UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

AT THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM: LANGUAGE, CULTURE, POLITICS IN THE EARLIER WRITINGS OF BRIAN O'NOLAN (FLANN O'BRIEN/MYLES NA GOPALEEN).

by

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ABSTRACT

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Starting with an analysis of the dominant concerns of O'Nolan criticism in Chapter 1, the thesis argues that critical readings of O'Nolan have typically figured his work in terms of a series of oppositions located around the antagonistic relationship between cultural nationalism and literary modernism. Focusing primarily upon the experimental character of his fiction, the cultural politics which underlie this are implicitly presumed to signal a radical critique of the essentialising discourses of cultural nationalism and, more specifically, to contest the aspirations of the Gaelic Revival. By firmly relocating O'Nolan's writing of the 1930s and 1940s in its historical moment as a body of works actively engaged in contemporary cultural debates around Irish cultural identity, the thesis aims to counter the reductive definitions of modernism and cultural nationalism often deployed in O'Nolan criticism and the prevailing assumption that O'Nolan is hostile to cultural nationalism per se in order to argue that his response to cultural nationalism is both far more complex than is usually allowed and often in fact expresses an impulse to ground cultural identity in something authentically and essentially Irish and which is compatible with certain aspects of cultural nationalist thought. The following chapters of the thesis read O'Nolan's writing in the context of the central tenets of official discourses of cultural nationalism in the 30s and 40s, concerning language, religion, the land and the peasantry. Chapter 2 focuses upon the critically neglected issue of O'Nolan's engagement with debates around the Irish language and sets out to theorise his complex relations with Irish and English in the context of the crisis of the Irish language in this period. Chapter 3 examines At Swim-Two-Birds in relation to modernist responses to contemporary culture and explores the novel's attempt to counter the perceived degeneracy of modern Irish culture through recourse to the regenerative potential of traditional bardic culture. Chapter 4 explores the formal strategies of O'Nolan's 'documentary' writings in order to provide a context through which to read The Third Policeman in terms of its figuration of the relationship between Irish cultural identity and the land. Chapter 5 reads The Poor Mouth in the context of contemporary idealisations of the western Irish peasantry and argues that, rather than constituting a straightforward critique of metropolitan views of rural life, the text presents an ambivalent investment in precisely those idealising discourses it purports to critique.

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Contents

Introduction

The primary impulse of this thesis is to challenge the widespread critical assumption that, as a writer of experimental fiction, Brian O'Nolan's work offers a radical identity politics as an alternative to the conservative accounts of Irish national identity proposed by official cultural nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. This is to call into question those readings of O'Nolan's work which argue that simply on the grounds of its formally innovative character it automatically constitutes a critique of the restrictive and essentialist versions of Irish national identity that were dominant in the immediate post-independence period, and argues for a more open and pluralist account of cultural belonging in modern Ireland. As I will argue in Chapter 1, this kind of critical reading of O'Nolan's writing has concerned itself primarily with the experimental character of his fiction and implicitly presumed that the cultural politics which underlie this experimentation signal a radical departure from the narrow and essentialising definitions of Irishness which were propagated by the government and the official language movement in the decades following independence. His work has also been held to contest the cultural and ideological project of the Gaelic Revival which sought to restore the Irish language to the vernacular throughout Ireland, and which made the Gaelic cultural heritage the primary constitutive element of an 'authentic' and enduring national identity.

However, by firmly relocating O'Nolan's writing of the 1930s and 1940s in its historical moment of production as a body of works actively engaged in contemporary cultural debates around Irish cultural identity, the thesis aims to counter the reductive definitions of modernism and cultural nationalism often deployed in O'Nolan criticism and the prevailing assumption that O'Nolan is hostile to cultural nationalism **per se.** For any analysis of his own peculiar cultural position needs to go beyond the restrictive set of cultural binaries within which he is conventionally placed and through which his work is usually understood. The central problem with the critical dichotomies which are applied to him - Gaelic/English,

provincial/cosmopolitan, artist/columnist - is that they fail to address both O'Nolan's movement between these oppositions and his often complex attempts to deconstruct them. To approach his work in terms of its tendency to disturb the boundaries between apparently incompatible cultural formations (signally modernism and nationalism) opens up a reading of his work which moves beyond the sterile, formalist accounts of his fiction that have come to dominate criticism in recent years. As I shall argue, to read his work produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s in terms of the specific cultural debates about national identity that dominated the arena of public debate in Ireland in this period reveals O'Nolan to be a writer deeply engaged in a dialogue with the central problems of Irish cultural nationalism (both explicitly in his newspaper column and implicitly in his fictional writings). This reveals a response to cultural nationalism which is both far more complex than is usually allowed and often in fact expresses an impulse to ground cultural identity in something authentically and essentially Irish which is clearly compatible with certain aspects of cultural nationalist thought.

The following chapters of the thesis read O'Nolan's writing in the context of the central tenets of official discourses of cultural nationalism in the 30s and 40s, concerning language, religion, the land and the peasantry. Chapter 1 further interrogates the binaries which have structured and limited critical readings of O'Nolan's writing and suggests the importance of relocating his work in a different set of cultural and critical coordinates. I begin to show how this can be achieved in Chapter 2, which focuses upon the critically neglected issue of O'Nolan's engagement with debates around the Irish language and sets out to theorise his complex relations with Irish and English in the context of the crisis of the Irish language in this period. This chapter argues that, rather than representing an outright rejection of cultural nationalism's claims for the centrality of the Irish language, O'Nolan's writings on the Gaelic Revival suggest that he shares cultural nationalism's belief in language as the essential determining element in national identity and departs

from the orthodox language movement only in terms of the puritanical and xenophobic forms of Irishness which they promoted.

Chapter 3 examines O'Nolan's first novel At Swim-Two-Birds in relation to modernist responses to contemporary culture and explores the novel's attempt to counter the perceived degeneracy of modern Irish culture through recourse to the regenerative potential of traditional bardic culture. This chapter locates the novel in the context of the different modernist paradigms represented by the work of T.S.Eliot and James Joyce - the former expressing a 'general' vision of cultural decline in modern Europe, and the latter a specific diagnosis of cultural paralysis in modern Ireland. I argue that At Swim registers the tension which is produced by the meeting of O'Nolan's 'dual' cultural sensibilities, the modernist and the revivalist and attempts to negotiate a response to the anxieties which emerge in the text by returning to an earlier moment of cultural vitality and social unity.

Chapter 4 explores the formal strategies of O'Nolan's 'documentary' writings in order to provide a context through which to read perhaps the most elusive of O'Nolan's novels, The Third Policeman. Contrary to the usual critical response to this text which locates it in terms of its general preoccupation with abstract concepts such as temporality and scientific rationality, this reading sets out to explore the novel as continuing the dialogue with cultural nationalism that was begun in O'Nolan's work on language and in At Swim. Reading the text against the grain of its apparently universaling framework, I argue that this is a text which nonetheless obliquely engages with the cultural concerns which dominated the historical moment in which it was written, and that this engagement emerges through its figuration of the relationship between identity and the Irish landscape.

Chapter 5 reads O'Nolan's Irish novel, The Poor Mouth, in the context of contemporary idealisations of the western Irish peasantry. In the context of a wider discussion of O'Nolan's responses to revivalist depictions of the west of Ireland by metropolitan writers such as J.M. Synge and indigenous writers such as Tomas O Crohan, the

author of The Islandman which The Poor Mouth parodies, I argue that, rather than constituting a straightforward critique of metropolitan views of rural life, the text presents an ambivalent investment in precisely those idealising discourses it purports to critique. I also suggest that this novel marks the terminal point of O'Nolan's attempt to reconcile the conflicting imperatives operating on him as a writer and intellectual.

Chapter One

Modernism and Cultural Nationalism: Critically Relocating O'Nolan

- I -

Critical accounts of the writings of Brian O'Nolan have tended to structure their analyses around a matrix of binaries in the cultural and literary spheres. To begin with, critical debate has tended to focus primarily on whether O'Nolan should be approached as a modernist or a postmodernist writer, and his fiction has been explored either in terms of its dependence on the innovative work of an earlier generation of experimental writers (most notably Joyce), or in terms of its anticipation of some of the more radical formal innovations that have become associated with contemporary postmodernist fiction. As the title of the most recent study of his work (A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist by Keith Hopper) seems to suggest, the view that O'Nolan's work is best understood in relation to the critical paradigms offered by postmodernism has come to dominate, though the allusion to Joyce's novel here indicates that a residual uncertainty about where to locate him in twentieth-century literary history persists.

To some extent, this uncertainty is perfectly understandable, and results from the peculiarities of the publishing history of O'Nolan's work. Published in 1939, O'Nolan's first novel, At Swim-Two-Birds, sank without trace after being met by a host of uncomprehending critical reviews, many of which understood neither the complex structure of the novel nor the nature of its relation to the traditional Irish materials it draws upon.[1] His second novel, The Third Policeman, was rejected by his publisher for being even more fantastic that At Swim, and O'Nolan consequently abandoned his attempts to publish it, and it remained out of circulation until its posthumous rediscovery and publication in 1967. His third novel, An Beal Bocht was written in Irish and was not available in English until 1973 when it was translated as The Poor Mouth. Given that one novel

had flopped, one had been refused, and one remained limited to a minority readership, O'Nolan was hardly known in Ireland as a novelist until the republication of At Swim in 1960, by which time it was now possible for critics and reviewers to make sense of the novel through recourse to the increasingly familiar narrative procedures of the **nouveau roman** and an emerging postmodernist fiction. Having given up writing novels after An Beal Bocht, he returned to the genre in 1961 with The Hard Life and rapidly followed this with The Dalkey Archive in 1964. To many readers and critics, then, O'Nolan seemed to be a sixties novelist, with the fantastic plots around which these three novels were woven only serving to emphasise his credentials as a writer of contemporary fiction. With the publication of The Third Policeman in 1967 to much critical acclaim, his reputation as a 'postmodernist' was sealed, and it is at precisely this moment that O'Nolan began to receive the critical attention that has subsequently grown apace. Furthermore, the number of contemporary postmodernist writers who cite Flann O'Brien's novels as significant influences on their own work, on account of its strong affinity with magic realism's blend of the fantastic and the mundane and its self-reflexive concern with the processes of writing, has also been a crucial influence on the way in which O'Nolan and his writings have been reconstituted postmodernist **avant la lettre** over the past thirty years.

While the circumstances surrounding the publication of his novels has facilitated the ease with which O'Nolan has been assimilated into the canon of postmodernist fiction, critics of his work have also been preoccupied with other problems concerning the definition and location of his work. To begin with, there is the question of whether his most enduring work was written in Irish or in English, and whether his key contribution was to the development of the Irish novel in Irish by shattering the extreme reverence with which the language and certain literary genres were treated 'officially', or whether it was to the European novel in English by introducing to it the other literary traditions, forms and languages marginalised by the Literary Revival. Following on from this, there is the question of whether his 'failure' to leave Ireland and his subsequent imprisonment in a condition of 'internal' exile stunted his development as an artist and blocked the extraordinary creativity and

promise shown in his earlier work, or whether this condition forced him to turn inwards and cast his satiric eye upon ordinary Dublin life and so develop and sharpen his skills as a satirist. In these terms, O'Nolan's contribution to modern Irish literature is judged either in terms of the varied work he produced as Myles na Gopaleen, the 'ordinary' Dubliner overseeing and castigating the follies of provincial Irish society and politics, or in terms of the novels he wrote as Flann O'Brien, the cosmopolitan European intellectual and one of the century's most influential experimental writers.[2]

Finally, there is the question of whether O'Nolan is to be celebrated as a unique comic talent who has made a singularly innovative contribution to the development of the Irish novel in this century, or whether he should be passed over as a failed Joycean, labouring under a debilitating anxiety of influence with regard to his compatriot and predecessor, appropriating the 'master's' motifs and techniques but lacking both in Joyce's deeper human sympathies and broad vision of cultural history, and the condition of exile and artistic freedom that was the precondition of his work. Seamus Deane has put forward this argument most forcefully:

> O'Brien's reaction to Joyce's work and, later, to Joyce's fame is one of the most astonishing examples of the 'anxiety of influence' to be found[.] ... At first there was admiration and respect. Then, as the books on Joyce began to proliferate, especially in the USA, a certain modification occurred. ... Thus the absorption of Joyce in the early novels, which led to their enrichment, declined into a running battle with his reputation in his later work, leading to its impoverishment.[3]

Of course, there is no denying the influence of Joyce on O'Nolan's work, particularly when one considers the dense fabric of references and allusions to A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses in At Swim-Two-Birds. But the overbearing influence of Joyce can equally be viewed as a factor in the artistic life of most writers of O'Nolan's generation, and not just in O'Nolan's work alone. As Terence Brown has argued, Joyce's work was appropriated as a model as much by realist writers such as Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor as by experimental writers such as Samuel Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy in the immediate post-independence period, though the two 'groups' turned to different aspects of that work in their search for the techniques and vision that could facilitate their divergent critiques of cultural

nationalism (the former looked to Dubliners and Portrait and Joyce's vision of spiritual paralysis, while the latter looked to Ulysses and 'Work in Progress' and his 'revolution of the word').[4] As such, it could be argued that Irish literary culture as a whole felt compelled to negotiate Joyce's achievements (and, arguably, continues to do so) and that O'Nolan's response is simply a sharper and more acute instance of a more widespread phenomenon.[5] O'Nolan's relation to Joyce, then, should be located in a broader cultural framework rather than reduced to a question of personal jealousy and animosity, and I would suggest that it is more productive to view his work as an extremely critical dialogue with Joyce's vision of modern Irish culture and the role of the artist in relation to modern Irish society rather than as a failed attempt to appropriate Joycean techniques for his own purposes.[6]

I want to suggest, however, that the critical paradigms within which many of these questions have been raised have served primarily to reduce the complexity of O'Nolan's writings and 'writerly identity' by erasing the contradictions and ambiguities around which the most interesting and problematic aspects of his work circulate. Through the imposition of an 'either/or' constellation, a series of rigid oppositions has been established which serve reductively to determine the ways in which 'the man' and his work can be read, either as modernist or postmodernist, as comic genius or belated Joycean, as provincial or cosmopolitan, as Irish or European, as satirist or artist, as Myles or Flann. While the persistence with which critics locate O'Nolan in terms of these oppositions tacitly problematises such critical and cultural demarcations (clearly both sides of these oppositions can be read into his work with varying degrees of credibility), in insisting upon these oppositions in accounts of his life and work, and producing commentaries predicated upon the establishment of the primacy of one side over the other, critical accounts of O'Nolan have largely failed to address rigorously the cultural and critical significance of such oppositions in the analysis of his work and in Irish criticism more generally, and have elided the tensions and contradictions which both inform and disturb them.

