann O'Brien wrote of Joyce's 'boundless intellectual arrogance allied with apparent contempt for the reader's taste or convenience'.²⁸ Often, it might be argued, O'Nolan took Stephen for Joyce and gave Joyce little credit for always being a step ahead of his earnest creation. Joyce, for O'Nolan (here writing as Myles), erred towards presumption when making his works too literary, too experimental:

Joyce's attainment on the positive side was that he was a truly great comic writer and, conversely, that he could be as affected, arid and boring as the late Charles Garvice.²⁹ He often committed that least excusable of follies, being 'literary'. His attempted disintegration, dissipation and demolition of language was his other major attainment, if you can call it that. What would you think of a man who entered a restaurant, sat down, suddenly whipped up the tablecloth and blew his nose in it? You would not like it – not if you owned the restaurant. That is what Joyce did with our beloved tongue that Shakespeare and Milton spoke.³⁰

At some level, O'Nolan could never forgive Joyce for abandoning real-life responsibilities at home in Ireland in order to serve his art by living abroad. An art divorced in this way from real, domestic and even national life, O'Nolan could not fully condone. It was little more than a game divorced from lived experience, the fruit of one obsessive, individual, egotistical imagination. Such obsession was never an option for O'Nolan or his acquaintances, who initially conceived of their literary endeavour in a more collective manner. Niall Sheridan's memoir makes it clear that he considered himself part of a group of writers and he invokes O'Nolan's proclamation that 'the principles of the Industrial Revolution must be applied to literature. The time had come when books should be made, not written – and a "made" book had a better chance of becoming a bestseller'.³¹ Thus Sheridan, O'Nolan, Donagh MacDonagh and Denis Devlin planned to collectively write 'the Great Irish Novel' to be called *Children of Destiny*.³² As writers they would attempt to follow a very different model to that of the heroic individualism lived by Joyce to the point, they believed, of approaching madness. As Anthony Cronin has written, Joyce's

challenge would be defused by making him a mere logomachic wordsmith, a great but demented genius who finally went mad in his ivory tower. Admittedly he was a great low-life humorist as well, but he was one whose insensate dedication to something called art would finally unhinge him. (52)

The collective 'Great Irish Novel' to rival or at least outsell *Ulysses* never got written, but Sheridan would play a crucial role in 'correcting' Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.³³

If this group saw Joyce as 'great but demented' they looked to the growing army of Joyceans as simply demented. While supporting Joyce's enterprise, most of these writers resented the so-called 'Joyce industry' that was consolidating in the United States. Joyce should be brought back down to earth, returned to Dublin where he belonged and where his works could find a readership capable of understanding him. Only 'Irish' readers could adequately understand the author and 'get' the vital humour in his work. This was the belief that underpinned the 1951 special issue of the Irish literary periodical *Envoy*, commemorating the tenth anniversary of Joyce's death and reflecting the attitudes and opinions of his fellow countrymen towards their illustrious compatriot. This volume, edited by O'Nolan, sought to claim

Joyce for Catholic Ireland and for Dublin. The contributors brought what they could bring to the international debate – and what they brought, essentially, was an innate understanding of his Irish Catholic background and his deep connections with all aspects of Dublin life, which they too knew instinctively and intimately. Theirs was a legitimate pitch to win a role in Joyce criticism and reception internationally with the only hand they had to play and it was also an attempt to wrestle the writer out of the hands of the professional academics and claim him for the real or hoped-for province of ‘the Plain People of Ireland’, the so-called ‘common reader’.

The grudging tone is set by the editorial note, ‘A Bash in the Tunnel’, penned by O’Nolan – calling himself, in this instance, Brian Nolan. In his note, Nolan voices his reservation about Joyce’s self-absorption and his choice of exile, his intolerance of the astonishing self-belief and arrogance that allowed Joyce to put his artistic mission at the centre of his entire life. In a mixture of defensive posturing, faint praise and open disparagement, Nolan celebrated Joyce’s humour and his linguistic playfulness with a description which can also be applied, perhaps more fittingly, to his own work: ‘Humour, the handmaid of sorrow and fear, creeps out endlessly in all Joyce’s work. [...] With laughs he palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic. True humour needs this background urgency’ (SP, 208). Like Patrick Kavanagh, O’Nolan emphasises Joyce’s Catholicism, claiming that he ‘emerges, through curtains of salacity and blasphemy as a truly fear-shaken Irish Catholic’, rebellious towards the Irish Church instead of God or the Church as a whole (SP, 207). Later, in 1962, as Flann, he would argue:

