

Brian O’Nolan, the Conspirator

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Abstract

Brian O’Nolan, writer and civil servant, wanted the Irish to explore alternative realities and build a new country. He unsettled taken-for-granted relationships between words and things, and used storytelling devices to engage his readers. However, once his status had been achieved, he profited from his ‘specific weight’ in society to launch deeper attacks on conventional beliefs. As a comic writer, he had the duty to criticise society even at the risk of losing benefits. As Bakhtin noted, inertia is maybe the worst social threat. In this respect, comic figures function as actors of solidarity, and keepers of a “culture in common”, in Raymond Williams’s words. Brian O’Nolan the comic writer was a negotiator of change, offering a comfortable and distressing perspective, but in the end not as harmful as that of the ruling class. He let us peep into parallel worlds for the improvement of our understanding of things.

Keywords: Brian O’Nolan, Cruiskeen Lawn, Flann O’Brien, Humour, Journalism

1. Introduction

Conspirator is a nice word carrying negative meanings with it. If we trace back its origins, as Brian O’Nolan himself often loved to do, we might see with some surprise that it meant quite the opposite of today’s usage. In effect, a conspirator (or conspirer) is ‘one who conspires’. According to the OED, to conspire means

[a. F. *conspire-r* (15th c. in Littré) (= Pr. *conspirar*, Sp. *conspirar*, It. *conspirare*), ad. L. *conspīrāre* lit. “to breathe together”, whence, “to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose, plot mischief together secretly”.]

intr. To combine privily for an evil or unlawful purpose; to agree together to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible (esp. to commit treason or murder, excite sedition, etc.); to plot. Const. with, against, to do something. (OED 2009, “Conspire, v.”)

Of course, now it means what we all think it means. But originally, to conspire meant ‘to breathe together’, to be in agreement, which is exactly what my reading of Brian O’Nolan’s works aims to show. Breathing together with his public, feeling the general sentiment and trying to educate people, in sum, is what I think he did in all his years as a writer and journalist engaged in Ireland’s public life.

By using different pen names, styles and techniques, what he managed to do was offer the Irish Plain People different points of view, possibilities of reality, or whole alternative worlds to look at and take inspiration from – fresh breaths, indeed – to drive the stagnant, suffocating and at times staunching cultural atmosphere to a new paradigm: a culture in common for an Ireland united and possibly reconciled.

Brian O’Nolan chose to write under many pen names, or *personas*, to whom what Declan Kiberd said of the characters in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* very well applies: “... in re-enacting the roles of Telemachus and Odysseus, these characters remind us of what peoples have in common across the ages, thereby achieving one of the basic purposes of art, making man feel less alone” (Kiberd 1992, xxix). And of its author: “Joyce believed that a writer’s first duty might be to insult rather than to flatter national vanity” (*ibidem*, xiii).

Writing as Myles na gCopaleen in his “*Cruiskeen Lawn*” column in the *Irish Times*, Brian O’Nolan talks of himself in similar terms: “I sometimes flatter myself that I am a most valuable person (or public institution) because I ventilate certain disquiets and resentments widely held, but mostly by people who have no means of public expression” (O’Nolan 1956).

Who was he, then? More than an author, he was certainly a comic *figure*, since his many personas allowed him to express a variety of points of view in different styles and different media, all linked together by a humorous bloodline. For this reason, he could reach a wider audience than that of a writer like Joyce, who was of course known but could not compete with the scale of a newspaper readership. Thus, he kept in contact with his public for 26 years (from 1940 to 1966, when he died) and influenced their views. To understand how and why he managed to do this, i.e. the ways in which he used humour to trigger social change, we first need a precise definition of humour and humorous writer.

2. *Exploring alternative realities through laughter*

Humour is quite easy to understand at face value. Actually, humour is one of the few things all human beings really have in common, as it regulates the threshold between the physical and the spiritual. *We understand* a verbal or non-verbal situation, and we *show* our reaction through smile and laughter – or frowning, if we disapprove of it. It is almost depressing to list the philosophers, writers and scientists who addressed the nature of humour

and laughter, the list itself being proof of how widely debated (and debatable) the definition of humour is.

Some of these definitions are today considered out of date or simply surpassed by acquired scientific evidence: one example is Bergson, who maintained that we perceive humour, and then laugh, only when we feel superior to others. Nevertheless, hidden in the past, there are also some valuable items still useful for our understanding. In ancient Greece, for example, laughter had a fundamental role in religion. Laughing was a sacred, key process in the rites of Dionysius, where the *komos* – the delirious crowd attending the ceremonies – reached a collective *ekstasis* and breached all rules governing body and mind. Ekstasis does in fact mean exactly 'to stand out' of the limited, corporeal body and seek contact with the divine element. Therefore, laughing and laughter were the privileged means of letting the earthly body into communion with the extra-terrestrial element. It was considered divine because of its mysterious nature, and like all things divine it was revered and respected. During the rites, comedy plays were performed where the actors sought to bring all the audience to this ecstasy of divine union using humour and laughter:

As to the mood in which the drama was performed it was one of Dionysian ecstasy and dithyrambic rapture. The player, withdrawn from the ordinary world by the mask he wore, felt himself transformed into another ego which he did not so much represent as incarnate and actualize. The audience was swept along with him into that state of mind. (Huizinga 1955 [1944], 145)

Johan Huizinga, the great Dutch anthropologist, in his justly famous study on play, *Homo Ludens* (1955 [1944]), frequently links the states of mind in play and humour. Nietzsche, in his work on the birth of tragedy, reminds us that, contrary to what we might intuitively think today, comedy was born first in the humus of Dionysian stage contests. Tragedy arose later, as a sort of counterbalance to a practice that seemed to get out of control to the then regulators (Nietzsche 1993 [1872]). This view on humour passed almost untouched from the Greeks down to the Romans, who were great admirers of Greek culture and exported its values throughout their empire.