The central opposition which most frequently structures critical readings of Flann O'Brien's fiction is anti-realism (in the form of

either modernist or postmodernist narrative experiment) and cultural nationalism, whereby practice of the former is seen automatically to imply a critique of the basic nationalist assumptions regarding the endurance of the Irish nation over the centuries despite the ravages of colonialism, and the essential nature of an Irish national identity upon which it is premised. By and large, O'Nolan is placed as a writer always in opposition to the forms of cultural nationalism that were prevalent in the immediate post-Independence period when he began writing and produced the works which have received most critical praise. Whether viewed as modernist or postmodernist, his work is always located in opposition to revivalism by virtue of the fragmented, parodic and self-reflexive formal procedures which he employs, and is seen to produce critical rather than essentialist accounts of cultural identity and the historical narratives which support it. Richard Kearney typifies this view when he places O'Nolan in a tradition of anti-realist fiction which, it is argued, disrupts nationalist conceptions of historical continuity through the production of non-linear narratives, and undermines nationalism's claims for a cultural identity that is both given and coherent through its demonstration of the necessarily discursive constitution of subjectivity and hence the constructed and decentred nature of cultural identity. Drawing upon a distinction between revivalist and modernist impulses in Irish writing (represented most completely by the opposing figures of Yeats and Joyce), Kearney describes the radical implications attached to the aesthetic practices and worldviews which constitute modernism and (by extension) postmodernism in modern Irish culture:

> Modernism rejects both the aims and idioms of revivalism. It affirms a radical break with tradition and endorses a practice of cultural self-reflection where inherited concepts of identity are subjected to question. Modernism is essentially a 'critical' movement in the philosophical sense of questioning the very notion of **origins**. And as such it challenges the **ideology of identity** which revivalism presupposes. The modernist mind prefers discontinuity to continuity, diversity to unity, conflict to harmony, novelty to heritage. ... Modernism is, consequently, suspicious of attempts to re-establish national literatures or resurrect cultural traditions. And most of those we might call Irish modernists deny the possibility of sustaining a continuous link between past and present. ... The modernist tendency in Irish culture

> is characterized by a determination to **demythologize** the orthodox heritage of tradition in so far as it lays constraints upon the openness and plurality of experience.[7]

Even where O'Nolan departs from exemplary modernists such as Joyce in his widespread use of Gaelic tradition, nevertheless he is still seen to maintain that critical distance from his predecessors in the Literary Revival and his contemporaries in the Gaelic Revival who drew upon that tradition to legitimate their versions of a continuous national history and an essential Irish identity. 'O'Brien succeeds in undermining the orthodox structures of realist and revivalist narrative', Kearney argues, 'we are not permitted to forget that character and plot [for which read identity and history] are but figments devoid of all **rapport** with the real world.'[8]

However, this focus upon O'Nolan as an experimental writer has produced an almost exclusive critical engagement with questions of the formally innovative character of his novels and thus tended to suspend any interrogation of the conflicting cultural formations to which O'Nolan belonged during his writing career in the guises of Myles and Flann. It has also often served to deracinate a body of literary texts deeply implicated within the cultural debates of their historical moment of production, locating them instead within an experimental literary tradition whose dominant concern is language and its problematic relationship with the reality it purports to describe. Starting from the **a priori** that any modernist or postmodernist critique of language automatically entails a radical identity politics, this kind of formalist criticism will always assume that the broader cultural politics inferred from his writing will be progressive with regard to essentialist conceptions of cultural identity such as those proposed by official cultural nationalism. It seems almost that for O'Nolan (as a native Irish speaker) to write primarily in English is implicitly to contest cultural nationalism's insistence on the Gaelic language and heritage as the source of an authentic Irishness, a reading which is backed up by his writings in Irish in which he parodies many some of the Gaelic revivalists' sacred cows in order to undermine the platitudes of cultural nationalism. However, as this thesis will argue, if O'Nolan is centrally concerned with general philosophical questions around language, he is equally

concerned about the cultural significance of particular languages (namely the historically conflictual relationship between English and Irish) and firmly engaged within local debates around the constitution of an Irish cultural identity and a modern national culture.

One of the main problems with the critical tendency to position O'Nolan in opposition to cultural nationalism on the basis of the formally experimental nature of his novels, is that it implicitly - if not, in some cases explicitly - categorises both cultural nationalism and modernism as homogeneous entities, singularising each formation as if the complex and contested histories of their constitution can be frozen into two polarised and historically immutable definitions. The 'either/or' scenario thus elides the diversity of political and theoretical positions that each term in the equation signals and necessarily occludes those elements which remain mutually incompatible or even contradictory. For example, how does O'Nolan's (it is assumed anti-nationalist) modernism and the cosmopolitan outlook that is supposed to accompany it square with the almost parochial nature of much of the material in 'Cruiskeen Lawn' with its local frame of reference, or with his writing in Irish and his interventions in debates such as the reform of Irish orthography? Or what are we to make of his quarrel with Joyce in At Swim-Two-Birds, in which it is implied that Joyce paid insufficient attention to local Irish materials - that there were appropriate figures and legends in the Gaelic tradition without having to turn to ancient Greece for a 'myth' to support Portrait and Ulysses.

There is no doubt that O'Nolan was critical of the particular forms of Irish identity proposed in official cultural nationalist discourses in the thirties and forties. However, the forms that his own criticisms took were not based, in the first instance, on principled positions concerning the exclusiveness of an essentialist identity politics. He certainly objected to the kind of moral puritanism and xenophobia which had become attached to the language movement in particular, and which made Irish identity dependent upon the adherence to strict Catholic moral principles and the repudiation of 'foreign' cultural forms and practices. But no matter how narrow and restrictive he found this particular version of cultural belonging, he didn't deny altogether the suggestion that Irish

national identity should be fundamentally grounded in something authentic and enduring, whether it be the Irish language, the Gaelic tradition, or the Irish landscape (as we shall see in the discussions of the novels that follow). Rather, O'Nolan's criticisms of cultural nationalism in this period were primarily based on the rather banal observation that the vision of Irish culture which formed the staple fare of political rhetoric on the issue was a total fabrication when it came to the realities of Irish life. In other words, the discourses of cultural nationalism had to be rejected because they had very little bearing on the actualities of modern Irish existence or on what it meant to be Irish.

O'Nolan wasn't the only intellectual of his generation to point to the obvious discordance between the ideal and the real in the nationalist vision of a Gaelic-speaking nation living according to the anti-materialist values that were allegedly embodied by Ireland's rural inhabitants, and the western peasantry in particular. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the most important cultural journal of the period, The Bell, declared its guiding principles to be the empirical exploration of modern Irish realities in the face of the fictions propagated by cultural nationalism, and (as many critics have remarked) the literature of the period is characterized by a marked interest in realism as the means of analysing the failure of the ideals that inspired the long struggle for independence. While the deflation of the heroic impulses of the pre-independence period may account for the disillusion of writers who were hostile to cultural nationalism, there was also a significant degree of criticism of the particular forms that cultural nationalism had taken in recent years from within intellectual circles that were fundamentally in sympathy the ideas which informed it. As I describe in Chapter 2, the widespread recognition of a discrepancy between the ideal and the real was nowhere more apparent than in relation to the Irish language. The evident crisis to which the language had succumbed in this period, in spite of government efforts to restore it to vernacular status, meant that many who dreamed and worked for the preservation of Irish as the vehicle of the nation's history and culture were forced to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the language and the conditions of its survival.

The ensuing ideological crisis within the language movement, and the more general economic collapse of rural Ireland which accompanied it, placed cultural nationalism's dependence on the language and the land as the primary sources of an essential and enduring Irish identity under increasing ideological strain. This crisis acutely foregrounded the discrepancy between the cultural nationalist vision of a Gaelic, rural nation and the actualities of contemporary Irish life, and forced many intellectuals sympathetic to the basic ideals of cultural nationalism to attempt to reformulate Irish identity in terms that accommodated the prevailing cultural situation (a predominantly English-speaking population being increasingly drawn to the towns and cities in search of economic stability). If this meant that the Irish language might have to be recognized as a secondary constituent of national identity rather than its defining property, it did not necessarily entail a wholesale repudiation of the basic ideological tenets of cultural nationalism. As we shall see in Chapter 2, O'Nolan himself attempted to reformulate the grounds of a modern Irish identity without surrendering cultural nationalism's basic premises, regarding the centrality of the language.

What this indicates in more general terms is that dissent from the dominant forms taken by Irish cultural nationalism did not necessarily entail abandoning altogether its fundamental ideological principles, and that different positions could be taken in opposition to the dominant formation while remaining within the cultural nationalist paradigm. This is to open out the terms in which dissent to cultural nationalism in this period is commonly perceived. For example, Terence Brown's seminal history of independent Ireland isolates Protestant Ireland and the urban working class as the two social groups that were obviously marginalised, if not excluded altogether, from the vision of the national community propagated by the triumphant ideological forces of Gaelic Catholic Ireland after 1922.[9] While Brown is sensitive to the pressures which were faced by writers in particular irrespective of their religious and class affiliation on account of the censorship mechanisms that were brought into operation in order to police any kind of departure from orthodox catholic morality, his analysis fails to address the issue of dissent beyond the two sociological categories mentioned above.

However, it is clearly necessary to think about forms of dissent in more complex terms than simply that which emanates from a 'disenfranchised' minority. As Alan Sinfield has argued in relation to the role of middle-class subcultures within British culture, the middle class has always produced dissident fractions at odds with the dominant ideological aspirations of the majority interest of the class.[10]. While David Cairns and Shaun Richards have begun to explore the way in which different cultural formations compete for the ideological leadership of the Irish nation, and have produced an analysis of dissent which goes beyond the simple tripartite schema of bourgeois Gaelic Catholic nationalism versus Anglo-Ireland (represented by Yeats) and the working class (represented by O'Casey) to include the voice of the rural poor (represented by Patrick Kavanagh), their analysis of this period in Writing Ireland is unfortunately brief and necessarily schematic, and still fails to account for dissent from within the middle-class Gaelic-speaking Catholic community.[11].

It is in terms of such a dissenting class fraction that I want to place O'Nolan - as a dissident voice whose work registers a criticism of the values of the dominant cultural formation from a position within that formation, who often produces a potentially radical critique of the dominant ideology but does so from a deeply conservative political position, sharing many of the fundamental assumptions about identity with his ideological opponents, retaining a residual investment in cultural phenomena such as language or religion or the land as essentially constitutive features of national identity. This is to suggest that rather than locate O'Nolan beyond the competing cultural formations of the period and in permanent opposition to the ideologies and exponents of cultural nationalism (as if in a condition of 'internal exile'), it is more enabling to locate him as actively engaged in dialogue with those formations and as attempting to negotiate for himself a position from which to address and participate in the formation of a modern Irish national culture. What this offers is the possibility of a more rigorous interrogation of the cultural assumptions and political ramifications of O'Nolan's writings, and their precise and often contradictory relations to official cultural nationalism and the notions of cultural identity it

produces.

To produce a more sophisticated understanding of O'Nolan's relationship to nationalism allows one to begin to consider his literary practice in more sophisticated terms also. This is to move beyond the crude conflation of radical formal practice and a radical politics, and to remain sensitive to the diverse and conflicting forms which modernism itself can take, enabling one to consider the specific response to (or reaction against) contemporary culture by a writer like O'Nolan. The aim of this section has been to suggest that the deployment of the kinds of critical dichotomies between modernism and cultural nationalism that I point to above, between the cosmopolitan Flann and the parochial Myles, which are all too often grounded in the assumption that their oppositional character is given rather than constructed in the critical act itself, needs to be problematised on the grounds that these kinds of oppositions have retained too strong a grip on the collective imagination of O'Nolan's critics and of commentators on modern Irish literature and culture in general, as is apparent from the opposition between revivalism and modernism which for Richard Kearney represents the fundamental conflict in twentieth-century Irish culture.[12]

It is not difficult to see how such dichotomies easily lend themselves to the analysis of Irish culture, both at the level of an identity politics based around stark oppositions (Irish/British, nationalist/unionist, Catholic/Protestant) and at the level of cultural production and narrative and poetic form (Gaelic/English, revivalist/modernist, realist/modernist, provincial/ cosmopolitan, Yeats/Joyce, etc.). This is not therefore to say that these oppositions do not form part of the Irish cultural experience, or that they are not crucial categories for the analysis of that culture and its forms. To deny the importance of the dominant forms of cultural identification and belonging in modern Ireland would obviously be both mistaken and politically naive. Yet clearly, in relation to O'Nolan and his work, it would not be too difficult to collapse the either/or into neither/nor, showing the oppositions to be untenable and identifying the traces of one or other term in its opposite, particularly in terms of a writer who appears to embody both aspects of these cultural oppositions: bilingual in Irish and English, born in

Ulster but considering himself to be a Dubliner, a Catholic nationalist berating nationalist politicians for twenty five years from the pages of Ireland's Unionist broadsheet, a self-styled cosmopolitan who rarely left Dublin let alone Ireland.

In the following section, I intend to explore O'Nolan's own cultural identity a little further, focusing on his family history and in particular his relationship to English and Irish. Such an exploration is illuminating for it reveals an extremely complex set of relations which do not lend themselves to the stark oppositions which I have outlined above as readily as most O'Nolan critics would seem to suggest. Crucially such a discussion also begins to open up a critical space within which to interrogate his particular relationship to modernism and cultural nationalism further in a way which again suggests that these two formations may not be mutually exclusive categories in terms of O'Nolan's cultural practice and politics.

- II -

Brian O'Nolan was bilingual, speaking and writing as fluently and as creatively in Irish as he did in English. He was brought up, however, as a monolingual Irish speaker.[13] According to all biographical sources, English was never spoken in the O'Nolan household when he was a boy, and his father went to great lengths to ensure that his children spoke only Irish at home, 'importing' Irish-speaking maids from the Donegal Gaeltacht and discouraging his children from playing with other children for fear that they would speak English. Moreover, he insisted that his elder sons should be educated through the medium of Irish rather than English, and, as there was no Irish schooling available locally, O'Nolan and his elder brothers didn't go to school until the family settled in Dublin in 1923, by which time Brian was eleven or twelve years old. In the absence of a formal education in these early years, Michael O'Nolan took it upon himself to teach his children to read - Irish but not English.

After his family moved to Dublin, O'Nolan attended the Christian Brothers School in Synge Street, where Irish was the teaching medium for part of the curriculum. At Blackrock College, however, (which he attended from 1927) English was the sole medium of

communication and Irish was taught only as a second language. Nevertheless, in a wholly English-speaking educational environment, O'Nolan and his brothers continued to speak Irish amongst themselves. Having taken Irish for his Leaving Certificate (a compulsory requirement for entry into the National University), O'Nolan continued his academic study of the language when he enrolled at University College, Dublin in 1929 to pursue a course in Irish, English and German. In 1934/5, he was awarded an M.A. for his thesis 'Naduir-Fhiliocht na Gaedhilge' ('Nature in Irish Poetry'), an anthology of Middle-Irish poetry with critical commentary, written in Irish.