His readiness to parade obscenity and blasphemy is commonly accepted as evidence of a complete break with the Catholic Church or any other form of Christian belief, yet few other writers dealing in serious matters display such dour preoccupation with the faith and awareness of its dark side. It is obvious that Joyce was no agnostic. Blasphemy can be taken as an inverted affirmation of belief and he was, *malgré lui*, an apostle of sorts. An attitude of abiding ambiguity was dear to his heart. I suspect he was a deeply religious man and certainly his personal morals have never been called in question.³⁴

Not for the first time, O’Nolan’s pronouncements read more like a self-portrait than an accurate or even fair depiction of Joyce and his religious

position. At best the commentary can be read as wishful thinking on O'Nolan's behalf. But it was a position that he persisted with, dragging it back up in *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), where he has Joyce himself describe *Ulysses* as a 'dirty book, that collection of smut'. O'Brien's Joyce discloses that Sylvia Beach was in love with him and had *Ulysses* 'concocted, secretly circulated and [had] the authorship ascribed to [him]' in order to make him famous. Joyce finds the bits of *Ulysses* which he has read 'artificial and laborious stuff', 'pornography and filth and literary vomit' (CN, 762-763) and will only admit to having written *Dubliners* with Oliver Gogarty (who subsequently gave him a bad name with his 'scurrilous and blasphemous tongue') and some religious pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CN, 761).

O'Nolan's *Envoy* article, on the other hand, concludes, more felicitously, by celebrating Joyce's innovativeness and playfulness:

Perhaps the true fascination of Joyce lies in his secretiveness, his ambiguity (his polyguity, perhaps?), his leg-pulling, his dishonesties, his technical skill, his attraction for Americans. His works are a garden in which some of us may play. All that we can claim to know is merely a small bit of that garden.

But at the end, Joyce will still be in his tunnel, unabashed. (SP, 208)

In *The Dalkey Archive*, Mick Shaughnessy, a Catholic civil servant like O'Nolan himself, gives a largely analogous assessment of Joyce:

I have read all his works, though I admit I did not properly persevere with his play writing. I consider his poetry meretricious and mannered. But I have an admiration for all his other work, for his dexterity and resource in handling language, for his precision, for his subtlety in conveying the image of Dublin and her people, for his accuracy in setting down speech authentically and for his enormous humour. (CN, 697)

A good description, this, of Joyce, but once again a better portrait of its own author as an older man who shared with Joyce a brilliant ability to render with extraordinary humour the patterns of Dublin speech.

Sometimes O'Nolan enjoyed being bracketed with Joyce. He stated, more than once, that he had met Joyce in Paris, although there is, of course, no evidence to suggest that such a meeting actually took place. In 1950, he claimed that Joyce had asked him 'to make some confidential inquiries on business and family matters' but refused to produce

evidence of this.³⁵ He also never hesitated to report when others associated him with Joyce, as when nationalist critic Daniel Corkery attacked them collectively in 1947. Myles's riposte reads as follows:

Professor Daniel Corkery is a man after my own heart. [...] Recently he put out an article on Peasants, wherein he had many digs at the expense of myself and James Joyce (i.e., Ireland's non-peasant class). We are called 'Philistines' and elsewhere there is mention of 'corner-boys', no doubt again our good selves, for it is only in cities one finds corners. Well, time will show whether we merited such reproaches. At least Joyce and I never compromised in our detestation of people who cannot exist without being 'from' somewhere; *we were here*, that's all and in our early university days we were rowing men.³⁶

O'Nolan never missed an opportunity to mock Corkery and his two most distinguished disciples from the Cork school of letters, Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin; in particular to accuse them of provincialism and of not having the wit to take certain Joycean pronouncements with a necessary pinch of salt. The following is but one of many humorous examples:

On March 6, 1903, Mr James A. Joyce, then living in the city of Paris, made this note in his journal, haunted apparently by the fear that he might forget it [...]:

'There are three conditions of art, the lyrical, the epical and the dramatic. That art is lyrical whereby the artist sets forth the image in immediate relation to himself; that art is epical whereby the artist sets forth the image in relation to himself and to others; that art is dramatic whereby the artist sets forth the image in immediate relation to others . . .'

Joyce was a great joker as we all know, but Mr O'Connor seems to take this piece of solemn drool and translated it into . . . Irish, is it? – thus:

'But drama is of a younger house. Poetry is about yourself and other people in relation to yourself; drama is about other people and only about yourself in relation to other people; and it is only occasionally that the subject which makes for poetry also makes for drama . . .'