The advent of Christianity in Europe brought about a reconsideration of humour as a fundamentally sinful attitude, and today's perception of it is still influenced by this view, at least in the countries where Christianity is still deep-rooted. If laughing at gods in a polytheistic pantheon was permitted and somehow due, now laughing at an all-powerful, single God became forbidden. If anything, for at least a logical reason: any act of communication is an act of knowledge and needs more than one player to be enacted. But if the new God is omnipresent and all-encompassing, there is no possibility of new knowledge because he knows everything and does not need a

second party to enact a communicative play. The ancient Greek and Roman gods laughed, but the one God does not laugh because he is never surprised by anything, so why should we be? In the Middle Ages, continental Europe passed on and reinforced this principle thanks to the strong links between Christianity and the (Roman and then Holy Roman) Empire.

Ireland was an exception, as often happens: in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, Saint Patrick christianised the island and founded many monasteries, but took great care not to admit Ireland to the territories of the Empire or the Papacy. Irish monasteries, under the more relaxed rule of local kings – some of them even setting up their residences in the very monasteries – were thus allowed to flourish and Irish monks turned to saving ancient texts from complete oblivion by copying them. The distance from the bloody wars and invasions that the Continent saw in those turbulent centuries, up until the ninth century at least, provided a relative peace and prosperous mingling of old pagan traditions and new Christian ideals. The good relations and collaboration between kings and monks, together with the distance from strict authorities like the emperor and the Pope, might well be what permitted the ancient tradition of pagan humour to survive the Middle Ages in the Irish texts that came from one of Europe's oldest written literatures. Vivian Mercier devoted a whole study to this entitled *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962), linking the perhaps over mythicized Irish Middle Ages with the existence and persistence of modern Irish spirit and humour.

Some centuries later, Humanism and the Renaissance in Italy and afterwards in Europe brought man and the human disciplines back to the centre: humour was revalued and employed in the arts, albeit as a side dish, rather than a main course, so to say. A debate in modern, scientific terms on the principles of humour only started in the seventeenth century with Hobbes, who in his treatises *On Human Nature and De Corpore Politico* (1994 [1640]) and *The Leviathan* (2008 [1651]) said more or less what Bergson was still saying at the beginning of the twentieth century: we laugh because we feel superior, fundamentally equalling humour with aggressiveness. Later on, other thinkers started to focus on its psychological aspects: the eighteenth century Irish philosopher, Francis Hutcheson, in "Reflections Upon Laughter" (1973 [1725]), was the first to introduce the concept of *incongruity*, still at the basis of today's mainstream theories of humour. In his opinion, laughter is nothing but human response to the external stimuli that are perceived as incongruous, therefore not interpretable according to our existing mental schemes.

A century later, Herbert Spencer, in his "Physiology of Laughter" (2017 [1860]), maintained that the 'energy' running through our nervous system always tends to generate a muscular movement proportional to the intensity of the emotions felt. When the tension reaches a peak that cannot be endured by our muscles alone, we use laughter as an outlet of this surplus energy. And this peak takes place, he says, "when consciousness is unawares

transferred from great things to small” (cited in Koestler 1975, 55). Though incomplete, it is one of the most satisfactory theories so far on the origins of laughter, since it gives a working definition of the foggy threshold between humour and laughter.

Freud was the one who placed the next tile in the puzzle. Even though he only wrote on wit and not on general humour, devoting to the former his famous essay entitled *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud 2002 [1905]), he spent some words on humour in general. He maintained that humour was something out of one's control, unintentional, while wit was an act of will in view of a specific purpose. Wit, for Freud, is the open-eye equivalent of dream, insofar as it operates to circumvent taboos and prohibitions and let tensions out. In a controlled context – jokes normally taking place in conventional, socially accepted places and situations – and through wit, one can let inner taboo contents out without activating Super-Ego censorship. He was then the first to establish a key principle: humour is a social activity and involves aspects of social regulation such as inclusion, exclusion, and bond enforcement.

If humour is not so much a literary device as a social practice with some standardised codifications in literature, some ideas from anthropological and sociological research can be included to clarify the limits of our subjects.

Fabio Ceccarelli is an anthropologist who wrote extensively on chimpanzee societies. In his biosocial study *Sorriso e riso* (Ceccarelli 1988; Smile and laughter), he demonstrates that laughter is used among chimpanzees to mark the inclusion in, or the exclusion from, the elite group. Basically, it is a conventional badge of membership. He argues that human societies are also organized in circles, that elite circles are recognized and institutionalized in all types of societies, and that the pressure to be included in them is a common social phenomenon. Laughter, then, is meant as a unifying signal that corroborates bonds within an elite and decrees the exclusion from the same elite of those who are laughed at and do not laugh together. This is the first known study to me that proposes a link between laughter, culture and society. Because being part of the same group means also to share the group's values and customs or, in other words, culture.

I think it is now quite clear where I am heading. Humour being a subject where so many giants of human thought failed, I think that the only way to deal with it, and thus understand more deeply what the humourist's motives are, is to cross some boundaries and go and search for connections with other disciplines that can illuminate this phenomenon. All scholars agree that humour fiercely resists categorizations in single slots or disciplines, be they biology, culture, or society. I think that what we call humour, for lack of better definitions, is a complex process involving many areas of life that we distinctly recognize and appreciate, but that we invariably fail to describe when they blend.

