

2014-04-30

## Never Myles from the News: the 'Meta-Journalism' of Myles na gCopaleen

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### Recommended Citation

Kilroy, Ian (2014) 'Never Myles from the News: the 'Meta-Journalism' of Myles na gCopaleen', Keeble, Richard Lance and Tulloch, John (eds) *Global Literary Journalism Vol. 2*, New York: Peter Lang.

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## Never Myles from the News:

### The 'meta-journalism' of Myles na gCopaleen

By Ian Kilroy

Author, satirist, critic, civil servant and cynic, Brian O'Nolan (1911-1966) was a man of many masks. Writing under a plethora of *nom de plumes* throughout his career, he was at times the novelist Flann O'Brien, at others the cult Irish journalist Myles na gCopaleen. Under this latter name (Irish for 'Myles of the Little Ponies'<sup>1</sup>), he produced one of the funniest and longest running columns in Irish journalism. His 'Cruskeen Lawn' slot in the *Irish Times* ran regularly from 1940 until his death in 1966. At over three million words of filed copy (Wheatley 2011: 3), it stands as a monument in Irish newspaper culture.

In recent years, O'Nolan's work has seen something of a revival. And this thanks in part to the popular HBO television series *Lost*, where O'Nolan's greatest novel, *The Third Policeman*, figured in the plot and resulted in 15,000 copies of the work being sold in the three weeks after the relevant episode's broadcast<sup>2</sup>. However, the success of his literary fiction was entirely overshadowed in his lifetime by his journalism (Cronin 1989: vii). Indeed, as Anthony Cronin points out in his biography of the writer, during O'Nolan's life, what is his most celebrated work in fiction today remained unpublished, with his fading reputation as a novelist resting on his earlier work, *At-Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). This mad, experimental book, with four separate beginnings and with characters borrowed from other sources, is a work some now see, with *The Third Policeman*, as the first great post-modern novel (Hopper 1995: 226). Indeed, as we

will see, many of the experiments introduced in the book found their way into his later work for the *Irish Times*.

But if O'Nolan's fame during his lifetime came largely from journalism, it has subsequently been secured by the enduring success of the novels. Indeed, with the habitual snobbery that the academy has for journalistic literary production, O'Nolan's journalism, along with his alcoholism, has been faulted for diverting him from the really important business of writing fiction. This thesis, as formulated by the Canadian literary critic Hugh Kenner, runs 'Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the Column?' (Kenner 1989: 255). And this critical judgment has persisted, to the detriment of what was the writer's greatest obsessive preoccupation: his 3,000 plus columns for the *Irish Times* (Young 1997: 112).

The column began life with a series of letters by O'Nolan under various pseudonyms to the *Irish Times* in 1939. They concerned a satirical, irreverent discussion of contemporary Irish cultural life and proved very popular with the paper's readers: so much so that RM Smyllie, the newspaper's editor at the time, invited O'Nolan to contribute a regular column from the autumn of 1940 on. At first, it was envisaged that the column would be entirely in Irish, O'Nolan being fluent in the language, having been brought up in an Irish speaking household (Costello & Van De Kamp 1987: 28). And in the early days of *An Cruiskeen Lawn*<sup>3</sup>, Irish was the dominant language. However, within a few weeks of the column's first appearance on 4 October, 1940, O'Nolan was contributing a mixture of English and Irish, before *An Cruiskeen Lawn* began, within a few short months of publication, appearing almost entirely in English, the dominant language of the unionist, ascendancy readership of the paper.

By this period, the Irish language had associations with political, even republican nationalism – associations that had been lacking earlier, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a language, it was associated with Douglas Hyde's 'Deanglicization of Ireland' project (Kiberd

1996: 136-154), a catalyst for the emergence of a cultural nationalism in late nineteenth century, early twentieth century Ireland that was the leverage behind securing political independence from Britain; an independence finally achieved in 1922 (see note below). Indeed, Hyde was later one of O'Nolan's lecturers at University College Dublin.