From the very beginning of his writing career, O'Nolan used both Irish and English, and wrote in archaic forms of these languages as well as modern. His contributions to the college magazine, Comthrom Feinne, included parodies of medieval generic conventions written in Middle Irish, and a short piece of fiction dealing with contemporary Dublin life but written in Old Irish (described by one of his friends as 'a sort of Dublin Decameron', which was censored by the college authorities for its obscenities). O'Nolan's first (unfinished) novel was written in Irish, and was later described by O'Nolan himself as 'the absolute as far as the Irish language is concerned - a lengthy document comprising every known and unknown dialect of Irish, including middle-Irish, altirisch, bog-Irish, Bearlachas, civil-service Irish, future Irish, my own Irish and every Irish'. [14] Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, O'Nolan wrote prolifically in or about Irish: stories, book-reviews, translations of Middle-Irish poetry, and miscellaneous writings on the language and its literature in Dublin newspapers, magazines and journals. [15]

O'Nolan's immersion in the Irish language and culture was a result of the influence of his father's side of the family who placed a strong emphasis on the importance of the Irish language and its cultural heritage. Michael O'Nolan and his brothers all shared an enthusiasm for the Irish language, with each of them systematically learning a different dialect. One of his uncles, Gearoid O'Nolan, was Professor of Irish at Maynooth College from 1909-40, President of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language for a time, and wrote a text book entitled The New Era Grammar of Modern Irish. Another uncle, Fergus O'Nolan, became a teacher and for a while

assisted Patrick Pearse at Scoil Eanna, the progressive Irish school for boys founded in Dublin by Pearse at the turn of the century. Together Fergus and Gearoid O'Nolan wrote a book of short stories in Irish (Sean Agus Nua, or 'Old and New') which they translated into English themselves as Intrusions, and Gearoid also wrote an autobiography in Irish, Beatha Dhuine a Thoil, which was published in 1950. Though he wasn't involved with the language in a professional capacity like his brothers, Michael O'Nolan continued to work with the language on a more informal basis, giving night classes in Irish and organising various Gaelic cultural activities in the Strabane area.

However, one needs to be a little wary about the claims made by O'Nolan's biographers regarding his knowledge of English in his early years. Although Irish was exclusively the language of the home it seems, O'Nolan could not have been completely isolated from English as is usually implied, and the claim that he taught himself to read English must surely be treated with a considerable degree of scepticism. Clearly the family came into contact with English on an everyday basis: the Strabane area was almost wholly Anglicised, and the family business necessitated basic social interaction in English. Furthermore, as a Crown civil servant Michael O'Nolan was fluent in English, read English newspapers and books, and took as much interest in English language based cultural activities as those in Irish (after having settled in Dublin for example, O'Nolan's parents frequently attended the Abbey, Gate and Gaiety Theatres). The idea that O'Nolan was monolingual and wrote in a second language in the manner of Conrad or Beckett is clearly a distortion of the truth, and doesn't really help to explain his particular relationship to the two languages, or his complex negotiations between them, a situation which is further complicated by the specific linguistic situation which prevailed in the area around Strabane where O'Nolan was brought up.

Strabane is a small market-town situated on the border between County Tyrone and County Donegal. Since 1922, it has also found itself situated on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (the Irish Free State/Eire). If Strabane straddles a border between two countries and two national identities, it is also situated precariously between two languages - Irish and English. The Strabane district has been a predominantly English speaking area for more than

two hundred years. Although significant numbers of native speakers survived in the area in the early part of the nineteenth century, these tended to be bilingual rather than monoglot, and from the mid-nineteenth century the town was almost thoroughly Anglicized (though the census of 1911 - the year that O'Nolan was born - showed the Strabane district to be an area where ten to twenty percent of the population still spoke Irish). However, Strabane is located within 'the last stronghold of Ulster Irish', between the two areas in Ulster where Irish survived in significant numbers into the twentieth century.[16] To the west is Donegal, where a living Gaeltacht survives (albeit in steady decline) to the present day, and a dozen or so miles to the east lie the Sperrin Mountains, where as many as sixty native speakers survived in the 1940s before the language finally died there in the 1960s. As Reg Hindley has shown, the 1911 census not only reveals 'some notable pockets of survival in the heart of the anglicized east, especially in or on the margins of Protestant Ulster, where the Sperrin Mountains ... showed concentrations above the 30% level', a sufficiently large proportion to indicate native survival rather than an increase in knowledge of the language due to second language teaching by the Gaelic League'.[17]

However, Strabane isn't located simply between two national languages, but is also intersected by different varieties of those languages. In the case of Irish (until earlier this century), it was situated between the Donegal dialect spoken in the Gaeltacht and the East Tyrone dialect spoken in the nearby Sperrin Mountains. In a similar manner, it is also traversed by two varieties of English: Ulster English or Northern Hiberno English and Ulster Scots or Ulster Lallans.[18] What is particularly interesting about this complex linguistic situation around Strabane and the O'Nolan family's relationship to the intersection of the varieties of Irish and English spoken there, is not so much their inevitably detached relation to English as their 'second' language as their peculiarly detached relation to Irish as their supposed native tongue. For while Michael O'Nolan brought up his family in Irish, the dialect which he spoke and which he taught his children was not the local dialect spoken by native Irish speakers of Tyrone but the dialect spoken in Donegal. One of Michael O'Nolan's closest friends was in fact a native speaker of

Tyrone Irish, which was still alive in his youth, but he and his brothers chose to learn different dialects of Irish rather than the local living dialect. This indicates a rather detached attitude towards and formal relationship with the language which appears to have rubbed off on Brian. It is significant that after having settled in anglicized Dublin and English became a significant (if not the dominant medium of their everyday communication), the family made annual trips to the Donegal Gaeltacht to keep in touch with this particular dialect of the language.

That O'Nolan's father chose to speak a dialect that wasn't 'native' to the area, and that he learned it (by all accounts) in a systematic and pedantic fashion, registers a sense of his distance from the indigenous Gaelic-speaking populations of both Donegal and Tyrone, and suggests that the O'Nolan family experienced a somewhat 'alienated' relationship to the language and the communities that spoke it, 'belonging' neither to the one nor the other, deliberately maintaining a sense of separation from the local dialect while being necessarily separated from the linguistic community with which they aligned themselves. This sense of detachment from the Irish language (embodied in the fact that though the national language was native to them, the local dialect they spoke was not that of the immediate Irish-speaking community) clearly represents a central problem in terms of O'Nolan's relation to Irish cultural nationalism and its insistence upon an organic relationship between national identity and the Irish language. For O'Nolan was a native Irish-speaker who nevertheless inhabited a social and cultural space which shared little common ground with the rural communities and cultural traditions which, according to cultural nationalism, are intrinsically bound up with the language to constitute the symbolic centre of the Irish nation. As such, one begins to see O'Nolan as dislocated both linguistically and culturally from a sense of Irishness which (in terms of his personal background and educational development) he clearly invests in heavily.

It is in terms of his peculiarly strained relationship to the Irish language that I want to begin to position O'Nolan as operating at the limits of cultural nationalism, clearly both belonging and not belonging to the linguistic community of the nation, and both desiring

and repudiating cultural nationalism's investment in the language as the grounding site of an authentic and enduring sense of Irishness. I also want to argue that this central problem around the language inflects O'Nolan's modernist literary practice. One of the interesting points of similarity between modernism and nationalism in a colonial and post-colonial context is the importance played in both by the experience of linguistic alienation. It has often been observed that Irish writers have played a centrally formative role in English-language modernism and that their achievements in terms of formal innovation is the result of their necessarily ambiguous or uneasy relationship to the language they speak and write. That is, their contact with or consciousness of different national languages, and different forms of English in particular (those which are spoken in Ireland and in England), has led them to an awareness of the relativity of all linguistic forms and hence to the autonomy and materiality of the very medium of their art.

The idea that linguistic alienation is one of the cultural preconditions of modernism does not belong solely to the colonial/ postcolonial nexus. Raymond Williams, for example, also points to the convergence of modernist experiment and a dislocation from habitual and naturalized perceptions of language as a transparent medium of communication, though he locates the site of this linguistic alienation in the unique cultural conditions of the modern metropolis where emigrant writers come into contact with a host of other languages which relativized each other in their mutual interactions:

> It is a very striking feature of many modernist and **avant-garde** movements that they were not only located in the great metropolitan centres but that so many of their members were immigrants into these centres, where in some new ways all were strangers. Language, in such situations, could appear as a new kind of fact: either simply as 'medium', aesthetic or instrumental, since its naturalized continuity with a persistent social settlement was unavailable; or, of course, as system: the distanced, even the alien fact. ... Within these specific conditions, various formations emerged: in political aspirations to a corresponding universality - the revolutionary groups; or in reactionary redoubts, preserving a literary language in either of its forms - a pure national language or a language of authenticity against the banalities or repressions of everyday language use.[19]

Williams is drawing attention here to the divergent forms of modernism

that emerged from the metropolitan experience of 'languageness', and which entailed radically opposed political agendas based around either a celebration of plurality and fragmentation or a lament for a lost organic wholeness. These divergent responses to the experience of linguistic unease or defamiliarization form the basis of an analogous experience which is held to be peculiar to the colonial context, whereby a reactionary nationalism is opposed by a progressive pluralism which is registered at the level of literary form. Seamus Deane posits the opposition in the following terms:

> There have been for us two dominant ways of reading both our literature and our history. One is 'Romantic', a mode of reading which takes pleasure in the notion that Ireland is a culture enriched by the ambiguity of its relationship to an anachronistic and a modernised present. The other is a mode of reading which denies the glamour of this ambiguity and seeks to escape from it into a pluralism of the present. The authors who represent these modes most powerfully are Yeats and Joyce respectively. ... In a basic sense, the crisis we are passing through is stylistic. That is to say, it is a crisis of language - the ways in which we write it and the ways in which we read it.[20]

Nationalism depends on a Romantic conception of language by which all languages are held to embody the essential spirit of the people or nation that speak it. In fact, the nation is defined precisely as that group of people or cultural entity which speak a particular language, and the existence of that language operates as both the source and security of their nationhood. The importance of language for nationalism, then, lies in the fact that the existence of a unique and autonomous culture is the legitimation in the cultural sphere for separatism in the political sphere. Linguistic alienation is part of a wider cultural alienation brought about by the imposition of the colonizer's language and the conceptual framework which is encoded within its linguistic structures, and the appropriate response to being caught between languages and cultures in this instance (according to cultural nationalism) is an essentialist appeal to the recovery of the language which operates as the vehicle of the nation's history and through which the nation can recognizes its natural unity.

This account of a coherent and enduring national identity is seen to be undermined by the existence of a critical modernism which is self-reflexive about the relative and self-referential character of

all languages and which foregrounds the fictive character of all conceptions of selfhood and hence of cultural identity. The modernism of writers such as Joyce, Beckett and O'Nolan (manifest in their linguistic play and non-linear narratives, for example) can be seen in these terms as the result of the unique linguistic and cultural conditions produced by colonialism, and as a direct response to the alternative position that those conditions have produced, that is the nationalist claim for an intrinsic and determining relationship between the nation's language and its cultural identity. Richard Kearney reiterates this opposition between nationalism and modernism, provincialism and cosmopolitanism, tradition and modernity, essentialism and pluralism, Yeats and Joyce, when he argues:

> In our literature we also discern two opposing tendencies. One led by Yeats sponsored mythology. The other, including Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Joyce, resolved to demythologize the pretensions of the Revival in the name of a thoroughgoing modernism; it endeavoured to liberate literature from parochial preoccupations with identity into the universal concern of language as an endlessly self-creative process.[21]

The notion, then, that Irish modernism is based on the recognition of the materiality of language is linked specifically to a political critique of nationalism which retains an adherence to organic conceptions of language, culture and identity.

However, if nationalism and modernism both converge and diverge around this issue of language, a number of crucial questions arise which have an important bearing on our understanding of O'Nolan's work, and which problematize the uncritical appropriation of him for the modernist as opposed to nationalist side of the binary structure. For example, what connects the modernism of an Irish writer such as Joyce, whose formal experiments are the result of the linguistic unease produced by colonialism (an argument based on the famous 'tundish' episode in Portrait) with similar artistic procedures and ideas produced by other writers whose cultural experiences are determined by other social and political factors.[22] While O'Nolan was born at the end of the colonial era, there is very little sense in his work that colonialism is responsible for a feeling of linguistic unease which then informs his fictional practice. On the contrary, as we shall see in the next chapter, his engagement with questions of

language are framed almost entirely by debates about the means and value of reviving Irish in the particular cultural conditions of the 1930s and 40s. Furthermore, O'Nolan's linguistic alienation or his detached attitude towards language needs to be viewed not in the context of linguistic and cultural imperialism, but in terms of the rather idiosyncratic linguistic traditions of his family.

Another question which arises is whether or not colonialism is in fact the determining factor in (for example) Joyce's modernist consciousness. After all, Joyce is precisely one of the writers who experienced that clash of languages in the metropolitan centres of Paris and Zurich which Williams discusses, and this experience of the cultural conditions of the metropolis may have been as influential as his experience of colonialism, if not more so, in the formation of his acute awareness of the materiality of language. Furthermore, one could remain in Ireland and still be subject to the kind of conditions that Williams identifies in the metropolis. As I pointed out above, the particular locale in which O'Nolan lived in his early years was traversed by distinct languages and varieties of languages, and although this does not quite amount to a state of radical linguistic flux such as that which might have prevailed in certain parts of Paris or Berlin in the early decades of the century, nevertheless the conditions are analogous. This not only calls into question the assumption that linguistic unease in Ireland must only be the result of a linguistic situation that is produced by colonialism, but also Williams's suggestion that such unease is unique to the metropolis. These cultural conditions, it seems, are able to traverse both the metropolis and the provinces and can facilitate the emergence of modernist forms at the cultural margins as well as at the cosmopolitan centre.

One further question which might arise from the simultaneous convergence and divergence of nationalism and modernism on the issue of language is whether or not the modernism which is produced at the cultural margins rather than in the metropolis (given that analogous linguistic conditions can be seen to prevail) displays a more ambivalent attitude towards tradition and the national culture than critics such as Kearney and Deane suggest. In the passage cited above, Williams certainly suggests that the modernism which results from the

linguistic unease produced by the cultural conditions of the metropolis may take the form of a longing for returned wholeness and integration as much as a celebration of incompleteness and plurality. This is an insight that is too often overlooked in accounts of Irish modernism, and of O'Nolan's work in particular, which automatically infer a radical identity politics from experimental literary forms and pay too little attention to alternative ways of thinking about the politics of writing in modern Ireland. As a cursory glance at the canon of 'English' modernism demonstrates, there is no intrinsic correlation between literary experiment and a progressive politics. In the case of Eliot, Pound and Lewis (all of whom are cited in At Swim as influences on O'Nolan's work), quite the reverse is true. Likewise there is no intrinsic correlation between formal innovation and outright opposition to cultural nationalism on the part of Irish writers, as Kearney suggests in the passage cited above. And it is part of the larger argument of this thesis that quite the reverse is true of O'Nolan's work.

O'Nolan's cultural politics cannot be read off from the form of his work as easily as some of his critics seem to imply, for the question of the the cultural formations in which he and his work circulated, and cultural and intellectual position from which he addressed the cultural problems about which he wrote, reveal a number of crucial tensions and contradictions which have been overlooked in the formalist bent of O'Nolan criticism. In this chapter, I have attempted to begin to address these problems by underlining the particular form taken by the defamiliarized relationship to language which seems to inform his modernism. While the unusual nature of O'Nolan's relation to Irish and English reveals a degree of dislocation from the apparently authentic linguistic communities of the Gaeltacht with which he was identified, I would like to suggest that this dislocation does not necessarily preclude an investment in the 'authenticity' of those communities and a belief in their essential relationship with the language. Furthermore, this experience of dislocation itself may in fact generate and drive such an investment in the idea of an authentic linguistic community retaining an organic relationship with the Irish language and Gaelic cultural traditions.