Research about humour is ripe today – there is even a dedicated quarterly, *Humor*, published by the International Society of Humor Studies – with theorists who devote their investigations almost exclusively to it. However, in many cases their research concentrates in psychology and the neurosciences and aims at finding which brain area is activated by which ‘kind’ of humour (or “scripts”, as Attardo and Raskin call them; see Raskin 1985; Attardo 2001). This, of course, is still very useful for the literary critic and the social scientist because it helps to better define the terms of the question, but it does not yield directly usable tools for analysing texts and bodies of work. In some respects, we find ourselves more or less the way Huizinga put it:

All the terms in this loosely connected group of ideas — play, laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic, etc. — share the characteristic which we had to attribute to play, namely that of resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms. Their rationale and their mutual relationship must lie in a very deep layer of our mental being. (1955, 6)

In my search for a usable framework to apply to Brian O’Nolan’s case study, I found some very interesting points in the works of three scholars that helped me better define humour and the humourist.

The first is Arthur Koestler. Born in Budapest in 1905 from a Jewish family of mixed Russian-Hungarian origins, he studied engineering at the Polytechnic in Vienna but left his studies to follow the Zionist project in Palestine in 1926. He eventually turned to journalism and earned his living from writing. He published novels, autobiographical works, and many non-fiction writings on such diverse subjects as the history of science, the paranormal, ethnography, Judaism, and most of all politics. Maybe only a man of such wide views on human knowledge could write a book like *The Act of Creation* (Koestler 1975).

In this unconventional essay, Koestler upholds creation as a human cognitive process that can take place in many fields. He examines the cases of the jester, the scientist and the artist. All of them create by using the same mental process, that of *bisociation*, as he calls it. To bisociate means to associate an idea to two different *matrices*, or mental patterns, normally not connected. When we expect something but something else happens, we react by laughing (to jokes), crying (when we are desperate or, on the contrary, extremely happy), or standing in awe (when we experience a ‘eureka’ moment). In any case, it happens when we find out new connections in our knowledge. Physically, it might be compared to the creation of many new synapses between our neurons. He was the first author I found who associated humour directly with knowledge and broke off the traditionally disparaging, debasing view that philosophers usually had. In effect, they used to assign it to the sphere of aesthetics, rather than knowledge, and, as it was considered in-

variably ugly, its destiny was to be simply named and forgotten without any in-depth analysis on its nature.

Koestler uses a famous joke to illustrate a union of matrices:

Chamfort tells a story of a Marquis at the court of Louis XIV who, on entering his wife's boudoir and finding her in the arms of a Bishop, walked calmly to the window and went through the motions of blessing the people in the street.

"What are you doing?" cried the anguished wife.

"Monseigneur is performing my functions", replied the Marquis, "so I am performing his". (1975, 33)

Here we would expect a plausible outburst of rage on the part of the betrayed husband. Instead, he connects two behaviours in a new way. Of course, a joke can be read in many ways but conceiving it as a production of new knowledge through an unexpected connection (the improbable, but possible, role exchange) sheds new light on the role of these constructs in social life.

The second is Peter L. Berger, an Austrian sociologist naturalized American. Famous for his thesis that reality is a form of consciousness (also the title of a book of his), he produced towards the end of the 1990s an interesting study on laughter, *Redeeming Laughter* (Berger 1997), in which he rescued two concepts earlier formulated by the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schütz: "paramount reality" (1945, 533) and "finite provinces of meaning" (551). The first is what everybody considers the conventional reading of reality, the set of accepted norms. The second are, on the other hand, all other possible readings and interpretations that might challenge taken-for-granted conventions. The first is soothing, reassuring, allowing for a tranquil flowing of everyday lives. The second are mostly subversive, rich in taboos and permanently revolutionary, not exactly the best environment where to live everyday routines. Therefore, he contends, there is a constant fight between the two, with the paramount reality always defending its privileged status against the aggression of other possible realities. As we all experience in our lives, conventions cannot suppress the emergence of other ideas. Our praxis has then created this sort of 'bubbles', revolutionary sandboxes opened and closed by conventional signs in which we can test these possibilities. This is the case of jokes (where taboos can be expressed), but also of theatre, film and fiction (where we can create entirely fictional worlds), of dreams, mystic ecstasies, and so on. We experience these finite provinces of meaning even many times a day, and this is not at all considered exceptional or schizophrenic but an integral part of our lives. It is in this very way that we can test ideas before buying them, and integrate them in a new paramount reality, different from the one we had before. It goes without saying that humour is the cheapest, most common and most sought-after way to experience these realities and, exactly for this reason, then again the preferred form of exploration and knowledge.

The third is Robert R. Provine. An American psychologist and neuroscientist who has studied laughter in social interaction for decades, he has drawn his own, original conclusions about its nature and functions. He thinks that laughter and smile are fundamentally social communication markers, but his most remarkable finding lies in my opinion in what he says about tickling. Though apparently an unimportant phenomenon, it is nonetheless revealing in that it demonstrates that laughing is not always (at least, not exclusively) linked to humour, and serves to prove that laughter is a social regulator, not differently from what Ceccarelli said about chimpanzees. We laugh when we are tickled, but only when the tickling comes from an accepted member of our circles. We do not accept tickling from strangers – as we do not accept sweets – because it represents a threat, rather than a pleasure. The conclusive proof seems to come from the self-tickling experience: normally, it does not work, and therefore we recognize that the stimulus comes from us and not from others. As a consequence, he postulates a sort of ‘nonself detector’ that allows us to recognize when the stimulus comes from the outside, this way describing laughter as a marker associated with a positive relationship with others.