But the question is, what was an Irish language column doing in the *Irish Times*, widely viewed as the organ of the Protestant, unionist minority (Horgan 2001: 6); a minority that had found itself marooned in the new Irish state? Cronin sees the column's commissioning as a strategy by the editor to extend the paper's reach:

It was Smyllie's ambition to reduce the dependence of the *Irish Times* on the Protestant Unionist readership, which was diminishing every day; to make it the organ of the more liberal and more intellectual elements in the new state; and to modify its west British outlook accordingly. He wanted to show that it was not against the Irish language but only against the chauvinism and hypocrisy that went with it (Cronin 1989: 112).

O'Nolan appears to have had similar attitudes to the language as his editor. In his very first column (*Irish Times* 4 October, 1940: 4) he reacts to a piece by the paper's leader writer arguing that the language is not equipped with a modern vocabulary up to discussing modern life, including the worldwide conflict then gathering apace. But in defending the usefulness of Irish as a modern language, O'Nolan simultaneously pokes fun at Irish and the language movement. He invents a comic family, meal-time conversation utilizing Gaelic equivalents for the terms 'air raid', 'incendiary bomb' and 'non-aggression pact', for example. While defending the subtlety and breath of the language, he does so in comic terms. Irish was a noble, holy linguistic vessel to the language revivalists of the Gaelic League. Comic use of the language was just too much for them and a slew of letters complaining about his column filled the letters pages of the *Irish Times*. While he had some defenders, much of the tone saw the unionist mouthpiece as being disrespectful of the native language (Clissmann 1975: 184).

Quite simply, O'Nolan's sophistication as a passionate language enthusiast was too much for those that had not reached the maturity of his ironic position. The appalled reaction to his debut column in the letters pages set the tone for the reception of O'Nolan's journalism for the succeeding decades. And while the identity of the real Myles na gCopaleen remained known only to a small elite of insiders, in the public sphere Myles's notoriety grew with each succeeded, acerbic contribution.

### **The Man Behind the Mask**

The man behind this mask was the Strabane, Co Tyrone, native Brian Ó Nualláin, as he was known in his Irish speaking home. The third child in a family of 12, O'Nolan's father, Michael, was a university-educated, Customs and Excise Officer in the Ulster town; while his mother, Agnes, came from a merchant family that had a shop on the town's high street. Michael Nolan was himself a writer, although secretly, having had a novel well received, although ultimately rejected by the publisher Collins. Also, Brian O'Nolan's uncle, Michael's brother, had a relatively successful play staged by the Abbey Theatre in 1920. So, writing was always there in the background as Brian grew up – as was alcohol; with Michael O'Nolan's primary responsibility being to collect tax revenue from the almost 100 local whiskey distilleries. As for O'Nolan's mother, she came from a family with close associations with the Irish language revival of the Gaelic League, a movement her husband was fanatical about. And the whole question of the language would prove to be one of the great preoccupations of the writer's life (Costello & Van De Kamp 1987: 25).

Brian O'Nolan was still a boy when Irish self-governance was secured after a bloody War of Independence (1919 – 1921). And by that time the somewhat nomadic life of the family of a minor government official became more settled, with the family settling in Dublin, as Brian's

father secured a job with the Revenue Commissioners. The writer's education with the Christian Brothers of Synge Street, in Dublin, was through, if brutal, as he later recalled in *An Cruiskeen Lawn*. But he soon escaped the brothers and was enrolled in Dublin's respected Blackrock College, a school for which he had an enduring affection throughout his life.

He went from there to University College Dublin (UCD). And if early signs of his exuberant brilliance and literary bent were shown at Blackrock College, they really came to the fore in his second year at UCD, especially in the heated evenings of debate held by the college debating society, in which he was active. He also made his first forays into journalism at UCD, contributing regularly and editing for a time the college paper. But even here he hid behind a mask: that of 'Brother Barnabus'. And before he had left college he had also started writing in Irish for the De Valera, Fianna Fáil-founded paper, the *Irish Press*: this time under his own name. While not supporting any specific political party throughout his life, O'Nolan's motivation in writing for the paper was no doubt financial. The press work certainly provided him with some income while he finished his Masters on Irish nature poetry at UCD – work he undertook after a short sojourn in Germany in 1933.