The discussion of O'Nolan's response to the crisis in the Irish language (explored at length in chapter 2) and his three early novels leads me to conclude that what emerges in this work is an acute tension between a cultural nationalist impulse located around the Irish language, literature and culture, and a modernist impulse located around an awareness of the arbitrary and material nature of language - a sense of yearning for something integral impacting upon a modernist recognition that this wholeness cannot be achieved given the inessential character of language and the discursive nature of the self. This tension manifests itself most clearly in his work on the Gaelic Revival, where there is a conflict between a residual belief in the idea that the Irish language is indeed the repository of certain fundamental values and experiences that are particular to the Irish people, and a practical consciousness which recognizes that the English language (or, as we shall see, certain forms of it) is wholly adequate to the modern Irish experience and as the basis upon which a modern sense of Irishness can be forged. In other words, his awareness of the relative nature of all languages arising from his dislocated relationship to both Irish and English leads him to the recognition that English, in and of itself, does not embody the values and experiences of the English people alone. I would argue that while the modernist impulse is dominant in his thought, this is undermined by his different relationship to the Irish cultural heritage, while at the same time enabling some sense of compatibility between the two. One of the central aims of the project, then, is to deconstruct this opposition between O'Nolan's interest in the Irish language and language **per se**, and to reveal his fundamental involvement in language politics debates around the English language in Ireland.

This thesis thus aims to relocate O'Nolan in a set of different literary and cultural relations to those in which he is habitually placed. By exploring O'Nolan's complex relationship to the Irish language and the question of its revival, I shall attempt to read his earlier writings in the light of my conclusions about his work on the language. In relating these conclusions to the formations of literary modernism and cultural nationalism in his work, I shall suggest that rather than simply rejecting dominant discourses of cultural nationalism **per se**, as is commonly supposed on account of his

experimental narrative form, O'Nolan critiques some of the specific forms which official cultural nationalism takes in this period but retains a strong yearning to ground identity in something enduring and authentically Irish, thereby revealing a dependence on cultural nationalist principles. This emerges as a strain within his writing, often producing contradictions which rub up anxiously against his modernist literary practice. This is also to suggest that this central problem which motivates and structures O'Nolan's writing should be related to the failure of both this dominant strain of Irish cultural nationalism and the identity of European modernism to account for, or resolve, his peculiar and fraught position in relationship to these formations. In the following chapters O'Nolan's novels and non-fictional writings produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s will be read in relationship to the central tenets of official cultural nationalism, language, religion, the land and the peasantry, to explore ways in which in this early work he attempts to negotiate a critical relationship to these principles at the level of the cultural imaginary and to read these imaginative texts through and against the non-fictional writings he produced in the same period. Despite the critical characterisation of O'Nolan as a writer whose primary achievements are typically located in the sphere of his formally innovative literary practice alone, this analysis will trace in its readings of the three novels produced at this moment of crisis point for Irish cultural nationalism an insistent return to the same apparently intractable problems of Irish cultural identity and nationhood. As I will suggest in my conclusion, these returns ultimately express his failure to resolve these problems satisfactorily and eventually underpin his rejection of the novel form for twenty years.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. A selection of these reviews can be found in Rudiger Imhof (ed.), Alive, Alive O! Flann O'Brien's 'At Swim-Two-Birds'.

2. See Rudiger Imhof, 'Chinese Box: Flann O'Brien in the Metafiction of Alasdair Gray, John Fowles, and Robert Coover', and Sue Asbee, Flann O'Brien, ch.8.

3. Seamus Deane, A Short History of Irish Literature, pp.194-5.

4. For an account of the manner in which Joyce was received and appropriated by Irish writers in this period see Terence Brown, 'Yeats, Joyce and the Irish Critical Debate', in Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays, pp.77-90.

5. Joyce's influence on subsequent Irish novelists is charted in James M. Cahalan, The Irish Novel; A Critical History, and the strength of his influence on Irish poets is explored in Dillon Johnston, Irish Poetry After Joyce.

6. This argument is pursued further in my discussion of At Swim-Two-Birds in Chapter 2 below.

7. Richard Kearney, Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture, pp.12-3.

8. ibid., p.85.

9. See Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, ch.4.

10. Alan Sinfield, Literature, Culture and Politics in Postwar Britain, p.41.

11. David Cairns and Sean Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, ch.6.

12. It should be noted that recent work by Emer Nolan in James Joyce and Nationalism and Terry Eagleton in Heathcliff and the Great Hunger has implicitly gone beyond Kearney's stark oppositions to suggest a more complex relationship between nationalism and modernism in Irish literary history.

13. The following information is taken from the following biographical sources: Anthony Cronin, The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, Timothy O'Keefe (ed.), Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, Peter Costello and Peter Van de Kamp, Flann O'Brien: An Illustrated Biography, Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, ch.1, and Kate Newman, Dictionary of Ulster Biography, p.231.

14. cit. Anthony Cronin, The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.55.

15. For a thorough bibliography of O'Nolan's writings in Irish see Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, pp.240-7.

16. Reg Hindley, The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary, p.65.

17. ibid., p.26.

18. See G.B. Adams, 'The Dialects of Ulster, in Diarmaid O Muirithe (ed.) The English Language in Ireland, pp.56-70, and John Braidwood, The Ulster Dialect Lexicon.

19. Raymond Williams, 'Language and the Avant-Garde', in Nigel Fabb, et al (eds), The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature, pp.44-5.

20. Seamus Deane, 'Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea', pp.45-6.

21. Richard Kearney,'Myth and Motherland', pp.69-70.

22. An interesting discussion of this episode in relation to experiences of linguistic alienation can be found in Seamus Heaney, 'The Interesting Case of John Alphonsus Mulrennan'.

Chapter Two

Language, Nation and Cultural Identity: O'Nolan and the Gaelic Revival

> What is the sole and true badge of nationhood? **The national language.** Without what would it be idle to seek to revive the national language? **Our distinctive national culture.**
>
> (The Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliche)

- I -

In his lifetime, Brian O'Nolan's views on the revival of the Irish language were celebrated and condemned in equal measure, but rarely were they properly understood or their implications thoroughly thought through. From the moment that he first entered into public debate on the subject in 1940, his writings in and about the language caused controversy, generating knee-jerk responses either for or against his views on the part of both 'orthodox' cultural nationalists insisting on root and branch Gaelicization of the national culture, and the self-styled 'modernizing' language enthusiasts advocating the preservation of Irish in a bilingual rather than monolingual cultural context. While the former censured him for his apparently iconoclastic attitude towards the language movement and the revival project in general, the latter applauded him for his pragmatic and modernizing approach to the problem of how to revive the language in the changing and challenging circumstances of the early forties. In more recent accounts of his work, however, this sense of controversy and political ambivalence surrounding his actual writings on the language has become obscured by a tendency among critics to over-simplify the complex positions he took on the revival by celebrating him as the scourge of nationalist ideologues, a standard-bearer (as one historian has characterized him) for 'the saner brand of cultural nationalist who felt nothing but nausea for the new, official, government approved, sanitised, **Iosa milis**, Gaelic revivalism'.[1] Breandan O Conaire, for

example, has described O'Nolan's attitude towards the revival in wholly oppositional terms:

> 'Cruiskeen Lawn' ... was, from the beginning, provocative, abrasive and scathing, especially in relation to all matters Irish. ... It singled out with particular venom the narrow, introverted backward-looking bias, the shibboleths prevalent in sectors of the Irish culture-language movement, the official lip-service paid to the Language Revival and the petrified mental attitudes associated with the establishment world of the Irish language. Mockery and insult, ridicule and sarcasm, parody and caricature were directed at these with a derisive bitterness that seemed at times close to contemptuous rejection.[2]

While it is true that O'Nolan frequently expressed contempt for some aspects of the language movement, and that it remained one of the major objects of his derision, it would not be fair to say that he was a straightforward and uncompromising opponent of all aspects of revivalist ideology, nor of organizations such as the Gaelic League which worked to make the principle of language revival a reality. O'Nolan's interest in the revival wasn't confined to the negative practice of caricaturing 'the ridiculous aspects of the language movement' and ridiculing 'the blind support of everything Gaelic', as some of his commentators have suggested recently.[3] While this satire is undoubtedly an important part of his work on the language, it represents only one aspect of that work - that which is negative, oppositional, heterodox. For there is also a more positive side to his thoughts on the revival which is sensitive to the broad range of motives and ideas which inspired and sustained the revival movement, and which makes his interventions on the subject appear significantly more complex and more affirmative than many critics have recognized.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who criticized the revival for its puritanical and xenophobic tendencies, he was able to separate some of the more excessive ideas and activities of the hard-line Gaelic purists in the language movement from the actual ideal of reviving the language, and he retained an acute awareness of its continuing cultural significance in spite of the fact that the revival had (in his view) been hijacked by 'professional Gaels' and made to serve conservative social ends. In the early forties, especially, he firmly believed in the principle of language revival, and although he often criticized revivalists for their dogmatic adherence to narrow

and idealized conceptions of the Gaelic cultural heritage, he shared with them some fundamental attitudes concerning the relevance of the language to the cultural vitality of modern Ireland and hence of the urgent need to preserve it. More significantly, he even endorsed some of the specific government policies designed to make the idea of revival a reality, which is remarkable considering O'Nolan's self-styled public image as the scourge of all forms of officialdom and political orthodoxy.

The basic ideas which emerge from his writings on the revival are distinguished from those of most of his contemporaries by the realistic understanding and sophisticated insights which he brought to the language debate. For example, he argued that the principle of revival had to be separated from the form which it had taken to date and from the narrow conception of Irishness which it was being used to promote. In other words, the language itself was not to be equated with the positions and strategies of the 'orthodox' language enthusiasts who had come to dominate the revival since independence. In particular, it was imperative that the language was divested of it debilitating association with the West of Ireland and religious puritanism (an association which had become especially prevalent in the 1930s), for a language which was vital and modern could not be burdened with connotations of rural backwardness, poverty and provincialism. Furthermore, the objective of the revival should not be the **restoration** of Irish as the vernacular, (as it had been officially decreed), but its **preservation** in a bilingual context. In his view, the aim of entirely displacing English replacing it with Irish as the common speech of the Irish people was entirely unreasonable, for it did not take into account the realities of the linguistic situation in Ireland (ie. the dominance of English and the precariousness of Irish) which, once acknowledged, would force the language movement to accept the more modest aim of simply preserving the language from extinction.

He held also that there was an integral relation between Irish and the variety of English that was spoken and (in some cases) written in Ireland, and that the intellectual rationale for reviving the language had to be reformulated to take account of this. This would require cultural nationalism to recognize the interaction and cross-fertilization that occurred between Irish and English in modern

Ireland, and consequently for it to abandon the prevalent idea that the two languages were absolutely sealed off from each other, remaining permanently frozen in a relation of mutual exclusivity. Moreover, with the death of the Irish language seemingly imminent, Irish-English might offer the basis in which to ground a modern Irish identity or, at the very least, form part of the grounds on which Ireland's linguistic distinctiveness and cultural difference from England might be asserted. In turn, this would mean discriminating between (at least) two varieties of English: English as it was conceived to be spoken in England, and Hiberno-English or Irish-English, a form of English which (it had long been argued) had been modified and invigorated by its contact and partial 'fusion' with Irish.[4] As the distinctiveness and continued vitality of Irish-English depended upon its interaction with Gaelic, it was imperative that the language be preserved and (hence) that the revival be sustained. Even at a time when the language was at its most depressed and unstable state, O'Nolan was able to provide a coherent rationale for pursuing the cultural goal of language revival which both took account of contemporary realities and did not invoke nationalism's crude and xenophobic appeals to the purity of Gaelic culture.

O'Nolan began to explore these ideas in his earliest public statements on the language question from 1940, and the controversy and hostility that was frequently generated around them is indicative of the anxiety felt within the language movement, not only about the critical state of the language at that time but (perhaps more significantly) also about attempts to reformulate radically the objectives and rationale of the revival from a position that was broadly sympathetic to it. What makes him particularly interesting as a writer on the subject is precisely this tension in his work between positive and negative impulses - between a keen sense of the cultural value of language revival and a recognition that it could not be achieved either in the terms that had been originally envisaged or in the forms which it was currently taking. To ignore this tension in his work by emphasising the latter impulse at the expense of the former is not only to be reductive about the scope and subtlety of O'Nolan's thinking on the language question, but (given that his ideas form an integral part of the debates about the language which took place

within the language movement from the late thirties onward) it is also simplistic about the capacity of the language movement itself to be self-reflexive and flexible in the face of changing social realities.

O'Nolan's views on the revival of the Irish language have never been adequately theorized. The partial and reductive accounts of his ideas provided by his commentators, which are usually based on a handful of his later, more polemical utterances on the subject, has served only to obscure rather than sharpen the broad outlines of his argument about the future of the language and the significance of his specific insights into its crucial relationship with English in modern Ireland. In this chapter I shall attempt to provide a critical account of O'Nolan's attitudes towards the government policies of language revival and the cultural nationalist ideology that underlies it, in particular his complex response to the cultural nationalist claim that there is an intrinsic connection between the Irish language and Irish national identity. I shall be looking at his comments on the Irish language, focussing on his ideas about its character and its relationship with English, and also his comments on the English language as it is variously used in both Ireland and England. I shall be arguing that rather than being unambiguously opposed to Gaelic revivalism as is often suggested, O'Nolan's attitudes towards the idea of reviving Irish, and towards the cultural nationalism which was its ideological support, is much more complex than has hitherto been recognized. Indeed, such is the nature of O'Nolan's ambivalent relationship with the language that he often embraces contradictory positions regarding its character, value and function in modern Irish cultural life. Sometimes he comes close to repudiating cultural nationalism's claims that there is an essential link between a nation and its language, while at other times he espouses positions which are compatible with such claims in interesting and significant ways. Indeed, sometimes his positions are difficult for him to sustain in any consistent or coherent manner for they require him to both refuse and embrace some of the fundamental propositions of the particular form of Irish cultural nationalism from which he is trying to distance himself and beyond which he is trying to move. As I shall demonstrate, the English language (or rather, the particular variety of the language known as Irish-English) becomes the crucial site upon which

these ambivalences and contradictions are played out and tentatively resolved.

In some ways O'Nolan attempted to reformulate the grounding principles of the revival by adapting them to prevailing linguistic trends in Ireland. To that extent he was totally caught up in the intellectual changes which were taking place with regard to the language in the 1940s, and he is typical of many of his generation who wished to see the language movement modernized and revealing broader cultural sympathies than it had done in the twenties and thirties. As Terence Brown has demonstrated, contrary to the widely held view that criticism of the revival had its origins in those who were fundamentally hostile to it on principle, 'it was in the ranks of the revivalists that some of the first signs of ideological change based on a perception of social change can be detected' in the early forties,[5] and it is proper that we regard O'Nolan's views as both a response and contribution to the cultural debate that was taking place within the broader language movement itself at this time. Although he was never part of the official language movement (as a member of a cultural organisation, for example) and could be extremely hostile towards the purist and exclusivist strain which came to dominate it in the 1930s, his writings on the language can only be properly understood if we locate them in the mainstream of contemporary thought on the issue, seeing them as an integral part of the revival at a crucial moment of crisis and transformation. By acknowledging that O'Nolan's writings on the language form part of a larger cultural debate, we are better able to see that, like many of the arguments put forward in that debate, his views are complex and often contradictory, reflecting the fact that the outlines of that debate had only just begun to take shape by 1940 and that its full implications for thinking about cultural identity were yet to be clearly realized.