A theoretical remark on humour and laughter by Ceccarelli can finally lead to the next stage, about the translation of a humorous idea into practical action. Just as animals do, he says, we have some innate mechanisms of reaction to stimuli, and react even when we are not in the presence of a *live* stimulus but only a symbol of it, a decoy:

And when we talk of an Innate Unleashing Mechanism [such as laughter], we talk about the possibility of deceit through decoys. Furthermore, the human being is a “talking animal” and human language has the characteristic, empirically detectable, of being “reified”: a tendency exists, highlighted many a time, in human beings so that it appears natural, at times incoercible, that they treat words, or better symbols in general, as they were “things” ... For this reason, we can logically derive that decoys capable of triggering the IUM concerning the hierarchical order of human individuals, can also be symbols, i.e., “words”, “verbal constructions” such as, for example, communism and capitalism. (Ceccarelli 1988, 142; my translation)

3. Unsettling taken-for-granted worlds

We have seen that one of the tasks that is conventionally assigned to humour is that of exploring alternative realities and bringing them to life in the designated test areas of the finite provinces of meaning. If these possibilities of reality are any good, it is up to the public to tell and signal through the conventional sign of laughter. Telling good jokes is a serious matter, but laughing, paradoxically, is what marks the approbation of these ideas and not their dismissal.

Let us consider the jester, a figure omnipresent in the history of laughter. The court buffoon has always been the only one allowed to treat badly a divinely chosen king. But this had its advantages for the king himself: in a

court where he was often lied to for political and personal reasons, the jester was the only one who could tell him the blunt truth. It was then far more than a nostalgic remnant of time bygone; it was a key political function. It does not come as a surprise that the king who suppressed this office forever was the most autocratic king of all, Louis XIV of France. One who not only could not stand a joke, but also thought he was never wrong.

Jesters were the representatives of an authentic comic tradition: confined in an apparently uncomfortable role, they were able to tell the truth. In this case, again we can find a parallel with what Vivian Mercier said of the Irish: never in power, but ever mocking power. Maybe the poverty that marked so much of the history of Ireland, and the submission to its stronger neighbour, contributed to forge their national character as much as their pagan tradition of grotesque humour. This is quite difficult to demonstrate but also quite easy to tell, since all ethnic groups who suffered for long – I think of the Jews – have developed original means to survive in the most terrible situations, and a strong dose of humour was certainly not the weakest arrow in their quiver.

We are not used to treating jesters as central in literature, mostly because their performances were mainly oral and not usually recorded for posterity. However, they existed and certainly influenced other authors and writers of their times. Luckily, modern jesters today write, to leave at least a hint in written words of what the power of words combined to action is. One of them even managed, for the first time in history, to be recognized as a canonical author: Dario Fo, the Italian playwright who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1997 on the grounds that he “emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden”. If we scroll the full speech introducing the Prize motivation, it is interesting to read at the end an unexpected Irish connection made by the Swedish Academy:

Looking backwards in time from Dario Fo, the ninety-fourth laureate for literature, to earlier writers given the award, it is tempting to arrest oneself at George Bernard Shaw, winner of the Prize seventy years ago. On that occasion the Swedish Academy emphasised the laureate’s idealism, humanity, and stimulating satire. The two writers are no doubt different from each other, but the same evaluative words can be applied to Dario Fo. (Frängsmyr 1998)

So “satire” and “scourging humour” have been finally recognized even by the solemnest academics as central in the fight for the “dignity of the downtrodden”, thus sanctioning the strong link between humour and society, intended as a group of actual individuals and not just an idealized readership. The same academics recognize at the beginning of the motivation document that “To be a jester is, and always has been, a serious matter” (*ibidem*).

As a self-appointed jester of the Republic, O’Nolan employed his full equipment of techniques. The first and simplest was the unsettling of the taken for granted relationships between words and things. O’Nolan liked this trick, which

would go from simple bad puns to very elaborate situation comedies. In the Keats & Chapman series, the pun was central, as in the feat where the two writers go to France to stage Molière, Keats not agreeing with Chapman's choices, though. Chapman's scenery had to be freighted by barge on the Seine, but an accident occurred and all his stuff sank in the river. Keats's dry punch line on this was: "For once I admire your *mise en Seine*" (O'Brien 2005 [1976], 21). Other sketches see the two poets-turned-comedians, together or individually, in bizarre situations like this, combining more than one pun and non-sequitur references:

A Guinness.

Of course there is no drink [that] can compare with a bottle of stout. It is *sui guinnessis*. Keats once called a cab and was disgusted to find the beautiful upholstery ruined with milk spilt by some previous reveller who had been going home with it. Instead of crying over the spilt milk, Keats said to the cabman: "What's this? A *cabri-au-lait*?" (O'Brien 2005, 12)

Or this, imitating the Irish pronunciation of some words and opening an article in a fictional reprise of earlier conversations:

The language problem again – I *am* sorry, but we must, you know. First, pronunciation; this is very important. ... Dublin people are perhaps the worst offenders in this respect. One thinks immediately of the words: "Cow", "Man", "Office", "Foreign", "It", "This", "Carry", "Dog", readers can finish the list (themselves). You know how they come out: "Kehaouw", "Mhaaanh", "Uffuss", "Phurren", "Ihh", "Dis", "Korry", "Dawg"... It is simply not good enough, that is all. The language will never progress if we make no effort to speak it properly. (O'Nolan 2000, 95)

However, this apparently innocent joking was just one layer of his multilevel game. He was not afraid of shifting to attacking politicians or other established figures, though at the same time he included play on words, especially on spellings, repetitions typical of oral storytelling, irony and even comic transliterations from the German (pronounced the Irish way, of course):