In 1934, O'Nolan, his brother and some of his heavy-drinking, UCD cronies launched a short-lived magazine balled *Blather*. Essentially satirical in nature, in it can be found the juvenile prototype of the Myles na gCopaleen voice and register. Modelled on the English equivalent *Razzle*, it's first editorial proclaimed its purpose:

As we advance to make our bow, you will look in vain for signs of servility or for any evidence of a slavish desire to please. We are an arrogant and depraved body of men. *Blather* doesn't care. A sardonic laugh escapes us as we bow, cruel and cynical hounds that we are. It is a terrible laugh, the laugh of lost men. Do you get the smell of porter? (Cited in Cronin: 1989: 72)

*Blather* promised 'entirely new levels in everything that is contemptible, despicable and unspeakable in contemporary journalism'. With its undergraduate aesthetic, it aimed to be

wholly cynical and ironic. However, without securing any advertising for any of its five issues, it folded quickly. What it demonstrated, however, was O'Nolan's ever present commitment to journalism. *Blather* shows the writer conceiving himself as a journalist as much as a novelist. But the failed experiment of *Blather* left him with few choices, and in 1935 he applied for a position in the Civil Service. His application was successful and he secured a position in the Department of Local Government. On his first day in July, 1935, he was required to sign the Official Secrets Act, and documents relating to 'Civil Servants and Politics' and 'The Use of Influence by Civil Servants' (Cronin 1989: 74). Henceforth, the mask of Myles would be essential. And by letting that mask slip in 1953, he would later forfeit his job.

### **An Cruiskeen Lawn**

The celebrated column itself was probably modelled on JB Morton's 'Beachcomber' column, which ran in the *Daily Express* for 50 years (McNally 2011: 2). In his weekly, or tri-weekly slot, Myles let his imagination run amok. Plot, coherence, consistency, character development or reasoned argument were all dispensed with. As a newspaper column, O'Nolan stretched the definitions of journalism. Indeed, as McNally has noted, Cruiskeen Lawn was as much an artistic project as a newspaper column, continuing the artistic ambitions of the author's experimental novel, *At-Swim-Two-Birds*.

Its greatest character was the supposed creator himself... By his own accounts, Sir Myles na Gopaleen was several hundred years old, having been born in Montevideo in 1646 and in various other times and places since, including London's Paddington Station in the 1860s... He had been present at many great historic and scientific events: studying music under Scarlatti, collaborating with Einstein and helping Clemenceau restore order to France after the first World War (McNally 2011: 2).

The riotous brilliance of Cruiskeen Lawn introduced its readers to a cast of characters in its first few years of publication that remained stalwarts of the column in succeeding decades. The leader of the Irish Writers, Actors, Artists and Musicians Association (WAMMA), for example, who concocted hare-brained schemes to address philistinism in Irish cultural life. These included a service that made ventriloquist escorts available for society people attending the theatre. The escort in question would throw his or her voice to make it appear their client was making intelligent conversation in public. Different conversations were available at various rates. But, in later columns, the whole scheme went awry when the ventriloquist escorts rebelled, forcing darlings of society to pay out or be embarrassed in public with a shaming statement that appeared to issue from their lips. Another example of the inane services available from WAMMA is the book handling project, whereby nouveau riche, vulgarians could have their newly acquired library books handled to appear used and read. Again, various rates applied, and for an extra fee notes like "Yes, but cf. Homer, Od., iii, 151", or "Nonsense, nonsense!" could be scribbled in the books' margins, to make their pages appear well perused.

The philistine voice of 'The Plain People of Ireland' also regularly interjected in the column: the purpose being to make a display of the erudition of Myles in contrast to the ignorance and stupidity of the people.

The Plain People of Ireland: How about those jokes?

Myself: Well wait till I see. Would you say that the cousin of the French Pretender is the Duc de Guise?

The Plain People of Ireland: Whaa? (O'Nolan 1968: 93)

That Myles punned not only in English and Irish, but also in French, German, Latin and Greek served only to display his superior intelligence and contrast it with the common man. Evidently subscribing to the modernist aesthetic of appealing only to an elite audience,

O'Nolan had found an apt home in the *Irish Times*. With a circulation of 32,421 in March 1953, compared to the Irish Independent's 203, 206, the mouthpiece of the Protestant minority and emerging, liberal intellectual class was a small affair when compared to the organ of the conservative, Catholic majority (Horgan 2001: 62). In addition, the references of Crusikeen Lawn were frequently only recognisable by a small in crowd, and quite deliberately so.