It is to this debate that I shall now turn by briefly outlining the history of the revival in the Irish Free State and the crisis around the language which led revivalists in the late thirties and early forties to reconsider their fundamental objectives and strategies. Given that the debate at this time often tended to revolve around very local issues (the specifics of government policy, for example), and as it was O'Nolan's nature to intervene at this level,

the precise character of the debate needs to be sketched with greater attention to local detail than to the broader philosophical ideas which underpinned the revival in the Irish Free State (these were very much taken for granted by this time, it seems to me). Only against this background does the full meaning and significance of O'Nolan's vision of the future of the Irish language properly emerge.

- II -

O'Nolan's comments on the Irish revival can best be understood if we place them in the context of the crisis surrounding the language from the late 1930s and the ensuing debate about the objectives and strategies for its preservation and promotion. Discussion about the language in this period was characterized by a pervading sense of despondency about the lack of progress that the revival had made and the bleak outlook for the language. Writing in the new periodical Eire in 1942, Ciaran O Nuallain (Brian O'Nolan's elder brother) pointed to the precarious position of the language at that time, and to the widespread fear that it might die out altogether:

> When the history of the revival of Irish comes to be written, after the language is out of danger, I believe that the year 1940 will be seen as the time when it was at its lowest ebb and closest to extinction.[6]

The period was also characterized by deep feelings of frustration and bitterness at the manner in which the language had come to be associated with a puritanical strain of Catholicism and narrow conceptions of what it meant to be Irish. Writing in the short-lived journal Ireland Today in 1938, Niall Sheridan (one of O'Nolan's closest friends and the model for Brinsley in At Swim) seemed to speak for his generation when he claimed that people were turning away from the language because they did not share many of the the prejudices of of the revival movement:

> All those who cherish Irish for the culture it enshrined are being gradually antagonized by the methods of the revivalists. The intolerance and bigotry displayed by its leaders have alienated all those to whom the language is not a trade.[7]

Together, despondency about the prospects of the language actually surviving and frustration at its association with puritanism and provincialism forced many writers and intellectuals to reassess their

relationship to the idea of reviving the language. While some (like Beckett, for example) repudiated the language revival outright because they could not accept the ideological baggage that had become wedded to it over the previous two decades, others remained basically sympathetic to the aims of the revival in spite of their criticisms of the narrow cultural values of the official revival movement.

As a result, there occurred a radical reassessment of the objective of restoring the language to vernacular status, the means by which the state was attempting to achieve this, and the kind of cultural identity that the language was being used to promote. The process of questioning the aims and strategies of the revival movement had serious implications for the ideology of cultural nationalism, which not only legitimated the revival and was itself sustained by the continued existence of the language. Any deviation from the fundamental aim of displacing English as the vernacular and replacing it with Irish throughout the country necessarily entailed radically rethinking (if not altogether abandoning) the idea that Irishness was based on a pure and enduring Gaelic identity that was grounded first and foremost in the language and reconstructing it as something modern and hybrid. It is precisely within this context of a changing intellectual climate around the objectives, strategies and ideologies of the revival that O'Nolan's ideas about the language will be read. As we shall see, notions of purity and hybridity in language, culture and identity turn out to be crucially significant concepts in his work on language and culture in this period.

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The philosophical premises of cultural nationalism assert that humanity is naturally divided into nations which are known by certain identifiable characteristics, and that it is the moral duty of each nation to preserve its unique character by forming a state of its own and governing itself in accordance with the popular will.[8] In other words, the desires and destiny of a unique cultural entity (the nation) are embodied in the actions of a political entity (the state), the **raison d'etre** of which is the prior existence the cultural entity of the nation. The nation is recognised to exist by virtue of

possessing its own unique language: languages are the external markers of the cultural differences which distinguish one nation from another, and a unique language is the main criterion by which a nation recognizes itself to exist. Hence, language is the primary determinant of national identity, and the national language must be preserved by the state and spoken by all members of the nation. To take up the language of another nation is to become inauthentic and unnatural, for one cannot express one's essential identity in another tongue. Individual identity is co-existent with the nation, and the identity of the nation is co-existent with the individuals who make it up. Thus, it is incumbent upon all members of the nation and the political institutions of the state to ensure that the nation does not fall into decay by preserving the national language in its original pure form, uncontaminated by contact with other languages.

The revival of the language by the government of the Irish Free State was underpinned by the principles of cultural nationalism as they had been formulated by the intellectuals of the Gaelic League (such as Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill and Patrick Pearse) in the decades leading up to independence. Looking back on the struggle for national independence in 1922, Michael Collins pointed to the indissoluble link between cultural autonomy and political sovereignty, and emphasised the crucial significance of the language in the continuing struggle against British cultural hegemony now that political independence had been secured:

> We only succeeded after we had begun to get back our Irish ways; after we had made a serious effort to speak our own language; after we had striven again to govern ourselves. We can only keep out the enemy and all other enemies by completing that task. ... We are now free in name. The extent to which we become free in fact and secure our freedom will be the extent to which we become Gaels again. ... The biggest task will be the restoration of the language.[9]

In accordance with the doctrines of cultural nationalism outlined above, Collins suggested that true freedom had not been gained simply by the achievement of political independence. Complete autonomy would only become a reality when the nation was culturally independent from Britain also, that is when the Irish people could express their unique national character in their own national language. By continuing to speak English, the Irish people were still enslaved, alienated from

their true selves by their adherence to a language which embodied the values of a foreign culture and which thereby marginalized and denigrated the quality of their specifically Irish experience. As Sean O Tuama has argued, this was the philosophical rationale behind the Gaelic League's insistence on the de-anglicization of Irish culture, an insistence born not out of xenophobia and nationalistic bigotry (as it sometimes appeared) but out of a concern that 'the Irish personality could not reach its potential except in a community proper to it':

> Clearly their notion was that you cannot normally produce creative or integrated personalities unless you have a creative and integrated community with a special and continuing experience of its own. ... The Gaelic League was asking the Irish people to have done with a second-class, imitative, provincial way of life, and to put something vital, and Irish in its stead. In this vision of things the restoration of the Irish language as the main community language was bound to be a major part of the programme. But the whole programme was directed towards building up, in every sector, a revitalized and distinctive Irish community which, of course, would have strong organic links with its own past.[10]

It had been argued since at least the end of the nineteenth century that the essential reality of the Irish nation was located in its Gaelic heritage. 'The foundation of Ireland is the Gael', D.P. Moran had declared in The Philosophy of Irish Ireland, 'on no other basis can an Irish nation be reared'.[11] The essential, authentic and enduring Ireland was Gaelic Ireland, and it was in the Irish language that the history and culture of Gaelic Ireland could be most readily encountered. Hence, root and branch displacement of English by Irish was the means by which an entire culture would be revived and the freedom of full nationhood be attained. Writing in The Leader in 1900, Moran envisaged a modern Gaelic Ireland as 'a self-governing land, living, moving and having its being in its own language, self-reliant, intellectually as well as politically independent, ... creating its own literature out of its own distinctive consciousness'.[12] Speaking for the people of a newly independent Ireland in 1925, Eoin MacNeill (Gaelic League activist and first Minister for Education in the Irish Free State) reiterated the argument for wholesale gaelicization in the following eloquent and impeccably orthodox cultural nationalist terms:

> For my own part, if Irish nationality were not to mean a distinctive Irish civilization, I would attach no very

> great value to Irish national independence. If I want personal liberty to myself, it is in order that I may be myself, may live my own life in my own way, not that I may live that second-hand, hand-me-down life of somebody else. ... If I want national freedom for my people, it is in order that they may live in their own way a life which is their own, that they may preserve and develop their own nationality, their own distinctive species of civilization.[13]

When MacNeill made the rather extravagant claim that the government's gaelicization policy was the best way not only of cementing the Irish nation but of reconstructing an entire Gaelic civilization, he was in fact being wholly consistent with the fundamental principles of cultural nationalism.

The Irish Free State's attempt to revive the language was to be more than simply a symbolic assertion of Ireland's cultural difference from Britain, though the language served as the most obvious external sign of that difference. Rather, the ultimate outcome of the revival was to be the regeneration of the entire national culture, and this became one of the primary objectives of the Free State's first Executive Council when it took office in 1922. From the outset it was made clear that the language was to be an essential element in the identity of the new state. In 1919 the First Dail Eireann had set up a Ministry for Irish, and the 1922 Free State Constitution declared Irish to be 'the national language' (Article 4), thereby officially cementing the union between the Irish language and Irish nationality. Having signalled the importance of cultural as well as political independence from Britain in the manner advocated by Moran and Collins, the Free State government immediately put into action what one historian has described as the only truly radical policy enacted by any Irish government in the immediate post-Independence period - the restoration of Irish as the vernacular throughout Ireland.[14]

In principle, the ultimate aim of the language policy was to make Ireland monolingual. Its overriding objective was not simply to increase the knowledge of Irish among the populations of the English-speaking areas of the country; rather, it was envisaged that a wholesale displacement of English as the vernacular would take place, with Irish becoming the primary language of everyday communication in Ireland. As one particular Gaelic League pamphlet unambiguously put it in 1936:

> All change means destruction. Just as the change to an English-speaking Ireland entailed the destruction of Irish, so must the change back to an Irish-speaking Ireland make the ultimate destruction of English in Ireland inevitable. To say that Irish was not completely destroyed is but to say that the change was not consummated. English came, Irish went. If Irish is to come, English must go.[15]

This policy required a dual objective: to revive the language as the vernacular in those areas where it had long since been replaced by English, and to keep it alive within those areas where it was still a living language amongst the wider community. Clearly the success of these two objectives would depend on factors other than the willingness of the people to embrace the language for the purposes of ordinary face-to-face communication: the widespread adoption and dissemination of the language by the institutions of the state (the official bureaucracy and the media, for example) in the predominantly English-speaking parts of the country would need to be encouraged, and a reversal of the population decline in the Gaeltacht (the predominantly Irish speaking areas) would have to be effected by drastically improving economic conditions there.[16] While the government took some measures to achieve this, its primary commitment to the revival was through the systematic gaelicization of the education system. William Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council, put the matter bluntly in the Dail in 1923:

> How are you going to reconstruct this nation? Upon what basis is the superstructure to be built? Must we not look to the Minister for Education to mark the gaelicization ... of our whole culture ... to make our nation separate and distinct and something to be thought of?[17]

The first free State Minister for Education was Eoin MacNeill, Professor of Early and Medieval Irish History at U.C.D. and Vice-President of the Gaelic League prior to his involvement with the Irish Volunteers. As an ardent cultural nationalist, MacNeill thoroughly endorsed Cosgrave's vision of using education as the means of reviving Gaelic culture as a whole, and he made quite clear his faith in such a policy in the Irish Statesman in 1925:

> Nationality, in the best sense, is the form and kind of civilization developed by a particular people and distinctive of that people. ... I believe in the capacity of the Irish people, if they clear their minds, for building up an Irish civilization. I hold that the chief function of an Irish State and of an Irish Government is

> to subserve that work. I hold that the principle duty of an Irish Government in its educational policy is to subserve that work. I am willing to discuss how this can best be done, but not discuss how it can be done without.[18]

The same year, MacNeill enacted a series of measures which were to form the cornerstone of Irish educational practice for decades. In Gaeltacht schools all subjects were to be taught in Irish, regardless of whether or not it was the home-language of the children, while in schools outside the Gaeltacht Irish was made compulsory as a second language, and other subjects were taught through the language where it was felt to be appropriate. Monolingual education in the Gaeltacht and bilingual education outside it (even at the expense of other subjects which were often reduced or scrapped to accommodate extra provision of the language) were the foundations of the government's revival policy, and they were pursued with such single-minded determination that 'education and the language became inextricable threads in the fabric of Irish society', as one historian has commented, 'debate on the one tended inevitably to raise the question of the other'.[19]

By the early 1940s, however, it was becoming increasingly evident that the state's language policy was not producing the widespread linguistic renewal that had been anticipated. Two problems in particular stood out. First, if the revival was to be successful it was important that the language was preserved in those areas where it was still living, and this required the preservation of the Gaeltacht itself as a social and economic unit. But in the absence of a coherent programme of economic renewal (stabilizing local industry, creating employment, and making welfare provisions) the decline of the Gaeltacht could not be reversed, and emigration motivated by economic necessity continued unabated. As the Irish-speaking areas continued to shrink in size, so did the number of Irish speakers. Add to this the fact that Irish-speaking parents were increasingly inclined to bring up their children in English because their economic prospects would be enhanced by emigration to Britain and America, and the fact that the English-speaking world was rapidly encroaching on the Gaeltacht in the form of Anglo-American mass-culture and tourism, it was clear that the language was being slowly eroded in those areas where its survival was of paramount importance.

If the cultural hegemony of English was not being withstood in the Gaeltacht, it should come as no surprise that there was no significant linguistic progress outside it. Although census figures for the period indicated an increase in the number of people living outside of the Gaeltacht who claimed a knowledge of Irish (undoubtedly the result of the compulsory Irish policy in schools), there was no evidence to suggest that they used the language informally in their daily lives. In fact, outside of the schools the opportunities to do so were rare. Although some steps had been taken to make Irish a central feature of the state bureaucracy (proficiency in Irish was a mandatory qualification for some state employments such as the Civil Service and the Judiciary) with the intention of ensuring that people regularly came into contact with the language through their dealings with the state, 'no genuine attempt was made to gaelicize either politics or the civil service, prerequisites for the success of the revival'.[20] As a result, any progress that had been made since independence could only be regarded as short-term and superficial.

With emigration from the Irish-speaking districts increasing and no real progress achieved elsewhere in terms of the language being used for everyday purposes, it was coming to be widely recognised that 'the revival policy was not creating a situation where an eventual linguistic exchange might occur'; on the contrary Terence Brown suggests, 'it was evident that the Irish language was nearing the point of extinction'.[21] In fact, so desperate was the situation in 1940 that even The Leader (founded in 1900 by D.P. Moran as an organ of thoroughgoing political, economic and cultural nationalism) acknowledged that 'people today lack faith in the possibility of language revival', and went on to clearly link the failure of the revival with the protracted economic crisis in the Irish-speaking districts:

> There is no use, therefore, in blinking the fact that the last reservoirs of living and vigorous Irish on whose continuance depends the success of what we are trying to do in the Gaeltacht are vanishing before our eyes.[22]

Even revival activists were forced to admit that their effort to resuscitate the language in areas where it had been dead for many years was pointless if it could not even be kept alive in its own heartland.