I, who have for so many centuries presided personally over the destinies of the very reverend the people of Ireland, cannot and will not pretend to be unmoved by the great news which from the grand mother country of Britain has just come to hand, bringing words of cheer and encouragement and abundant promise of good things in the daze to come to all good men who in this green clime dwell. There has been, it appears, there has been formed and established within the ranks of the Mother of Imperial Par (laments!), Co. Westminster, a little enclave, a few Jems set in that silver See, a small but select coterie, whose O'Vowed object it is, once and for all from the chain of the rt hon. the O'Pessor to emancip8 the gallant and indomitable company of the Royal Gaels, Southern Irish Divn. There has been set on Foote (Co. Dingle) a distinguished club, gathering within the esoteric circle of its élite all that is brightest and best in the British political harena, and holding always

in the most genuine O'Steam those pitiful nomadic hordes of displaced personnel which, Vorlach of Faub-Badenheim, we do not deem unfitting to denominate as the Irish, traditional and time-honoured fusiliers! (Some of them are still doing it – the others are marking it). (*Ibidem*, 144-145)

Engaging in such an activity – we agree with the Swedish Academy – means voicing the ideas and the whole cultural world of the many towards, and sometimes against, the established culture of the few, i.e., of the elites in command. This was the role O'Nolan took for his personas, but we could say also for himself: Carol Taaffe, in her *Ireland Through the Looking Glass. Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate*, remarks that “his inconsistency not only reflects the plain fact that his was not really a single (if a singular) voice, it also betrays Myles's position, as Anthony Cronin saw it, as the licensed jester of the Dublin intelligentsia” (1990, 127).

This is only partly true, as Taaffe herself admits elsewhere. O'Nolan was certainly the scourge of Dublin, and Irish, *intelligentsia*, but also sought to alternate hefty, Latin-stuffed pieces with other popular themes such as *The Brother* or the *Plain People of Ireland* series. And, *in se*, all articles included the high and the low, as for example the many instances in which he explicitly used the (stet) and other marks indicating that a likely mistake is indeed correct because it is a play on words or an intended, usually bad, pun: “That mush (stet) at least is certain”, “demi-cracies (stet)” (O'Nolan 2000, 91), “The Abbey Theatre is a case in paint. (Yes – *paint!*)” (*ibidem*, 130) and “the Crok philosopher (stet)” (*ibidem*, 167). He even resorted to an asterisk on the title of a piece: “* An asterisk at the title of an article means, and will henceforth mean, that the article is absolutely true and that any incredible statement in it has been, where possible, verified” (O'Nolan 1989, 75).

This idea of him as part of the intelligentsia but also holding a foot in plain people's doors, connects to another ground-breaking concept introduced by Raymond Williams in his seminal work, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1982 [1958]), reaffirmed by Terry Eagleton in *The Idea of Culture* (2000). It is the concept of a *culture in common*, stressing the importance of negotiation between the culture of the elites, the exclusive culture including regulations and canons originating in the middle classes, and the culture of the masses, the inclusive culture of the people passed on through the generations and including traditions, superstitions, songs and the like.

One of the focal points in the building of a culture – and then of a nation – is that culture is a convention in which elements are chosen rather than received, acritically and in bulk, from a mythical golden age in the past when they were all created once and for all. But who chooses them? Of course it is the elites, who always tended to exclude the products of popular literature and culture. But the people, as Bakhtin showed in his study on popular culture (1984), never passively accepted this and always fought back to keep

their traditions and at times also to speak up against rulers, as was the case of the Carnival period in the European Middle Ages. In this short yearly festive period before Lent and Easter, humour, subversion and the culture of the people took temporarily the power to mimic, or to test, what the world could be like if other ideas, other sets of values were *really* ruling. A proper finite province of meaning, in the very sense Alfred Schütz intended for these experiments in alternative realities.

Humour is certainly not the only means of negotiating between the culture of the elites and that of the masses; but it is one of the most powerful ones, since, as we have seen, it shares with art and science a fundamental mechanism of discovery and creation in an accepted testing environment. Maybe it does not actually work as Koestler postulates – neuroscientists are today working intensely on this, so we can expect more insights in the future – but we can be positive enough that the basic procedure is that of the connection between two (or even more) matrices or patterns not previously associated. This would include the notion of incongruity, as eighteenth century philosophers claimed, because there is no previous relation between the newly associated domains.

Afterwards, the idea that at first struck one as incongruous begins to work as actual possibility and, if the new association produces fruitful and viable inferences, what seemed laughable now becomes possible and eventually real. This would also explain why jokes, sketches and in general all humorous performances work best only the first time we see or hear them, and why their effect wanes steadily with exposure: they are no longer new, but appropriated ideas already connected in our patterns, therefore not surprising and certainly not inspiring any new knowledge. Comic figures like Brian O’Nolan, who managed to engage their audiences for a long time with a humour always different but always inspiring, faced a task more difficult than it looked. The use of many personas was certainly part of the strategy he decided to employ so as not to lose the grip on his public’s hearts. Taaffe again, speaking of *The Third Policeman*, notes that “The language of such times [the war years] has a certain affinity with nonsense, creating an alternative reality (however improbable) that can only be sustained on its own terms” (Taaffe 2008, 87).

This did not prevent him from making reference to real threats such as the atomic bomb, and to imagine comic situations in a tragically real contemporary setting. Just after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in 1945, the usual Keats & Chapman go to America and take their residence in a nuclear test area without knowing it. While Chapman is away on errands, Keats is hit by a prototype bomb that selectively blows people’s backs off, leaving them alive and with all organs in view and functioning. Chapman finds his friend in this condition and provides him with a cardboard back. But there is a surprise:

Morning revealed another wonder. All the human backs blown off by the bomb were to be seen piled in a heap in a nearby field. Keats, still cursing loudly and vowing vengeance on the bombers, insisted on stumbling in among the bleeding backs, surveying them carefully. Chapman took exception to the poet's language.