To a large extent, what attracted the *Irish Times* readership to the column was what they believed to be its strictly esoteric character. It was meant for the initiated. Only they knew the background to many of its jokes; only they were familiar with the types who were the models for its characters; only they could appreciate the subtle accuracies of its dialogue... the column was almost wholly writ to intellectual Dubliners (Cronin 1989: vii).

Indeed, the ephemeral nature of some of those references has rendered many of the columns opaque to a reader today. Like all journalism, Cruiskeen Lawn was concerned with contemporary events and culture. The 'Research Bureau' and its off-the-wall inventions reflect a time when goods and machinery were hard to come by, in an isolated, neutral country during 'the emergency', as World War Two was known in Ireland. The Bureau's innovations would make jam out of second-hand electricity (O'Nolan 1968: 125) or light the street lamps by tapping sewer gas (O'Nolan 1968: 116). These were jokes with contemporary relevance that can still be enjoyed today for their comic inventiveness. The bores and know-it-all characters Myles brought into his column are types we've all met, bringing to the column the comedy of recognition. And while the transient nature of certain references in the irreverent arts and cultural criticism of the column leave a reader cold today, the comic delight taken in playing with language, as well as the searing critique of those that misuse language, make much of the column readable all these years later.

While George Orwell seems to have been unaware of his contemporary, he might have appreciated his 'Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliché'. But where Orwell's critique of the

politics of language was serious-minded and rooted in political convictions, Myles appeared unburdened by such concerns. Yet if Orwell was right, and clarity of language could lead to political regeneration, then Myles was on side with his Catechism.

What may one do with a guess, provided one is permitted?

Hazard.

And what is comment?

Superfluous. (O'Nolan 1968: 206)

Rather than the deadly language of the cliché, this 'murder of my beloved English language' (O'Nolan 1968: 207), Myles was much more attracted to the liveliness of the pun. Indeed, through the characters of the poet Keats and his sidekick Chapman, he would go to whatever dexterous lengths proved necessary to arrive at a one-liner. Take his pun on the Hiberno-English expression 'drop of the craythur', for example, meaning a 'drop of whiskey'.

Keats and Chapman once climbed Vesuvius and stood looking down into the volcano, watching the bubbling lava and considering the sterile ebullience of the stony entrails of the earth. Chapman shuddered as if with cold or fear.

'Will you have a drop of the crater?' Keats said. (O'Nolan 1968: 183)

Language itself, then, is the great subject of *An Cruiskeen Lawn*; language, its uses and abuses. Whether it be in the satirical treatment of legalese in his bawdy 'District Court' sketches, or the mock technical terminology of the steam engine enthusiast in the 'Steam men' pieces, the joke always turns on a phrase. And this send up and deconstruction of language included all registers of its use. Often, it was the newspaper itself that provided the modes of discourse that were being satirized. The specialist jargon of court reports; the clichés of film

reviewers; the familiar chatty tone of women's columns – as Young has noted, all are absorbed, transformed and reinserted back into the newspaper by Myles. This makes Myles a unique type of satirist, says Young, one 'whose work remains embedded in the very thing it attacks' (Young 1997: 118).

Indeed, *An Cruiskeen Lawn* can be seen as a kind of 'antijournalism', in the way that *At-Swim-Two-Birds* is a kind of 'antinovel', conceived by O'Nolan quite a few years before Jean-Paul Sartre coined the term for the *nouveau roman* (Webster 1995 :58). The structures and modes of journalistic discourse are being disrupted and taken apart in his work. If the characteristics of the antinovel are a work that stretches to transcend the form in which it sets out, then Myles does quite a similar project with his journalism. The key notes are parody and pastiche. Coherence is eschewed in favour of sudden transitions and jilting transformations in the narrative. The realistic aesthetic that lies at the very foundation of journalistic reportage is ruptured, where plot and character are inconsistent, unreliable and subject only to provisional truths. Even the controlling personae of Myles himself is unstable, offering numerous possible explanations for his birth and origin, his lifespan, occupation and social status. It is journalism as a Bakhtinian romp, excessively extravagant in possibility, making the literal meaning of *An Cruiskeen Lawn*, 'the small, brimming jug', apt in the column's narrative excursions and generous linguistic colour. A colour that was markedly in short supply in the Ireland in which the column was produced.