By 1940, then, there was a general awareness that the policy of language revival was failing to fulfil its objectives, and a general loss of faith in the possibility of genuine revival was beginning to occur. Moreover, for the first time since the government embarked on its drive to restore the language in 1922, there was explicit criticism of that policy by individuals and organizations who had hitherto thoroughly supported the idea of language revival as the principal means of asserting Ireland's cultural distinctiveness. In particular, teachers in the National Schools were concerned that the state's dependence on the schools for the success of its language policy was seriously affecting educational standards in general. In the 1920s the Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO) had readily co-operated with the Department of Education in its plan to gaelicize the schools (government policy had in fact been based on a series of recommendations put forward by INTO and the Gaelic League). By the mid-1930s, however, there was a marked shift of opinion away from sympathy with the idea of wholesale gaelicization of the education system, as was indicated by the report from their inquiry into the use of Irish as a teaching medium (published in 1941) which expressed the view that the majority of National School teachers were opposed on educational grounds to using Irish as the sole medium of instruction when the home language was English. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the organization was opposed to the principle of revival. Rather, its criticism was directed at the specific strategy of placing the burden of language restoration almost solely on the National Schools. Not only did this strategy have a deleterious effect on children's overall progress, it was argued, but it was actually having an adverse effect on the progress of the language itself. In using the schools as the sole weapon in their cultural crusade, the government was in fact reinforcing the lack of cultural prestige which had been accorded to the language since the mid-nineteenth century.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the government did not respond to these criticisms in a sympathetic manner. Speaking as the Fianna Fail Minister for Education in the Dail in 1943, Thomas Derrig reasserted the principal of replacing English with Irish as the vernacular through compulsory Irish in the schools when he declared that Irish could not be saved 'without waging a most intense war against English,

and against human nature itself for the life of the language'.[23] Nevertheless, while some revivalists vigorously defended Derrig's position, many others were beginning to feel that they could not depend upon the state alone to achieve their desired objective, and there was a growing feeling amongst them that it wasn't just the language that needed reviving, but the language movement as a whole. And in order to achieve this, there needed to be a shift away from exclusive dependence on government policy in favour of re-establishing the kind of popular cultural organizations which emerged all over Ireland in the 1890s but which had largely withered away with the coming of independence in the 1920s (with the significant exception of some parts of Northern Ireland where Irish was not the national language). It was recognized that the real hope for the future of the language lay in the development of a modernized language movement which would be more effective in stimulating an interest in Gaelic culture in the anglicized towns and the cities where the language had to take root if the revival was going to be a realistic cultural enterprise. As a result, a host of independent educational and cultural enterprises were established in the forties - journals and periodicals, publishing houses and language organizations, and (most importantly) new writers attempting to forge the language into an instrument capable of dealing with the changing realities of the modern world. As we shall see below, it is precisely this question of the language's relation to contemporary experience which so preoccupied O'Nolan in this period, and which became one of the central threads of his work on the language.

Retrospectively, then, the 1940s was a crucial moment in the history of the revival. It was the moment at which the harsh realities of modern Irish culture collided with the ideals which had informed the revival and made those ideals untenable if they persisted in their existing form. Increasing despair at the imminent death of the language in the Irish-speaking areas and its failure to take root elsewhere, forced many revivalists to reconsider the main strategies which had been adopted in the twenties. The schools policy had failed to encourage people to use Irish as the language of everyday life, largely because the government had relied exclusively on that policy to bring about the revival and had not given serious thought to other

strategies which might complement the schools policy and help make the language a more accessible and familiar medium of communication. As a result, some revivalists became critical of the government's insistence on gaelicizing the schools as the exclusive means of restoring the language. Unwilling to rely on a single strategy to achieve their aims, they set up independent educational and cultural enterprises to complement the schools policy, and they targeted those areas where the revival had made little if any impact - the anglicized towns and cities where the language was most associated with the backwardness and deprivation of rural life.

Out of crisis, then, came renewal and revitalization, at least in terms of the the activities and strategies which the language movement was now beginning to adopt. But this renewal brought with it another set of problems concerning the fundamental objectives involved in the attempt to revive the language and (most significantly) the ideological repercussions that were attached to it. For the crisis in the fortunes of the language at this time suggested to some revivalists that they should change not just their strategies but their actual objectives too. Rather than forcing Irish to compete against the unrelenting cultural hegemony of English by persisting with the idea that Irish should simply replace English as the language spoken by all Irish people in their everyday lives, the near death of the language persuaded some of them to adopt the more practical and attainable aspiration of simply preserving the language and increasing people's knowledge and interest in it where possible. Hence, the more realistic albeit uninspiring aim of creating a people conversant in both Irish and English began to replace the revolutionary dream of a monolingual Gaelic nation sealed off from the debasing influences of the English language, cosmopolitan intellectual forces and Anglo-American mass-culture.

However, there were serious ideological repercussions attached to the adoption of bilingualism as opposed to monolingualism as the ultimate objective of the revival. For how can the language be used as the criterion of Irish national identity if it is no longer necessary for people to speak it? How can Irish be both the mark of the nation's external difference and the source of its internal cohesion once it has been conceded that English is the **lingua franca** of most of the

population? How is national identity constituted now that its essential defining feature, the language, is acknowledged to be contingent? Indeed, what is the point of trying to revive the language at all if there is no longer any philosophical or political rationale for doing so? It is precisely this set of problems that O'Nolan's comments on the language articulate so clearly, and it is to his work that I shall now turn, reading it as an attempt to find a satisfactory solution to the ideological crisis that had beset the language movement at this particular moment and for which his own ideas were in part responsible.

- III -

In September 1960 O'Nolan spoke to a meeting of the Belfast branch of An Comhchaidreahm, a revivalist organization which had been set up in the mid-1930s in reaction to the Gaelic League's failure to achieve its primary objective of restoring the Irish language to the vernacular. Seeking to achieve the Gaelic League's original aims of preserving and promoting the language, An Comhchaidreamh had been the driving force behind some of the most innovative and successful Irish language ventures of the previous two decades (the journal Comhar founded in 1942, Comhail Naisiunta Gaelige [the National Congress of the Irish Language] founded in 1943, and the cultural organization Gael Linn founded in 1953). However, with blatant disregard for the efforts and achievements of the organization which he was addressing, O'Nolan described the Irish language as 'useless' and the attempt to revive it as 'plain silly'. 'There is no instance on record of a dead or moribund language being revived', he argued, 'the re-creation of an Irish-speaking Ireland is a delusion that should be looked after by doctors concerned with diseases of the mind'. With the kind of blunt irony that only O'Nolan was capable of, however, he addressed his comments to the meeting entirely in Irish.[24]

There is nothing unusual about O'Nolan denigrating the language and disparaging the attempt to revive it, particularly in his later years when he became increasingly strident and uncompromising in his views on the issue. Writing in 'Cruiskeen Lawn' in 1962, he insisted that the aim of restoring the language was a romantic ideal which

could never be realised because it had long ceased to be a living language and no-one wanted to speak it anyway:

> Every language has its life-cycle, and Irish was virtually dead three centuries ago. ... Is there any point in paying so much attention to a dead language? ... I cannot recollect any other instance of an extinct language being revived to become the vernacular speech of everyday life, particularly among a tiny community with millions of kin in Britain and the US. Apart entirely from that, it is a plain fact that the Irish people do not want the Irish language, even if they could get it.[25]

Speaking in a debate on 'The Future of the Irish Language' at the 1956 Tostal (an annual festival of Irish culture), he was even more forthright in his denunciation of the language movement for its obstinate refusal to accept the simple fact that the revival had been a dismal failure both as a government policy and as a popular movement. 'The people of this country do not want Irish', he insisted, 'it is a romantic and obsolete tongue as a medium of ordinary communication', and went on to argue that the state revival policy should be completely scrapped. 'The Irish revival movement is a deliberate farce', he concluded.[26]

These are unambiguous statements of O'Nolan's attitude towards the revival in the later part of his career and are characteristic of the hostile way in which he greeted most government-sponsored enterprises at this time.[27] However, the speech he gave in Belfast is a more complex matter because in choosing to speak in Irish when pronouncing the death of the language, he implicitly indicated that it was neither 'moribund' nor 'obsolete', but was in fact a living and vigorous language which could be used not only as a medium of ordinary communication but also in an ironic and self-referential way in intellectual debate. Whether or not this irony was intended is difficult to assess. The broader context of his views on the language at this time certainly suggests that we should take his words at face value as indicating a sincere belief that Irish had been permanently superseded by English and had long ceased to be adequate to the changing realities of the modern world. 'English is now the lingua franca of the earth', he had defiantly declared (in Irish) to his Belfast audience, 'everybody must now know English, irrespective of nationality'.[28] But the very fact that such a statement can be made in Irish at all clearly disproves his assertion that the language is

archaic and serves nothing other than a symbolic cultural function in a world dominated by English.

While we could read this speech as just another one of O'Nolan's eccentric jokes, the contradiction it embodies (simultaneously denying and affirming the cultural significance of the Irish language) is nevertheless illuminating, for it highlights a basic tension which lies at the very heart of his ideas about the place of the language in modern Irish culture. Central to his writings on the issue from 1940 onwards is the problem of how to reconcile the conflicting intellectual and emotional demands of (on the one hand) the ideal of preserving and promoting Irish as an essential aspect of Ireland's cultural identity, and (on the other hand) the pointlessness of pursuing that ideal given that the language was in a state of terminal decline in the Irish-speaking areas now that the cultural hegemony of English had become permanently entrenched in Ireland.

At first sight, it would appear that the latter impulse is the more prominent in his work. He was certainly acutely aware of the material pressures that were working to undermine fatally the state's attempts to replace English with Irish as the common speech of the Irish people, and took a wholly pragmatic and unsentimental view of the linguistic situation in Ireland. 'I cannot see any prospect of reviving Irish at the present rate of going and way of working', he wrote in a letter to Sean O'Casey in 1942.[29] 'Provided big changes occur gradually, they are hardly noticed', he commented a few years later, 'people begin to forget one language and speak another. This process of change is endemic, ageless and unavoidable'[30] Furthermore, he acknowledged openly that 'the mother-tongue of most Irishmen ... is English',[31] and that 'any notion of reviving Irish as the universal language of the country is manifestly impossible' because of that fact.[32] As a result, he felt that the language movement should acknowledge the cultural supremacy of the English language in Ireland and reformulate the basic principles of the revival according to the realities of the contemporary situation.

In spite of this harsh diagnosis of the situation, however, he was deeply disappointed that the language was rapidly being lost, and this disappointment often spilled over into anger and frustration at the Irish people themselves for having (as he saw it) 'discarded their

birthright with such indecent speed' in the face of the advancing English tongue, and for hastening the death of the language by continuing to accord English greater cultural prestige than Irish:

> The present extremity of the Irish language is due mainly to the fact that the Gaels deliberately flung that instrument of beauty and precision from them, thrashed it out of their children and sneered in outlandish boor's English at those who were a few days slower than themselves in getting rid of it.[33]

His own personal attachment to the language of his youth meant that he viewed its apparently irreversible decline as a fundamental impoverishment of Irish culture as a whole, notwithstanding the small number of people in the country who actually spoke it as their first language. In the words of his biographer Anthony Cronin, O'Nolan felt that the death of the language would be nothing less than 'a cultural tragedy ... the loss of which would be more than merely linguistic'.[34] But why did he feel it to be a cultural tragedy exactly? What bearing did the loss of the language have on Irish culture as a whole, and on ideas about Irish identity in particular? How did the reality of the linguistic situation affect the revival ideal in O'Nolan's understanding of it?

This tension between the ideal and reality, between the desire for revival as the means of revitalizing modern Irish culture and resignation before the brute fact that prevailing cultural conditions prevented it from being realized, informs all of O'Nolan's work on the language question. But not all of his utterances are made with the kind of polemical excesses which we saw above. Only in later years did he greet the arguments for revival with such dismissive contempt, raving against the government's 'mad policy of squandering time and money on the revival of Gaelic' and condemning the teaching of Irish in schools as 'sheerest humbug and a scandalous waste of money'.[35] In the forties, by contrast, he publicly supported the principle of reviving the language and even swam against the current of enlightened opinion in the language movement by endorsing the government's policy of compulsory Irish in the National Schools as the means of bringing it about. In a lengthy article on the language question in 1943, he defended the principle of state expenditure on the revival against those who claimed that the money would be better spent on public necessities such as housing:

> The movement to revive the Irish language should be persisted in. I hold that it is fallacious to offer the Irish people a simple choice between slums and Gaelic. ... I take the view that the free expenditure of public money on a cultural pursuit is one of the few boasts this country can make. Whether we get value for all the money spent on Irish, higher learning and on our university establishments is one question but that we spend liberally on these things is to our credit and when the great nations of the earth (whose civilisations we are so often asked to admire) are spending up to £100,000,000 (roughly) per day on destruction, it is surely no shame for our humble community of peasants to spend about £2,000 per day on trying to revive a language. It is the more urbane occupation.[36]

Even in the early fifties when the number of primary schools teaching parts of the curriculum through Irish began to decline drastically, thus signalling the beginning of the end of the government's attempt to revive the language through state education, O'Nolan continued to defend the schools policy against accusations of it being a waste of public funds.

In 1952, for example, Patrick Kavanagh launched an attack on the policy in his journal Kavanagh's Weekly, arguing that much of the £7½ million spent every year on primary education was 'wasted on the stupid teaching of the Gaelic language' instead of being spent more profitably on encouraging children in a proper grasp of English (a grasp of 'proper English' would perhaps be a more accurate way of describing Kavanagh's vision of adequate educational provision):

> A man can be a fool or a wise man in any language. The language a man speaks has very little to do with his outlook. ... Whenever I hear a man, be he bishop or politician, talking about restoring the Gaelic language I must come to the conclusion that he is an enemy of thought, that he has no regard for the future of that section of the population whose only education is a grasp of the three R's and a sense of judgement.[37]

Kavanagh's attitude is typical of the kind of negative thinking about the revival which was widespread in intellectual circles at this time, echoing some of the reservations about government policy that INTO had been expressing throughout the previous decade (though without the qualified support that the teaching organizations had given to the actual principle of language revival), and dismissing the language movement in general as an agent of philistinism and political self-interest in modern Irish society. In associating the idea of revival

primarily with bishops and politicians, he was suggesting that it had become inextricably bound up with the kind of puritanical social policy advocated by the Catholic Hierarchy and repeatedly legislated for by both main parties since independence (the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, for example, which Kavanagh is probably alluding to when he refers to 'enemies of thought'). In Kavanagh's view, the education system was being used not only to disseminate a knowledge of the language, but to promote the narrow moral dogmas of the Catholic Church also. Hence the revival had to be resisted **in toto** in the interests of the intellectual enlightenment and spiritual freedom of the Irish people.