"You mustn't talk like that," he remonstrated. "This is an outrage, but it is not for human agents to exact retribution. Vengeance is not for mortals. Please come away from this ghoulish repository of flesh..."

"I'm going to get my own back," Keats said savagely, turning over nearby flesh-es. (Quoted in O'Brien 2003, 174-175)

Along with George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce can be cited as well as an example of a comic figure who, through satire, stimulated the debate for the building of a culture. As Niall Sheridan recalled in *Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan* (O'Keeffe 1973, 32), Joyce himself said that most critics failed to appreciate his *Ulysses* for what it really was, a "funny book" (*ibidem*, 49). Funny it was indeed, so profoundly funny that it unsettled many conventional views on literature, society, and maybe the very mindset of many. Brian O'Nolan loved the master for this reason, as John McCourt remarks in "Myles na gCopaleen. A portrait of the artist as a Joyce scholar": "What most appealed to O'Nolan was, very simply, Joyce's humour and his 'almost supernatural skill in conveying Dublin dialogue'. However, like many other supporters, he remained disenchanted with much of the later part of *Ulysses* and with all of *Finnegans Wake*" (McCourt 2014, 112).

And he also went so far as to write in 1962 to the *Irish Times*, as Flann O'Brien, to complain about the unreadability of the latter book by the common reader, and to let other readers know that he himself had bought a copy and "given it away within a fortnight" (cited in *ibidem*). On top of that, he surely envied his fame and had different ideas on novel writing, while the American academia who jumped in the wake probably irritated him, because he might have felt that foreigners were appropriating a national glory. Nonetheless, the Great Exile remained a touchstone for Irish writers and for him in particular:

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. ...

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. (*Ibidem*, 122-123)

Kiberd summarized this complex relationship with a catchy formula:

The problem of language confronting an Irish author in English had not changed all that greatly since the time of Joyce. It might be summed up in the fact that all of O'Brien debunking of Joyce were parodies of a parody, since there was no definitively Joycean style. (2000, 507-508)

However, as already mentioned, comic figures build and do not destroy. If a comic debunks and shatters something to pieces, it is always with a purpose. It can vary from one case to another, but in general, their purpose is to build a common framework with the audience, in which to play with language and culture and to explore, safely, possibilities of reality. That is, a culture in common.

4. Building a culture in common

It is universally acknowledged that a single man cannot be many a man. Carol Taaffe says of O’Nolan that his “humour spiralled from the erudite and the ordinary, scolding the Plain People of Ireland while very much remaining a part of their world. There is not much else like it” (Taaffe 2008, 207).

Brian O’Nolan is difficult to treat critically for various reasons, namely, the many pen names he adopted in his life as a journalist and writer. Even if from the very start some critics called him by his real name (in the several variants, Brian Nolan, Brian O’Nolan, Brian Ó Nualláin) there have always also been those who preferred to relate to one or the other of his celebrity personas, Flann O’Brien or Myles na gCopaleen / na Gopaleen). The ambiguity was created by the author himself, to be sure, and he was almost delighted that many failed to recognize him as the man behind Myles or Flann. But once we are certain that the author is dead – and we are – there is no point in keeping up this distinction. In recent years, a number of studies have been published mixing contents in which Brian O’Nolan was recognized as such, with titles featuring his most famous pen names of Myles and Flann to attract attention (Taaffe 2008; Borg, Fagan, Huber 2014). Of course, there are understandable publishers’ reasons, but it is time for literary criticism to make a step further and speak of Brian O’Nolan, the author.

This is particularly important in my view since, as the first section on the theories of humour attempted to point out, comic figures function as essential social connectors, invested with key responsibilities in maintaining society’s cohesion. Using different pen names is only part of the strategy and the reason for it, given the premises, is quite clear: the humorist wants to create multiple identities to survive as long as possible and acquire a stable status in society. Normally, comic figures are not allowed this – except jesters, although at the same time they were hated for their privileges – but O’Nolan felt that modern mass communications society could now provide comic figures at a distance from the centre of attention from where to continue provoking conventions and testing alternative realities.

The context was favourable: the civil war in Ireland ended formally in 1922, when he was eleven, and then the new constitution and the country’s neutrality in the Second World War kept a relative peace at home. His civil service employment secured a fixed income, a thing not to underestimate

in those years, so he had his back covered. He started writing as a journalist and it was a beginning full of great expectations, but his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published in 1939, was not a success in terms of sales. The second, *The Third Policeman*, was bluntly rejected by the publisher and literally put in a drawer for the rest of his life. He still had his column, which, amidst highs and lows, he kept for twenty-five years until the very day of his death, on 1 April 1966. He signed his novels as Flann O'Brien and his most famous column as Myles na Gopaleen, neither of them his real name, not counting the many other pseudonyms he used for other columns in national newspapers. But of course he was behind these writings (vouchsafing also what Niall Montgomery ghost-wrote for him, cf. Taaffe 2008), and the framework was one and only.

As already mentioned, the only strategy possible for anyone engaging in the difficult craft of making people laugh through humour, is not to aggress (as Bergson would say) but to show them that the world is more than the current pattern of paramount reality, and that new ideas coming to the surface during the designated appearances of the finite provinces of meaning could change it. Such was Brian O'Nolan's strategy: taken together, all columns offer themselves to us at first sight as a bunch of funny sketches. At a closer look, some of them are not at all so; on the contrary, they are pretty rough in tone, thought-provoking, revolutionary. At the beginning of 1953, Myles attacked Andrew Clarkin, mayor of Dublin, about his shop's broken clock (he called the article series ACCISS, for Andy Clarkin's Clock Is Still Stopped), and one year later resumed the point to further explore his mission as a writer:

I KEEP evading the point. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, as a tyrant once said. I confess that I have been myself too remiss and facetious in the past. Jokes are jokes, and they are necessary —just like occasional hysteria in women. But it is wrong for even a professional comic to turn away from contemporary decomposition of civilization and society.