### **In the Clutches of the 'Sea-Cat'**

In '100 Myles', the special supplement published by the *Irish Times* to mark the centenary of O'Nolan's birth, journalist Fintan O'Toole reminds his readers of the terrible, monstrous creature that is described and graphically illustrated in the only novel published by O'Nolan under the Na gCopaleen name. The 'Sea-Cat', depicted in *An Béal Bocht* (The Poor Mouth), is

a terrible beast with 'ill luck attending it'. As sketched by the novel's protagonist, it is clearly a map of Ireland, drawn on its side in such a way that the monster walks on the island's four western peninsulas. As O'Toole sees it, 'O'Brien, almost alone among the great writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland, fell into its clutches. He stayed in Ireland and paid a fearful price in frustration and neglect.' For O'Toole, it is the post-revolutionary dissolution, with its philistine culture, poverty and sexual repression that spawned Myles in his many incarnations (O'Toole 2011: 1). For the leader writer of the *Irish Times*, however, Myles 'supplied readers of the column with daily laughs throughout two-and-a-half of modern Ireland's grimmest decades' (Irish Times: 1 Oct 2011).

The context in which O'Nolan was writing his journalism was the Fianna Fáil dominated Saorstát Éireann, the Irish Free State, which had been set up when O'Nolan was a boy. That France had fallen to the German onslaught in June 1940 had little effect in Dublin, apart from mainly urban discontent at wartime stringencies (Lee 1989: 239). Taoiseach Éamon de Valera had declared Ireland neutral. It was a move that was widely supported by the Irish population, as it saved a country impoverished from a decade of economic war with Britain from embarking on a disastrous conflict. However, it also ensured that Ireland remained isolated in cultural and political terms, a situation Lee argues had been the reality for some time.

Ireland had already intellectually isolated herself in large measure since independence. Her links with the outside world were mainly confined to Britain and the Vatican. She had some contact with the United States at a personal level, but little at an intellectual level. She might envy American consumption standards. She had no intention of trying to emulate American creative capacity (Lee 1989: 261).

This intellectual isolation was further reinforced by a severe censorship regime. Since 1929, literary works that were deemed to be obscene or morally corrupting were banned in Ireland. What raised the ire of the censor most often were depictions of sexual intimacy – leading

O'Nolan to exclude sex entirely from his first novel, where characters are conveniently and comically born at an advanced age. The same is true of his journalism, where, for example, Sir Myles, after being buried for some months, is exhumed.

The grand old man was alive and well, and looked extremely fit as he stepped from the coffin. 'Never again,' he said as he jested with reporters before being driven away in a closed car ... The Register-General, to whom the grand old man then had recourse, has refused to issue a fresh birth certificate on the grounds that the applicant could not be born at the age of eighty-one... (O'Nolan 1968: 158-160)

O'Nolan is doubly duping the censor by circumventing even conception and birth in his writing, while infusing a good dose of cutting irony into the mix.

The context is also one where the press has been subject to vigorous censorship since the start of 'the emergency' (Horgan 2001: 42-48). The *Irish Times* was the only paper to put up any serious resistance, resulting from 1942 in the entire paper being subject to complete pre-publication censorship. An *Crusikeen Lawn* often alludes only obliquely to the global conflict. And on the subject of censorship, the cranky, cantankerous Myles even at times appears to support it, suggesting that man has not proven himself mature enough to not need guarding like an infant (O'Nolan 1968: 255-256).