O'Nolan promptly responded to Kavanagh's article in an open letter to the journal, rejecting outright the call for the abolition of compulsory Irish in schools, and suggesting that to deny the cultural significance of the language merely because it was associated with the more extreme elements of the language movement was to capitulate to the prudery and anti-intellectualism which they fostered:

> Your weekly - being 'A Journal of Literature and Politics' - does itself no service in publishing repeated attacks on the policy of teaching the Irish language in the schools. Most people take the term 'literature' to mean all the literatures of the earth, ancient and modern: Irish is a precise, elegant and cultivated language, with a most unusual and curious literature. Your attitude appears to arise from plain ignorance of it, and you get yourself into further trouble by confusing the study of it with the buck-lepping antics of the Gaelic League type of moron (few of whom know Irish properly at all). One should not abstain from champagne simply because the upper flight of prostitutes drink, nor is there anything 'literary' or even civilised in denouncing the study of any branch of human knowledge and experience.[38]

Although he was defending the official language policy of a self-proclaimed Catholic state, O'Nolan wasn't suggesting that there didn't exist a strong link between the language revival and religious puritanism, as Kavanagh (and others of like mind) claimed. As we shall see below, he was unambiguously opposed to the way in which the two had become inextricably intertwined in the rhetoric and practices of cultural organizations such as the Gaelic League, and resented the fact that the language itself had been appropriated by forces of social conservatism to propagate narrow ideas about Ireland's cultural

identity. But, unlike Kavanagh, he felt that it was mistaken to elide the essence of the revival with that which was merely contingent. The principle of language revival had to be separated from the particular forms which the revival movement had taken to date, for it did not necessarily follow that either knowledge of the language or support for its revival meant that one subscribed to the more extreme form of cultural politics subscribed to by its ultra-orthodox advocates.

This is the central theme of one his earliest public comments on the language question in April 1940. In a letter to the editor of the Irish Times, he censured the paper's columnist Quidnunc (the pen-name of Seamus Kelly) for sarcastically suggesting that a lack of knowledge of Irish was not so much a sign of ignorance as a mark of cultural refinement, and he was insistent that the language should not be confused with the more extreme forms of Gaelic purism that had come to dominate the revival:

> Why should ignorance of any language be regarded as a mark of superiority? ... It is common knowledge that certain categories of Irish speakers are boors. They (being men) have nuns' faces, wear bicycle clips continuously, talk in Irish only about **ceist na teangan**, and have undue confidence in Irish dancing as a general nationalistic prophylactic. ... Hence, some self-consciously intellectual citizens are anxious to avoid being suspected of knowing Irish owing to the danger of being lumped with the boors. There is, however, a **non-sequitur** here. A knowledge of Irish does not necessarily connote adherence to the social, cultural or political philosophies of any other Irish speaker. ... Irish is just a language and is not to be ranked with illicit distilling, coin-making, shoplifting or any other pursuit of which respectable people like to disclaim all knowledge.[39]

O'Nolan objected to the way in which the language had come to be appropriated by the more puritanical and regressive strains within cultural nationalism in the formation of an exclusivist idea of what it meant to be Irish. Hence, it was not the principle of revival that should be rejected, in his view, but some of the specific forms which it had taken since independence. Neither did he deny cultural nationalism's founding premise that the Gaelic language and Irish national identity were intrinsically linked. Rather, it was the specific kind of Irish identity which the language was used to legitimate that he opposed.

National identity involves sameness as well as difference, and

if language is the feature which distinguishes one nation from another (according to the basic principles of cultural nationalism outlined above), it is also that which bonds and unites the people of the nation to each other, transcending all other forms of cultural difference within the nation and effacing the signs of social conflict between classes, genders, ethnic groups, and so on. While the Irish language was a crucial ideological weapon in the struggle against external rule by Britain (grounding Irish claims to the right of national self-determination in their unique cultural heritage), it was also used as a weapon internally in the production of a highly prescriptive sense of Irish national identity. By making Irishness synonymous with Gaelic culture and the Catholic religion, the ideologues and legislators of the new Free State elided the formative influence of the English language and the Protestant religion in Ireland's cultural history, and denied them a constitutive role in the formation of the modern nation's cultural identity. While Gaelic and Catholicism were defined as native and natural, English and Protestantism were regarded as alien and artificial. Hence, language and religion became entwined with each other as the joint site on which national identity was asserted and contested. As a result, the revival of the language came to be used for the celebration of a narrow and puritanical conception of Gaelic culture, and the Gaelic way of life became virtually indistinguishable from an extremely conservative idea of personal and social morality. The purity of the Gaelic tongue inevitably implied the purity of the Gaelic soul in the rhetoric of the official language movement and pastorals of the Catholic Hierarchy.[40]

In the discourses of an explicitly Catholic-oriented cultural nationalism, sexual promiscuity was singled out as the greatest threat to the moral integrity of the Irish national character, and abstinence in this sphere (except for the purposes of procreation within marriage) was widely regarded as an integral part of an essentially Gaelic and Catholic way of life. While strict codes of sexual conduct had long been an essential element in the social behaviour of many Irish men and women for basic economic reasons (namely, the prevention of the fragmentation of the family holding in order to ensure stem-inheritance),[41] the Catholic Church nevertheless policed social

relationships between men and women in an increasingly zealous and often bizarre fashion. In the thirties, for example, the church in Ireland launched a moral crusade against the dangers of sin arising from public dances. 'The surroundings of the dancing hall, withdrawal from the hall for intervals, and the back ways home have been the destruction of virtue in every part of Ireland', warned a statement on the dance-hall evil issued by the bishops in 1925.[42] While the dance-halls scare was no doubt motivated at least in part by a genuine attempt to reinforce strict standards of sexual behaviour, it was also rooted in a xenophobic response to 'foreign' music and dance which lent itself to a particularly virulent form of cultural nationalism. One senior clergyman expressed worries that 'the old Irish dances had been been discarded for foreign importations which, according to all accounts, lent themselves not so much to rhythm as to low sensuality', while another was concerned that 'the radio would bring foreign music and the propagation of foreign ideals', thereby enhancing 'the danger to our national characteristics [which] was greater now than ever'.[43] When the Gaelic League's anti-jazz campaign was launched in 1934 in an effort to curb its debasing influence (described by the Gaelic League as 'denationalizing in that its references are to things foreign to Irishmen'[44]), Irish dancing and the Irish language were officially hitched together in the promotion of a narrowly-defined and exclusivist cultural revival. 'The Irish language, Irish music, drama, dance and literature are to shadow forth the new civilization', wrote the music critic and historian Eamonn O Gallchobhair.[45] Just as the language operated as a vehicle for the nation's moral values, as O Gallchobhair wrote elsewhere, 'that set of values which makes the Irish mind different looks out at us clearly from our old music - its idiom having in some subtle way the idiom of the Irish mind'.[46] But the hostility which some revivalists felt towards jazz music and jazz dancing in particular often tipped over from nationalistic zealousness into plain racism, and there were calls that it should be banned altogether on account of its 'nigger qualities'. 'I for one do not want to ape the nigger', wrote the music critic of the Irish Radio News in 1928, and went on to argue that the worldwide popularity of jazz was 'not a very sound argument as to why we should not discard - if necessary by decrees - the music of the nigger in favour of

products of our own artistic creation and the creation of cultured peoples'.[47] If the purity of the Gaelic soul was guaranteed by the purity of Gaelic culture (traditional music and dance as well as the language), that culture also operated as a sign of the purity of 'the Gaelic race'. When the Irish bishops listed the dance halls alongside English newspapers and popular fiction as aspects of the modern world 'which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race',[48] they were drawing distinctions not just between the cultures of different nations but between the cultures of different racial groups. Hence, race and nation came to be overlapping and interchangeable terms in the articulation of a cultural nationalism founded on a fear of miscegenation.[49]

'Irishness is not the same as narrowness', wrote O'Nolan in response to the puritanical and xenophobic tendencies that had emerged in the language movement over the issue of jazz music and the dance halls.[50] In a Cruiskeen Lawn piece from 1943, he tells how he had been held up recently at a Dublin street corner by a small crowd listening to a speaker from a revivalist organization denouncing jazz dancing as 'the product of the dirty nigger culture of America', and how he had been surprised that nobody present had laughed at the man's assertion that moral purity and racial purity coincided in and were guaranteed by the products of the Gaelic cultural heritage:

> There is something comic about revivalists who have no idea of what they are trying to revive. What a shock this young man would get if he could read what remains to us of the literature of our tough and bawdy ancestors. Complete humourlessness is, of course, the characteristic of the evangelist. If you go ball-dancing every Saturday night, you will eventually find yourself (to your great surprise) in Hell. Heaven, on the other hand can be attained by assiduous devotion to the jig. There is also a mystical relationship between the jig, the Irish language, abstinence from alcohol, morality and salvation. It is extremely difficult to save your soul if you happen to be an English person.[51]

O'Nolan was clearly impatient with the suggestion that cultural pursuits such as dancing and temperance were intrinsically spiritually uplifting and offered protection against the dangers of moral and national (and, in some instances, racial) degeneracy. 'I do not think that there is any real ground for regarding Irish dancing as a sovereign spiritual and nationalistic prophylactic', he wrote in his

article on the dance halls, 'if there is, heaven help the defenceless nations of other lands'.[52] And to the claim in a revivalist journal that 'the person who is too fond of the drink is not a true Irishman', O'Nolan responded by suggesting that 'the person who is truly a true-Gael is (always) truly intoxicated - or twisted drunk'.[53]

When O'Nolan refers, in the comment cited above, to 'the social, cultural or political philosophies' that have been attached to the language, it is clear that he is alluding to precisely this bonding of the linguistic and the religious in revivalist ideology and rhetoric. In a letter to the Irish Press in 1940, he explicitly condemned the upsurge in puritanical moral values which had taken over the revival movement in the 1930s, and which was making the language appear so unattractive to those who had to bear the burden of the revival - the children in the National Schools. He objected in particular to:

> the cult of prudishness and prurience which hangs over Irish literature today like an eroding miasmal pall. It is doubtful if the Irish language will ever survive its successful revival. For the past forty years it has, perforce, been connected more with the school than with the dram-shop and the circumspection which is rightly observed where youngsters are concerned has been allowed to spread (or been sedulously pushed) to all reading, writing and speaking. Infantile (and completely heretical) concepts of morality are widely accepted among adults today as the badge of sound national orthodoxy.[54]

This puritanical attitude was producing, he concluded, a language movement which was hopelessly attempting to revive 'not the Irish language, but the pre-fall Eden'.

When he argued (in his open letter to Quidnunc) that merely knowing Irish did not imply an acceptance of the moral and political views of the Gaelic League or of any other cultural organization, O'Nolan was articulating a view that was gaining credence within the language movement itself at this time, namely that the language should not be used as the vehicle for a narrow conception of Irish identity built around prescriptive codes of social morality and ideas of cultural purity. However, he wasn't suggesting that the language did not operate at all as the vehicle for specific sets of social and cultural values, as appears to be the case when he claims that Irish is 'just a language' and not the repository of 'the social, cultural or political philosophies of any other Irish speaker'. Languages are

never ideologically neutral, and to suggest otherwise not only disavows the ways in which any language (at the level of its **langue**) sets the terms of, and imposes limits on, what can be said and thought by a given linguistic community, but it also occludes the fact that the language in question is also a site of contestation over meaning and that any utterance or body of utterances made in that language will betray the speaking subject's own beliefs about the world and his or her place in it. O'Nolan appears to suggest, by contrast, that languages neither have worldviews or value-systems inscribed within their very structures nor operate as the arena of social struggle, a suggestion which is not only wholly at odds with the insights he makes in his novels regarding the constitutive role of discourse in the construction of social reality and the formation of the social subject, but which also contradicts his own account of the formal character and cultural significance of the Irish language (as we shall see in the next section), as well as his reasons for intervening so vociferously in a debate about languages.

Irish was more than 'just a language' to O'Nolan. Why else should he have insisted so forcefully that the broad objective of attempting to revive it should be persisted with in spite of the fact that everything pointed to the impossibility of such a project given the social and cultural conditions prevailing at the time? Why not let it die a natural death in the face of the seemingly irreversible cultural hegemony of English? And why else should he have defended the specific policies employed by successive Irish governments in their effort to restore the language to vernacular status, knowing that such policies were underpinned by an explicit political philosophy, that of cultural nationalism? Was it really possible for him to advocate the revival of the language and not subscribe in some measure to the fundamental idea that Irish wasn't merely an ordered set of signs, but was in fact the vehicle of at least some aspect of the nation's history, culture and identity?

Thus far, I have suggested that O'Nolan's criticisms of the revival project demonstrate his disaffection with the specific forms taken by the rhetoric and practices of the language movement in its propagation of a narrow conception of national identity, and that these criticisms should not be read as a repudiation of the principle

of reviving the language. However, while it is beyond dispute that he does support this principle (at least in the forties and early fifties), it is not immediately apparent why he does so. Most of his comments on the language which I have discussed above define his relation to the revival in largely negative terms, that is through his antagonistic relationship with the language movement at this time because of the way in which the language had become linked to extraneous cultural values. But what about the more positive aspects of O'Nolan's ideas about the language and the principle of restoring it to the vernacular? To what extent was his support for the revival grounded in the cultural nationalist ideals which informed the ideology of the official language movement? It is to these ideas that I shall now turn, examining them in relation to the notion of linguistic hybridity and considering the significance of this concept in relation to O'Nolan's arguments for the cultural value of Irish-English.

- IV -

Although O'Nolan retained his support for the broad aims of the revival in spite of his criticisms of the narrow cultural values of the official revival movement, it wasn't always obvious to some of his more orthodox contemporaries in the language movement where exactly his sympathies lay. Clearly his disavowal of the link between the language and the specific cultural values advocated by official nationalism would have won him few admirers in orthodox revivalist circles. However, it wasn't just his views on the relation between Irish and matter external to it that marked him out as a heterodox thinker on the subject. Neither could O'Nolan's ideas about the very nature of the language (ie. that which was properly internal to it) and about its relationship with English in modern Ireland be easily assimilated into the revivalist paradigm, notwithstanding his declared support for both the revival ideal and some of the means used by the state to make it a reality. This was forcefully indicated by the controversy that was generated around one of his earliest public statements on the issue.

In October 1940, the editor of the Irish Times invited O'Nolan

to write a critical rejoinder to one of the paper's own leading articles which had openly questioned the effectiveness of certain aspects of government policy regarding the revival. Following the appearance of his article, a furious argument erupted in the paper's letters column between orthodox cultural nationalists who denounced him for his iconoclastic attitude towards the revival, and modernizers within the language movement who applauded him for his attempt to revitalize the movement by demonstrating how the language itself could be used as a flexible instrument of communication when confronted by the complexities of modern life. While the cause of all this controversy was nothing more than an innocuous comment about a minor aspect of the government's revival policy, its effect was to lay bare the divisions that existed within the language movement in a wholly unexpected but illuminating way. Retrospectively, the fall-out from what became O'Nolan's first 'Cruiskeen Lawn' article provides some crucial insights into O'Nolan's ideas about the character of the language, its cultural significance and the value of sustaining the revival in spite of the depressed cultural context which prevailed at this time.