How felicitous that first 'only'! *Seo ceist* – if Shakespeare as a young man had known Corkery, would he have written *The Mirchint of Ennis*? Would Turgeniev have written *A Nest of Simple Folk*?³⁷

O'Faoláin and Myles are referring to Joyce's pronouncements in his very early Paris notebook, while the latter enjoys a literary joke with his allusions to Shakespeare and to O'Faoláin's *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1933), the title of which was openly derived from Turgenev's *A Nest of Gentle Folk* (1858).

The Joyce with whom Myles identified was very different to the figure he saw emerging in the sometimes-pious academic criticism he deplored. He admired the Joyce who challenged the stultifying political and religious *status quo* in Ireland, whose writings engaged with and put it up to, 'the Plain People of Ireland', of whom, in many ways, Myles always felt he was a member. He was little interested in the very different Joyce that was emerging from America through the work of successive generations of critics led by the likes of Stuart Gilbert, Harry Levin, Richard Ellmann, Adaline Glasheen and Hugh Kenner. In June 1949, he warned his readers of the '4,000 strong corps of American simpletons now in Dublin doing a "thesis" on James Joyce'.³⁸ He was still at it ten years later when the publication of Stuart Gilbert's *Letters of James Joyce* led him to rail against those 'poor demented punkawns' responsible for 'a veritable deluge of thremendious illiteracy foaming' over 'Joyce's pedantry, aridity and tourdeforcicity',³⁹ before returning to the subject two years later to denounce the 'shower of gawms who erupt from the prairie universities to do a "thesis" on James Joyce'.⁴⁰ On another occasion he suggested that

the Irish Government would be in order in refusing a visa to any American student unless he had undertaken, by affidavit on oath, not to do a 'thesis' on James Joyce and subsequently have it published as a book. All literature has been defaced by so many such abortions.⁴¹

On 7 July 1953, Myles announced that no less a personage than Richard Ellmann was in town to complete the 'grim task' of writing a book on James Joyce. If Ellmann tries to contact him, Myles pledges, 'I guarantee I will frighten the life out of him by the disclosure of the state of *my mind*'.⁴² In 1958 Myles addressed 'the latest item in the silly American "literary" drip about James Joyce', Adaline Glasheen's *A Census of Finnegans Wake*:

The book goes right from A to Z through all the difficult words in Finnegan, a book I have not read and do not intend to: I am not too sure that Mrs Glasheen has read it either, though she may have

examined it with her literary tongs for the purposes of dissertation for a yankee Ph.D. [...] Only Americans can write like this and the title pages remind me that it is published originally by Northwestern University, so I suppose there must be cowboys lurking in the purple sage.⁴³

Even as Irish a critic as Vivian Mercier gets tarred with this brush in a review of a book about Joyce 'to be published soon in America'. According to Myles's review:

Joyce, it seems, had a hand in the Koran. Ah, yes. He also did the Aeneid, the Bhagavat-Ghita, most of Dante's stuff, King Lear, all the quartets of Beethoven as well as a few things of Seumas's. (There's not a word, however, about him founding the Mount Street Club, the Hammond Lane Foundry and the old Theatre Royal! Or about doing the frescoes in my study at Santry!) This book is published as far as I can make out by two Americans Mr Seon Givens and Mr Vivien [sic] Mercier and it's called JAMES JOYCE: *Two Decades of Criticism*.⁴⁴

Myles was certain that Joyce would have shared his views on the matter of 'Joyce scholars':

I do not think I have ever heard or read comment on Joyce's work that did not seem to me to be fundamentally mistaken and the man himself – whom I once met – was by no means the last to be amused by the pre-occupation he had become with eggheads. He disliked Americans, as do most Europeans.⁴⁵

For all his annoyance and perhaps envy at all the attention Joyce was receiving, O'Nolan greatly identified with the older writer's use of humour and parody which was used with such great effect to undermine Irish pieties. In a *Cruiskeen Lawn* column titled 'J-Day', Myles complains that 'parts of "Ulysses" are of unreadable boredom' before celebrating the novel's humour, writing of 'the utterly ignored fact that Joyce was among the most comic writers who have ever lived. Every time I get influenza I read about the Citizen and his Dog; penicillin has nothing on them'.⁴⁶ Perhaps his straightest appraisal of Joyce, published under his Flann O'Brien pseudonym, is the commemorative piece titled 'Enigma', which was written to mark the opening of the Sandycove Tower as a museum in 1962. Again he mixes complaint with celebration, describing the 'Oxen of the Sun' episode of *Ulysses* as 'tedius [sic] and boring', claiming that the 'Nighttown episode does not seem to

justify its complexity and tortuousness', while applauding Joyce's 'achievement as a superb comic writer', which derives from an 'uncanny accuracy in recording the idiom and idiosyncrasy of Dublin speech'.⁴⁷