The tone of the column, nevertheless, was not one that lent itself to obscenity, overt political partisanship or offence. And it was never used by either O'Nolan or his paper to circumvent the censor. The irony was most often written with large brush strokes, the Irish nation as a whole being the target of its satire, rather than discernible targets that might offend officials in the censor's office. So, for example, the Fianna Fáil doctrine of self-sufficiency (Lee 1989: 184), which was once motivated by ideology rather than the need of wartime shortages, was clearly the target of the 'Research Bureau' columns. Each inane invention made fun of the isolated economy of Ireland, while celebrating the native inventiveness that tried to deal with the situation. As for the 'Steam Men' columns, while sending up train-spotting types, they

simultaneously celebrated the great inheritance of the Irish railways, while lamenting their shabby treatment since independence.

As historians Joe Lee and Terrance Brown have written, the Ireland Myles inhabited was a country in economic decline. Like its railways, it was growing increasingly shabby. Emigration, especially to Britain, was rife throughout the decades *An Cruiskeen Lawn* was being written. As Brown notes, from 1936-46, an estimated net emigration of 187,000 was recorded. And in the 1950s, this just increased. For instance, from 1951-56, emigration rose to 197,000 (Brown 2004: 174). For those that were left behind, there was a sense of stagnation about the country. Ireland was a place to leave, rather than to commit to. It was intellectually repressive. It failed to value or recognize its indigenous talent. It offered little opportunity. The arrival of the industrial dream, imagined by Irish civil servant TK Whitaker and future Taoiseach Sean Lemass, was still some way off. For Myles na gCopaleen, Ireland was a stultifying backwater, and philistine to boot.

A truer impression of the times emerges when one reflects ... on the frustrated, unhappy histories of three of the country's most gifted writers, who scarcely found the attractions of an insecure, bohemian existence in the pubs of Dublin in the 1950s adequate compensation for lack of public appreciation of their real artistic ambitions and of financial support. Indeed, each of the careers of Patrick Kavanagh, Brian O'Nolan, and Brendan Behan shows the terrible marks of years of public indifference or misunderstanding. (Brown 2004: 225)

The bitterness of this reality sometimes found its way into the journalism. For what was meant to be a funny column, at times its hue was distinctly dark. Sir Myles is presented occasionally as a misunderstood genius, a depressed character, as he has to tolerate the imbecility of the people among whom he lives. But more often it is the comic and the satirical that is to the fore. And here O'Nolan is an individual author at home in a distinctly native tradition.

The Irish tradition of satire, to which Myles belongs, arguably originates with the great Dean Swift (1667-1745). Works like *A Tale of the Tub* (1704) and *A Modest Proposal* (1729) see the public sphere providing an outlet to satirize the ills in society, while adopting the voice of the concerned, civic citizen. In the latter work, Swift proposes a solution to Irish poverty that Sir Myles himself would have been proud of in its grotesqueness: that the Irish poor sell their children to the rich as food. It is a proposition argued with a logic similar to that which informed some of Myles's more outlandish proposals. And like these Swiftian tracts, O'Nolan's column was aimed at engaging a public than might not be reached in strictly literary works. Class him as a modernist or early post-modernist, this engagement with journalism marks O'Nolan off from many other serious writers of creative prose in his era.

What set the Irish modernists off from their Continental counterparts was their marked willingness to engage with newspapers. Yeats's voluminous journalizing fills the two largest of his published volumes ... [Jonathan Swift] had shown by his brilliant polemics that it was quite possible to close the gap between journalism and art. (Kiberd 2000: 464)

This gap between journalism and art is a liminal space worth considering. It is the space occupied by 'literary journalism', by work that aims to be both current and engaged with society, while remaining simultaneously work with a eye on the future, with an eye to posterity. Indeed, this dichotomous distinction may be considered by many post-modern commentators to be redundant. Nevertheless, it is a dichotomy worth evaluating with regard to O'Nolan, as it keeps rearing its head in the criticisms of his journalistic output.

## **Journalism and Art**

If Myles's journalism is attempting to continue the artistic project of O'Nolan's first novel, *At-Swim-Two-Birds*; and as suggested earlier, if it positions itself as a kind of 'antijournalism'; then can this be considered 'journalism' at all?