The column I run here — it runs me, to some extent— is the best in the whole world. I mutilate grammar to say that I intend to improve the best by making it better. Ultimately it may be our simple boast that the stuff is good. In old age, a senile blush may welcome the assurance of a young caller that it is "fair." We won't go into the value of the compliment where the word "bad" is mentioned.

* * *

We are going to be more serious in the future. Do you think, reader, it is infantile —this belated resolution to change the world? What else is there left to change? (If that slurred sound I half-heard was the word "ME," I will have the blood of the speaker!). (O'Nolan 1964)

Not the funniest, I agree. But the truest, maybe. After 14 years of mostly entertaining columns, this one hit serious problems and revealed the writer's

propositions. Its point of departure is a trifling one (the broken clock), but what it says on its way is dangerous enough: Brian O’Nolan (and not his personas) was indeed forced to retire from the civil service in 1953, curiously immediately after the ACCISS affair. This series criticized things, people, customs, even alliances (with the US), trying to maintain a playful tone *en passant*. Of course, the risk was of not being funny, but the Plain People had to get the chance to see a possible, alternative future.

This to me is a confirmation of Brian O’Nolan’s idea of being a writer: he was serving his country, both with his daytime job as a civil servant and in the papers as a ‘hackney journalist’ – as he dubbed his Myles persona. Giving readers hints for reflection was and still is the most dangerous thing to do in a very controlled country – and Ireland was one, if we are not to pretend that the reference to a tyrant was simply casual, given his long-running antipathy for the party system. In this “Brother” incipit, O’Nolan describes how the Plain People generally saw politics at the time of De Valera (whom he dubbed “Dev”), i.e., as a shady environment where everything important is discussed in guilty nightly meetings. The People, now like then, seem to know it instinctively and to have mixed feelings of complaint and admiration:

The brother is thinkin of goin up.

Going up what?

The brother is thinkin of standin.

Standing what? Drinks?

The brother is thinkin of having a go at the big parties.

Do you mean that your relative is considering offering himself as a candidate when a general election becomes due by reason of constitutional requirement?

The brother is thinkin of goin up at the elections.

I see.

Of course it’s not the brother himself that is all mad for this game. He’s been pushed do you understand me. Certain influential parties is behind him. They’re night and mornin’ callin’ to the digs and colloquin with the brother inside in the back-room with the brother giving orders for tea to be made at wan in the mornin’. Any amount of fat oul’ fellas with the belly well out in front, substantial cattle-men be the look of them. No shortage of the ready there. (O’Nolan 1993, 58)

Being a literary humourist, as we have seen, forces the author to search for new material outside the proper domain of literature to establish unexpected connections and elicit laughter. As a matter of fact, many critics correctly underlined O’Nolan’s interest in science, pataphysics, philosophy, religion, international relations and politics. The reason for this wide-ranging esprit, given our premises, becomes quite obvious in the light of the fact that keeping a strict ‘literary’ profile would have exhausted his creative force very soon, while cross-domain expansions and connections allowed for an otherwise unreachable creativity and possibility for humour. This is why critics

have always had problems in categorizing Brian O'Nolan. Strictly speaking, he might be included both in Modernism and Post-Modernism, as Keith Hopper argued in his *Flann O'Brien. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (1995) and in his essay on "John Duffy's Brother":

It seems to me that Flann O'Brien's particular brand of post-modernism needs to be understood in two interrelated contexts: in an aesthetic domain (a challenge to the conceits of high modernism); and in an ethical domain (a resistance to the nativist and Catholic hegemony of post-colonial Ireland). (Hopper 2014, 27)

Marion Quirici, in the same collection with a piece on the use of frame device in O'Nolan's short fiction, also notes that he possesses some of the qualities normally assigned to post-modernism:

the only thing being exposed here [in "Two in One"] is the construction of the story itself: the naked story does not hide the conventions of its own manufacturing ...

As his puns and purposeful misspellings in "*Cruiskeen Lawn*" attest, the failure of language can give rise to fresh meanings and can be a means of subverting the "mortified language" of clichés. (O'Nolan 1993, 227)

If the limitations of language can be exploited to creative ends, so can the limitations of the frame. (Quirici 2014, 49-50)

Both of these sound convincing, but I prefer to widen the scope in order to include the later novels, which are more conventional and less experimental as regards points of view, reliability of the narrator and, yes, humour as a destructive force; and to include the whole of his journalistic production otherwise neglected, a mass of more than two million words, outnumbering by far the books he wrote. It is not just a question of quantity, it is the quality of these writings that places them in the (again, very Irish) tradition of life writing, even if of fictional lives. In a sense, the very telling of invented life episodes involving Myles and many other characters makes this a long narrative, a story fragmented just like real life and collected to make up a new novel deserving to be included in his corpus. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and Werner Huber, editors of the most recent volume on the author, *Flann O'Brien. Contesting Legacies* (2014), in the "Introduction" to the volume put it in an interrogative way:

What if, rather than the ruination of his immense talent in subservience to an inferior medium, the "*Cruiskeen Lawn*" columns represent O'Nolan's great modernist magnum opus in that most Benjaminian site of modernity, the newspaper? What if, rather than a minor, if funny, bald parody of *Peig* and *An t-Oileánach*, Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht* deserves acknowledgement for the subtlety of

its nuanced cultural critiques, the innovation of its compositional strategies and the fullness of its achievement beside Flann O'Brien's more established novels? What if long-standing views of O'Nolan's position on the spectrum from parochial conservatism to international experimentalism are complicated by the rich expanses of largely uncollected experimental Gaelic texts, from the anarchic tales and columns that he contributed to Eamon de Valera's *Irish Press* to the predominantly Gaelic first years of "Cruiskeen Lawn"? (*Ibidem*, 5)

Indeed, this is not a new idea. Stephen Young had already supported it in his essay "Fact/Fiction: 'Cruiskeen Lawn', 1945-46". With respect to the journalistic period of O'Nolan, he comments: "I think this enormous work should be recognised as a new kind of satire, perhaps even as a new kind of novel" (Young 1997, 118). John Wyse Jackson, too, who edited two collections of Brian O'Nolan's articles (*Myles before Myles*, 1988, and *At War*, 1999), recalls that he "began to think of 'Cruiskeen Lawn' as some unidentified subspecies of the fiction family, a random, episodic, wildly innocent rough beast of a 'novel', in which the novel form itself has been stretched to screaming point and beyond" (O'Brien 2003, 11).

If readers and critics had noticed this unity of intents in Brian O'Nolan's lifetime, it would have been dangerous for him. Because, as he wrote in 1964 (as Myles) in a famous autobiographical piece, being credited with fixed attitudes is the worst danger for a writer, and even more so for a humourist:

Apart from a thorough education of the widest kind, a contender in this field [literature] must have an equable yet versatile temperament, and the compartmentation of his personality for the purpose of literary utterance ensures that the fundamental individual will not be credited with a certain way of thinking, fixed attitudes, irreversible techniques of expression. No author should write under his own name nor under one permanent pen-name; a male writer should include in his impostures a female pen-name, and possibly vice versa. (Cited in Cronin 1990, 247; originally in O'Nolan 1964)

I believe that we can certainly consider "*Cruiskeen Lawn*" as an integral part of Brian O'Nolan's opus. The reasons put forward by O'Nolan's critics are certainly valuable but, formally, I reckon that Bakhtin's and Eco's definitions of novel, postmodernity and the comic are what make for a definitive classification of O'Nolan's journalism in the category of the novel.

Bakhtin, in his essay on epic and the novel, identifies the foundational features of the novel itself:

I find three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: 1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel; 2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; 3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of

maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness. (Bakhtin 1981, 11)

They almost seem taken straight out of a case study on O'Nolan. They are striking to the point of needing no additions, so well do they depict our journalist's condition.

Eco, on the other hand, in his essay on "The comic and the rule", observes that, contrary to the common belief that comedy is linked only to contemporaneity while tragedy is universal and a-temporal, the real difference is that the moral universe in a comedy is implicitly shared between the author and the audience, and there is no need to state it. Only when the author is unobtrusive can the spectator actively collaborate in the construction of new meaning. On the other hand, a 'serious' work of art such as a tragedy, normally explicitly contains its moral universe of reference: in this case, the author is not in search of collaboration but imposes his world view on the audience, and exactly for this reason viewers cannot bisociate but only associate the elements proposed to their corresponding places in the framework of reference. Humour generates only when we actively do something, only when we create *our* new references, *our* new bisociations (Eco 2014, 269 ff.).

O'Nolan makes wide use of traditional storytelling techniques as he tries to engage his audience by constantly reclaiming attention, prompting responses, recovering the story's thread (for those who got distracted or were absent), or challenging the belief of his readers/listeners with openings like the opening epigraph of *At Swim-Two-Birds*: "All the characters represented in this book, / including the first person singular, / are entirely fictitious and bear no relation / to any person living or dead" (O'Brien 2001, 7).

Maybe these very techniques are what suggested his possible belonging to an avant-garde postmodernism, because of their jumping in and out of the literary conventions. He actually starts sometimes as if he were interrupting something else he was doing, and finishes to converse with an imaginary audience, mimicking real-life storytelling environments (and creating, again, another finite province of meaning):

Dog bites man. O.K., we know that ain't news, no good newspaper man would try to make a story out of that. But man bites hot-dog, is that news? Man chases cat, is that news? Well-known dog elected to Board of Bank of Ireland, is that news? Puce-faced usurer fights ferret, how about that? If over-zealous Customs men at Dundalk insist on searching the bags under your eyes, is that news? If ebullient zestful Myles na gCopaleen quips in Dublin's swish uptown Shelbourne Hotel that the Americans and Japs are "Pacifists", is that news? JOCKEY RIDES STRAIGHT RACE AND DOES HIS BEST TO WIN! Would ace-reporter Clark Gable tear out the front page for that and hold everything for a re-plate?

The word "news" is composed of the initials of north, east, west, and south – news from all quarters, see, STOP THAT!

The Plain People of Ireland: What?
Myself: Biting your nails.
The Plain People of Ireland: Sorry. (O'Brien 2003, 55-56)

As Ceccarelli said, treating words like things is a natural human activity and is what comic figures do most of the time. What we call pun, or play on words, or satire, or irony, draw on the basic mechanism of unlocking words from their encrusted meaning and placing them in completely different settings and situations, digging their literal meanings, playing with sounds and spellings: this is the radical unsettling that opens up the doors of the finite provinces of meaning, where we can eventually do whatever we want without worrying too much about the consequences. Calling Brian O'Nolan a conspirator, then, to me is awarding him the role of captain player, the one who sets the rules by breaking the rules of paramount reality, so that others can play at reorganizing them. The building of a culture in common owes much to humour for the possibilities it creates, and we must only thank comic figures like Brian O'Nolan who mastered language and literature for the widest public to engage in this foundational social activity.

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