Much of the ambivalence to be found in the column is reiterated in *The Dalkey Archive*, where O'Nolan resurrects his old quarrel with Joyce as though seeming not to realise that it was a battle he had already won, having himself written a body of work deserving of the utmost respect on its own terms. He does himself few favours in this last novel, staging what is a funny if slightly juvenile form of revenge on Joyce, who is considered as a 'holy Mary Ann' by his neighbours, by leaving him at the Jesuit house in Leeson Street. By this point in the novel, Joyce, reduced to being utterly harmless, has been renamed as James Byrne and warned not to mention his murky past to the Jesuits. Mick's final remarks show O'Nolan gleefully borrowing the metaphor of paralysis from Joyce as he describes him in a death-like state. Joyce is 'unnaturally still in his chair, as if dead [...] Mick thought furiously in this situation of paralysis' (CN, 779). O'Nolan has finally got Joyce where he wants him, trapped, as Dotterer puts it, in his own 'archival fiction [...] locked in a paralytical, pious humility'.⁴⁸

But if this was a victory it was pyrrhic. If this novel was written to allow O'Brien to run free, sadly he had very little running left to do. *The Dalkey Archive*, a flawed and uneven novel, was published in 1964 and O'Nolan would die just two years later. Furthermore, he claimed to have been less than satisfied with how he dealt with Joyce in the novel, writing: 'I'm not happy at all about the treatment of Joyce: a very greater mess must be made of him. Would one of his secret crosses be that he is an incurable bed-wetter?'⁴⁹ This dissatisfaction with the take-down of Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive* would suggest that O'Nolan's Joyce anxiety was one he never fully removed. Much as he loved to hate him, O'Nolan remained convinced by his sense of Joyce's vast achievement and did that same achievement much service throughout his career, arguably at a cost to his own literary ambitions.

As his own life lurched to a premature close, Brian/Flann/Myles sent out mixed signals with regard to Joyce. Just when he was writing his attack in *The Dalkey Archive*, he was also publicly proposing that Joyce's body should be repatriated.⁵⁰ This idea of bringing Joyce home suggests a sense of closure which contradicts the continued scrapping being enacted in *The Dalkey Archive*. The repatriation letter of 1962, which followed a speech to the same effect and the aforementioned

'Enigma' article of the same year, affords an alternative conclusion to the Joyce-O'Nolan relationship, which tempers the rather antagonistic stance suggested in *The Dalkey Archive*. O'Nolan opens his 'Enigma' piece as follows:

James Joyce is a most unsatisfactory man to try to write about, as he was himself unsatisfactory to talk to, for a queer, ineffable, masked personality has largely eluded those who have written books about him and his work.⁵¹

In a 1938 letter to his literary agent A.M. Heath and Company, O'Nolan characterised *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a 'very queer affair, unbearably queer perhaps'.⁵² 'Queer' is a word that pops up more than occasionally with regard to himself and his work and the qualities O'Nolan ascribes to Joyce in this appraisal apply with equal aptness to himself – indeed it is almost as if he is directly describing himself in this piece. And in a way he was. His row with Joyce was, in more ways than one, little more than a mask for his own deeper and more personal life-long battles as a writer, battles he both lost and won.

60 Ute Anna Mittermaier, 'Charles Donnelly, "Dark Star" of Irish Poetry and Reluctant Hero of the Irish Left', in David Clark and Rubén Jarazo (eds), *'To Banish Ghost and Goblin': New Essays on Irish Culture* (La Coruña: Netbiblo, 2010), p. 191.