Certainly, under the terms outlined as traditional definers of the journalistic by, for example, Jonathan Rabat, *An Cruiskeen Lawn* sits uneasily as journalism. If the journalist aims to 'tell what really happened, as it happened' (Rabat 1987: 165), then Myles's enterprise is doing something entirely different. It is writing that deliberately undercuts its own probability. It is only tenuously a 'literature of fact' (Hartsock 2000: 5). Rather, it revels in unlikely narratives and characterization; inconsistency and improbability. It is playfully 'making things up'. It is not in any sense a report of events as they played out in the actual world. It is instead a distorted reflection of the actual, refracting the real through a distorting prism for purposes of pastiche and parody, in order to achieve the distorted face of a comic mask. So, while the realities of life in 'emergency' Ireland are not addressed in a realistic, faithful way, they are touched upon with satirical intent; when, for example, Myles's know-all 'Brother' character suggests everyone in Ireland go to bed for a week in every month to save resources (O'Nolan 1968: 46). But this is the same Brother that claims to own a talking dog (O'Nolan 1968: 54), that suggests seals from the Irish Sea steal from Dublin gardens at night (O'Nolan 1968: 53), and that secures a job for his dog as a senior Garda, in the Irish police force (O'Nolan 1968: 63).

That the surrealism of the column often made fun of actual events in Irish life is the most that can be said of its relationship to realism. For here the chord that ties the writing to the real and verifiable has been cut. It is deliberately fantastical writing. If 'literary journalism can be presented as a throwback to the idea of a stable text and a stable reality' (Keeble & Tulloch 2012: 8), then *An Cruiskeen Lawn* does not fit the bill. Not only does Myles na gCopaleen move beyond the modernist mode that threatened the realistic narrative in which journalism

has enduring foundations, but it struck out further into the post-modern. Other texts are quoted, incorporated and subverted. The key tones are pastiche, satire and irony. Claims to truth are asserted only to be refuted. Even the author is an unstable entity and not always in control of the fantastical narrative, as others, like *The Plain People of Ireland*, butt in to contest things.

Yet O'Nolan is writing a newspaper column and engaging, from time to time, with matters of national cultural life: be it the visit of John F. Kennedy to Ireland in 1962, post-war urban planning or the arrival of the atomic bomb. With Myles we see that old newspaper tradition of 'the sketch' being practiced. We see interventions on debates over matters of public policy. Riddles are offered for the reader to solve. Suggestions are made that legislators might follow. Myles's 'little brimming jug' is so overflowing that it is hard to quantify or categorize. Maybe it is for that reason that it does, indeed, fit under the term 'literary journalism', as generously defined by Keeble and Tulloch.

We might argue that, rather than a stable genre or family of genres, literary journalism defines a field where different traditions and practices of writing intersect, a disputed terrain within which various overlapping practices of writing – among them the journalistic column, the memoir, the sketch, the essay, travel narratives, life writing 'true crime' narratives, 'popular' history, cultural reflection and other modes of writing – camp uneasily, disputing their neighbors' barricades and patching up temporary alliances. (Tulloch & Keeble 2012: 7)

Certainly, *An Cruiskeen Lawn* touches on many of these genres and sub-genres. But it does more than operate within their boundaries. It resides with ironic distance, spinning a meta-narrative around whatever mode or register it wears as a transparent mask. And this to parody and satirize newspaper styles in all their variety, holding them up to comic scrutiny. What Myles is writing, as Stephen Young has argued, is a 'bizarre newspaper inside the newspaper' (Young 1997 : 118). Myles comments on the leader article, with which *An Cruiskeen Lawn*

shared a page for a time. He makes reference to content elsewhere in the paper. O'Nolan was writing a 'meta-newspaper', as Carol Taaffe has termed it (Taaffe 2008: 137), that can best be understood as a 'meta-narrative', as defined by recent literary criticism with relation to fiction. As cited by Hopper, here is how Jeremy Hawthorn defined the practice in *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*:

Literally, fiction about fiction [...]. It is generally used to indicate fiction including any self-referential element [...]. Metafiction typically involves games in which levels of narrative reality (and the readers' perceptions of them) are confused, or in which traditional realist conventions ... are flouted and thwarted. (Hawthorn 1992: 104)

This revealing, or laying bare of the process of journalism and the construction of the journalistic voice is painstakingly deconstructed by Myles, in, for example, 'The Catechism of Cliché'. In an exercise that would have been appreciated by Orwell, the language of the news itself is blown open, and the debris raked through with a critical eye.

Hopper dislikes the term 'anti-novel', in relation to O'Nolan's fiction (Hopper 1995: 6-7), because of its disparaging focus on the negative, preferring the term 'meta-fiction'. For similar reasons, the term 'meta-journalism' might better describe Myles's literary journalism. But we should not repress any acknowledgment of the critical, bitter and disparaging elements in *An Cruiskeen Lawn* with regard to journalism. As many commentators have noted, the column was increasingly the outlet for a frustrated civil servant, a bitter, disappointed writer, whose best fiction remained unpublished and who remained largely unrecognized for the work that he truly cared about.

This bitterness only intensified after O'Nolan lost his civil service position in 1953 for flouting too openly the binding requirements that were meant to prevent a career civil servant from engaging in public pronouncements. The particulars of the case were that O'Nolan criticised his own minister under the Myles pseudonym – but it was by now an open secret

that Myles and O'Nolan were one and the same. Henceforth, journalism would be more a matter of bread and butter for O'Nolan, than an amusing side-show.

### **The Drink or the Column**

The debate persists of whether O'Nolan's journalism just served to divert the great writer from his life's work. Declan Kiberd sees O'Nolan as the ultimate and final victim of his ridicule.

The final paradox in this story of Mylesian identities lies in the fate of Brian O'Nolan [...]. The author himself became the ultimate victim [...]. So successful was the column conducted thrice-weekly by Myles na Gopaleen in *The Irish Times* that it lasted for over twenty-five years [...]. The cost was massive. Throughout the period, O'Nolan produced no works to equal the brilliance of his three early and major novels [...]. If O'Nolan succumbed early to that temptation to placate his newspaper audience, he did not do so before he had written three comic masterpieces. That is the measure of the immense talent wasted in the service of R.M. Smyllie (Kiberd 1996: 512).

But could it not equally be argued that *An Cruiskeen Lawn* was, in fact, O'Nolan's major life's work? It is a singular achievement in the history of Irish journalism – not only for its longevity and size, but in its experimental nature and innovative technique. If O'Nolan can be credited with a hand in the invention of the postmodern novel, he can also be appreciated for the invention of a 'meta-journalism' that is unique in the practice of literary journalism as a whole. While the allegiance of journalism has by and large stuck with its roots in aesthetic realism, O'Nolan is that rare thing, a literary journalist that moves into the magical realistic, fantastic and surrealist modes of literature. The reason that this remains journalism is because this aesthetic and formal innovation is done while continuing to reflect critically on contemporary events. It is written for a mass, newspaper audience and there is still an engagement with the wider society, even if, admittedly, that audience was limited to a specialist readership in a minority newspaper. As for *An Cruiskeen Lawn* being a diversion from the real work of fiction, the fact that the column is still read today speaks volumes of its

literary merit over time, despite its detractors in the academy. That journalism can become literature, after being journalism first, is a fact made evident by every anthology of great journalism published. O'Nolan's brimming jug promises to be a place where readers go to quench their thirst for many years to come. An Crusikeen Lawn has proven itself to truly be news that stays news.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The name comes from the play *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), by Dion Boucicault. An important character in the play, Myles-na-Coppaleen is the epitome of the charming Irish rogue. Kiberd makes the point that this stage Irish character is being reclaimed, up to a point, by O'Nolan for the Irish. O'Nolan himself always insisted on the translation "Myles of the Ponies", as he could not see why the principality of the pony should be "subjugated to the imperialism of the horse". O'Nolan used a variety of spellings of the name over the years.

<sup>2</sup> See BBC News. 'Lost Revives Irish Novel Interest'. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4746918.stm>. Accessed 8 March, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The name of O'Nolan's column in the *Irish Times*, *An Cruiskeen Lawn* is an anglicization of the Irish *An Crúiscín Lán*. It means 'little overflowing jug', and is the name of a song sung by the Myles character in Boucicault's play.

<sup>4</sup> While the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in December 1921, the Treaty only came into effect in December 1922.

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