61 Wyse Jackson, 'Introduction' (MBM, 8).

7. McCourt: A Portrait of the artist as a Joyce scholar

- 1 Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', in Timothy O'Keeffe (ed.), *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1973), p. 39.
- 2 Joseph C. Voelker, 'Doublends Jined: The Fiction of Flann O'Brien', *Journal of Irish Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1983, p. 94.
- 3 Thomas B. O'Grady, 'High Anxiety: Flann O'Brien's Portrait of the Artist', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 2, 1989, p. 205.
- 4 M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 30.
- 5 John Wain, 'To Write for My Own Race', *Encounter*, July 1967, p. 85.
- 6 Joseph Browne, 'Flann O'Brien: Post Joyce or Propter Joyce?', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 19, no. 4, Winter 1984, p. 157.
- 7 'The Nobel Prize', editorial, *The Irish Times*, 16 October 1940, p. 4.
- 8 CL, 25 July 1962, p. 8.
- 9 CL, 26 July 1962, p. 8.
- 10 CL, 6 June 1957, p. 8.
- 11 Flann O'Brien, 'Enigma', *The Irish Times*, 16 June 1962, p. 10.
- 12 'Death of Mr Niall Montgomery', *The Irish Times*, 13 March 1987, p. 8.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 Niall Montgomery, 'Dublin's Dublin', *The Irish Times*, 16 June 1962, p. 10.
- 15 'Two Irishmen: James Joyce and John McCormack', unsigned review, *The Irish Times*, 22 March 1941, p. 5.
- 16 Montgomery, 'Dublin's Dublin', p. 10.
- 17 Niall Montgomery, letter published in *The Irish Times*, 12 July 1941, p. 6.
- 18 John Garvin, *James Joyce's Disunited Kingdom and the Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976).
- 19 Anthony Cronin, 'Life-Long Devotion', *The Irish Times*, 12 March 1977, p. 8.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 D.F. (Donal Foley), 'Dr John Garvin: An Appreciation', *The Irish Times*, 5 April 1986, p. 19.
- 22 Niall Montgomery is quoted making this comment in an article signed 'Irish Times Reporter' titled 'Judgements on Joyce and Proust', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 1962, p. 4.
- 23 Quidnunc (Seamus Kelly), 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 16 June 1962, p. 10.
- 24 Quidnunc, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 1954, p. 5.
- 25 *The Irish Times*, 26 June 1954, p. 9.
- 26 Quidnunc (Seamus Kelly), 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 16 June 1962, p. 10.

- 27 See Peter Costello, 'James Joyce and the Remaking of Modern Ireland', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 93, no. 370, 2004, pp. 121–132.
- 28 O'Brien, 'Enigma', p. 10.
- 29 Charles Garvice (1850–1920) was a prolific and hugely popular author of romance novels who, despite being perhaps the most successful author of his day in England, was subjected to regular ridicule by literary critics for his melodramatic and formulaic style.
- 30 *CL*, 7 July 1958, p. 6.
- 31 Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', pp. 72–81.
- 32 *ibid.*, pp. 41–44.
- 33 Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), pp. 76–77.
- 34 O'Brien, 'Enigma', p. 10.
- 35 Peter Costello and Peter Van de Kamp, *Flann O'Brien: An Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury 1987), p. 24.
- 36 *CL*, 18 June 1947, p. 4.
- 37 *CL*, 17 December 1948, p. 4.
- 38 *CL*, 9 September 1949, p. 4.
- 39 *CL*, 6 June 1957, p. 8.
- 40 *CL*, 3 January 1959, p. 9.
- 41 *CL*, 20 December 1961, p. 8.
- 42 *CL*, 7 July 1953, p. 4.
- 43 *CL*, 7 July 1958, p. 6.
- 44 *CL*, 18 August 1948, p. 4.
- 45 *CL*, 7 July 1958, p. 6.
- 46 *CL*, 16 June 1954, p. 4.
- 47 O'Brien, 'Enigma', p. 10.
- 48 Ronald L. Dotterer, 'Flann O'Brien, James Joyce and *The Dalkey Archive*', *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, Summer 2004, p. 63.
- 49 Robert Hogan and Gordon Henderson (eds), 'A Sheaf of Letters', *Journal of Irish Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1, January 1974, p. 82.
- 50 Flann O'Brien, 'Bringing Joyce Home', letter, *The Irish Times*, 20 June 1962, p. 7.
- 51 O'Brien, 'Enigma', p. 10.
- 52 Letter from O'Nolan to A.M. Heath & Co., 31 January 1938, Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, File No. 243.

8. Walker: *The Third Policeman* and the writing of terror

- 1 'The Death of Detective O'Sullivan', *The Weekly Irish Times*, 22 June 1929, p. 17.
- 2 'Blown to Pieces in County Clare', *Irish Independent*, 13 June 1929.
- 3 'Brutal Murder says Coroner', *Irish Independent*, 14 June 1929 <<http://www.garda.ie/honour/default.aspx>> (20 February 2014).
- 4 Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 56–57.
- 5 See David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Terror in Ireland: 1916–1923* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012).