In 1933 the government had introduced Sceim Labhairt na Gaeilge ('the Irish-speaking Scheme'), a new policy designed to accelerate the spread of Irish monolingualism throughout the Gaeltacht given that the schools policy wasn't proving as effective as had been anticipated. Its aim was to encourage the inhabitants of the Gaeltacht to use their 'native' Irish (which meant the local dialect or vernacular as opposed to the standard form of the language used for official purposes and government publications) as the everyday language of the home, thereby ensuring that children were exposed to their 'natural' language on a daily basis outside the more artificial situation of the classroom. As an incentive, the state offered Gaeltacht families an annual grant of £2 (known as the **deontas**) for each of their children between the ages of 6 and 12 who were adjudged by a schools inspector from Roinn Oideachais (the Department of Education) to speak their native language fluently.[55]

However, by 1940 it was becoming clear that this policy was following the general trend of most other revival enterprises by failing to encourage Irish-speakers to use the language consistently

for everyday purposes. The publication of the statistics for 1938-39 had revealed that the number of families who qualified for the **deontas** was the lowest to date, and that this was particularly notable in the Fior-Gaeltacht (the predominantly Irish-speaking districts in the West) where it was expected that the policy would be easiest to prosecute. Only 10,870 families were recorded as using Irish as the sole medium of conversation in the home, out of a total of 666, 601 persons who were recorded as Irish-speakers to varying degrees of fluency in the 1936 census.[56] In a leader article entitled 'Irish in the Home', the Irish Times noted that this was 'a sadly small percentage of the whole population, particularly when one takes into consideration the probability that a large number of these children will not continue to use Irish exclusively'.[57] In recognising that Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht might have practical material reasons for embracing English, and that Irish monolingualism would probably be difficult to sustain (let alone extend) in the face of a broadly felt need for bilingual proficiency, the paper was simply articulating the kind of pragmatic view about the future of the language which was becoming widespread at this time, namely that the state's language policy had become an anachronism which was not only failing to revive the language in any significant way but might even be hastening its extinction. To this extent, the paper's comment was wholly in accord with the thinking of the more enlightened elements in the language movement itself at this time, as I demonstrated above. However, the article then went on to suggest that the real problem with the revival lay not in the revival strategies that had been adopted but in the character of the language itself. Irish could not be revived, it was argued, because it was too archaic and primitive to encompass the complexities of the modern world beyond the Gaeltacht:

> Surely the Government has realised by this time that it is very far from an easy task to eliminate and extend the use of the Irish language in place of English. The task would be hard enough in normal years, unless conversations could be limited to requests for food or drink and other expressions of the elementary wants of life, but at such a time as the present, when children all over the world are trying to keep pace with an influx of new words as a result of the war news bulletins, it becomes well-nigh impossible. Parents who confine the family meal-time discussions to conversations in Irish must find it very difficult to explain such words as air-raid warden,

> incendiary bomb, non-aggression pact, decontamination, and Molotoff bread-basket. Has Gaelic ingenuity, for that matter, stretched so far as to provide a really expressive and indigenous equivalent for the well-known 'Axis'?[58]

Given that the language's supposedly impoverished vocabulary prevented its users from engaging with the intricacies of modern diplomacy and warfare, it was argued, Irish had become an anachronism and was now redundant as a viable means of communication in a contemporary international context.

O'Nolan's response pointed to the patent absurdity of the idea that Irish lacked the linguistic resources to express anything other than 'the elementary wants of life'. 'If on and after tomorrow the entire Irish Times should be printed in Irish', he replied sarcastically, 'there would not be a word about anything but food and drink'.[59] In his view, Irish did not belong to an older and simpler way of life whose basic patterns delimited and impoverished linguistic expression, but was in fact wholly adequate for dealing with such modern experiences as European wars. He sought to show that Irish could be as flexible and as creative in assimilating new ideas as any other language, and that its resources were not limited to 'expressions of the elementary wants of life' but could accommodate itself to the rapidly changing material realities of the wider world. He went on to demonstrate this by coining several Irish words for the term Molotoff bread-basket, one of the 'new words' for which there was allegedly no 'really expressive and indigenous equivalent' in Irish. These included a simple translation ('cliabh arain an duineuasail Ui Mhuilitibh'), a transliteration of the English term ('brad-bhascaod Mhalatabh'), and some ironic coinages of his own making ('manna Ruiseach' [Russian manna] and 'feirin o Stailin' [a little gift from Stalin]).[60] With these simple albeit ironic examples, O'Nolan was able to show that Irish clearly possessed the resources to translate, assimilate or invent terms whenever it needed to accommodate new concepts, and that this made it a living language which was as capable of change and development as English or any other modern language. Furthermore, it could be used self-consciously and ironically for rhetorical and satirical purposes, as he went on to demonstrate by sketching a series of comic dialogues around 'the stormy philological breakfasts that obtain in the households of the Gael' and which

incorporated many of the terms for which it had been claimed there was no Gaelic equivalent.[61]

O'Nolan's article was intended to mock the Irish Times and its readership for being ignorant about the language upon which they passed such sober judgement and for laying bare naive prejudices about the evolutionary status of native speakers. However, it unexpectedly met with a barrage of criticism from the one group whom one would have expected to applaud him for his defence of the language: orthodox language revivalists. 'I do not understand what worthy motive can inspire your 'skits' on the Gaelic language and its students', wrote one reader in a letter to the editor of the Irish Times. 'I have heard many adverse comments on Irish', he continued, 'but you are spewing on it'.[62] Further letters appeared in a similar vein, accusing O'Nolan of writing 'vitriol merely meant to disfigure and destroy ... the Irish language', and of 'following a set policy in an attempt to sabotage the propagation of the language and things Irish'.[63] One correspondent even alleged that the whole of the Irish Times editorial board was involved in a conspiracy against the revival, claiming that O'Nolan's articles were 'designed to prove the unsuitability, the inadequacy and the impracticability of the Irish language for modern needs', and thereby constituted 'a menace and an attack perhaps more sinister than any that ha[s] yet appeared'.[64] Other readers, however, recognized that O'Nolan was neither mocking the aims of the revival nor vandalizing the language, and defended him against such accusations in equally vigorous terms. 'They are not 'skits' on the language or on its students', claimed one writer, 'but a rebellion in satire against the awful 'tripe' which is dished out day after day in news sheets all over the country in 'the Irish''. 'Far from poking fun at our native tongue', wrote another, O'Nolan had 'ably demonstrated its elasticity and adaptability', while another letter predicted that the column would have 'far-reaching effects ... towards an Irish literary renaissance', because it deflated 'the oafish drolleries and bucolic banalities' which were being propagated 'in the sacred cause of national culture' and 'appears to take for granted the assumption that Irish is neither dying nor dead, but is, in fact, a vigorous, contemporary European language'.[65]

Why O'Nolan should have been attacked in these terms is not

immediately apparent. After all, his article had not been at all disparaging about either the revival ideal or government policy on the issue (both of which he openly supported) as the Irish Times leader had been, and he even remained silent about the puritanism and xenophobia which he felt was contaminating the language movement and betraying the original revivalist project. Although he hadn't explicitly defended the principle of reviving the language in terms which might have placated the language enthusiasts who attacked him, nevertheless he had produced an implicit defence of the language by demonstrating that it was modern and adaptable rather than archaic and inflexible, thereby suggesting that its intrinsic value required no other justification than its evident vitality and resourcefulness pointed to by the inventive linguistic games he was able to play with it. Why, then, was his article so ferociously denounced by those whose interests and labours he appeared to be protecting, if only tacitly? The problem, I would suggest, lies in O'Nolan's characterization of the language itself - the very object of the revival and the site of conflicting cultural imperatives. For his work reveals the language to be essentially hybrid rather than intrinsically pure and self-contained as the ideological premises of Irish cultural nationalism required that it should be, and this cut right to the heart of revivalist ideology.

The twin concepts of purity and hybridity have been used in a variety of ways and with reference to a number of of different phenomena in the discourses of colonialism and nationalism. While they have been deployed as central ideas in the racial theory used to legitimate colonial rule, they have also been mobilized in the service of nationalist struggles against the political control and cultural hegemony of colonial powers. In both instances, hybridity is invoked (if only implicitly) as something debasing and threatening to the purity and integrity upon which a secure and enduring cultural identity depends, and both require the continual exclusion of any alien presence (ie. racial and/or linguistic other) in order to maintain their essentialist models of culture and selfhood. At the level of language, this involves (in the case of colonialism) the imposition of the supposedly unified, standard language of the metropolitan centre upon the colonial margins, and (in the case of

nationalism) resisting this process through the use of the indigenous language of the colonized. In both cases, purity of language and culture is deemed preferable to hybridity, as it operates to secure national identity in an unchanging and authentic national essence.[66] The concept of hybridity has also been used in nationalist struggles in a different sense, as something to be embraced rather than repudiated. Here 'hybrid' refers to the production of 'mosaic' or composite models of culture and identity which depend on the fusing of disparate ethnic elements, thereby refusing the colonizer's appeal to cultural purity as the index of cultural maturity and superiority. At the level of language, this might entail the appropriation of the 'standard' metropolitan language by the colonized who then subvert it from within by inflecting it with lexical elements and syntactical structures belonging to either a different language (ie. an indigenous tongue) or a non-standard form of the language of the metropolitan centre. This strategy has also been used in the post-colonial context by groups marginalized by nationalism's prescriptive appeals to the purity and unity of the nation, an appeal which is countered by the idea of the necessarily hybrid character and experience of the post-colonial subject.[67]

Although he doesn't deal explicitly with a colonial and post-colonial context, Bakhtin also presents a model of linguistic hybridity which is particularly useful for exploring the way in which O'Nolan engages with the question of linguistic purity in the language debates of the period. The OED defines a linguistic hybrid as 'composite word formed of elements belonging to different languages', and O'Nolan's ironic coinages for the term 'Molotoff bread-basket' would constitute such hybrid forms, grafting Irish spelling onto English sounds or combining English and Irish words in a single phrase. Bakhtin extends the scope of hybridity beyond simple words to include utterances, discourses and whole languages when he describes linguistic hybridity (or 'hybridization', to use his own term) as 'an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages', two semantic and axiological belief systems'.68 Linguistic hybridity, then, is the production of a discourse in which

two languages (in the broader sense) are brought together and interact with each other dialogically:

> What is a hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.[69]

Not all hybridizations are of the same order, however, and he goes on to make a distinction between unconscious organic hybridity and conscious intentional hybridity. Organic hybridity, he argues, is an inevitable condition of the historical development of languages, brought about by languages interacting and mixing with each other as a result of historical processes such as military conquest (in the case of national languages) or unequal class relations (in the case of other social languages):

> Unintentional, unconscious hybridization is one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages. We may even say that language and languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization, by means of a mixing of various 'languages' co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language, a single branch, a single group of different branches or different groups of such branches, in the historical as well as paleontological past of languages.[70]

Intentional hybridity, on the other hand, is the production of double-voicedness in discourse through the artistic merging and counter-pointing of different social languages, styles or accents within the bounds of a single utterance. Given that every language embodies its own worldview or belief system, the merging of languages which takes place in this type of hybridization necessarily entails the collision of distinct points of view on the world whose claims to truth are revealed to be partial and relative in an act of ideological contestation:

> An intentional hybrid is precisely the perception of one language by another language, its illumination by another linguistic consciousness. ... An intentional and conscious hybrid is not a mixture of two **impersonal** language consciousnesses (the correlates of two languages) but rather a mixture of two **individualized** language consciousnesses (the correlates of two specific utterances, not merely two languages) and two individual language intentions as well: the individual, representing authorial consciousness and will, on the one hand, and the

> individualized linguistic consciousness and will of the character represented, on the other. ... Thus there are always two consciousnesses, two language-intentions, two **voices** and consequently two accents participating in an intentional and conscious artistic hybrid.[71]

The aim of bringing together these distinct voices or linguistic consciousnesses within the boundaries of a single utterance is so that the conflicting belief systems embodied in their different languages (styles, accents, etc) may 'come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance. ... It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms'.[72]

However, the intentionality that characterizes conscious intentional hybridization in its attempt to dialogize the represented language or style, thereby divesting it of its cultural authority, clearly isn't present in organic hybridization. This, after all, is a process that all languages inevitably undergo in their historical engagements with other languages, and the potential for the mutual illumination of the distinct worldviews embodied in those languages 'remains mute and opaque, never making use of conscious contrasts and oppositions',[73] and thereby never becoming fully dialogized:

> It must be pointed out, however, that while it is true the mixture of linguistic worldviews remains mute and opaque, such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant for potential with new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words.[74]

Although never fully articulated, the potential for conflict and contestation characteristic of intentional hybrids nevertheless remains. It is precisely in terms of the conflictual and interactive relations between and within different national languages in the context of modern Ireland that this suggestion is especially useful, as I shall demonstrate in returning to the controversy in the Irish Times described above.

While the philosophy of cultural nationalism conferred nationhood on any people in possession of its own unique and original language, Irish cultural nationalism required that language to be not just authentic but also pure and self-contained, uncorrupted by the mutual interaction with other languages or by the presence of disruptive internal differences (ie. of a regional or class

character). If Irish national identity were to be grounded in the existence of the unique Gaelic language, simultaneously unifying all the speakers of the language under the sign of the nation and differentiating them from the speakers of all other languages, external cultural difference and internal cultural unity could only be maintained if the language were to retain its alleged original purity. That is, it would have to suppress differences within the national language which might expose its apparently enduring unity and stability as something achieved in discourse rather than given by nature. Furthermore, it would have to resist the tendency to mix with other languages with which it came into contact in order to retain uniqueness and originality which operated as the guarantor of the pure and enduring identity of the Irish nation and of the Gaelic people who constituted it.[75]

In arguing that the world beyond could not impinge on Irish speakers because the language did not have the resources to accommodate new and sophisticated concepts, the Irish Times leader had effectively suggested that Irish was hermetically sealed off from external influence, thereby inadvertently reproducing this central tenet of Gaelic revivalist ideology. Whereas the supposedly closed and archaic character of the language suggested to the Irish Times leader writer the futility of attempting to revive it, for cultural nationalists this was precisely why revival was so desirable. For if the language remained closed from and unmixed with other languages, it meant that Irish could act as a barrier to the demoralizing influences of a degenerate and cosmopolitan culture, the signs of which were encoded in (for example) the English language and disseminated through the British press, English popular fiction, birth-control manuals, etc - precisely the type of material, in fact, that the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act aimed to prevent from being circulated in Ireland.[76] Whereas cultural nationalists might have countered the Irish Times' claim by describing the language in terms of its purity and antiquity rather than its primitiveness and simplicity, nevertheless both groups agreed that the language was self-contained and impervious to the incursions of 'foreign' linguistic material. This, perhaps, might account for why no protest was raised at the Irish Times leader by cultural nationalists even though it openly denigrated the language

and the notion of reviving it, for the underlying ideas expressed there offered no real threat to the ideology that underpinned the revival project. If the language was self-contained and resistant to the hybridizing impulses of other languages (as it was claimed), then provided the revival was vigorously pursued, it would continue to secure the purely Gaelic identity of the modern Irish nation.

O'Nolan, on the other hand, was a different proposition altogether. While it appeared that that he took sides with orthodox revivalists in opposing those who denigrated the language as primitive and incapable of being revived, he actually differentiated himself from them over the crucial issue of the character of the language itself. Here was someone who appeared to be in favour of revival (who was, in fact, a native Irish speaker) but whose work implied things about the nature of the language which were fundamentally at odds with orthodox nationalist thinking on the subject. Rather than revealing Irish to be thoroughly impervious to forces outside Gaelic culture, resisting all interaction with other languages and thereby remaining stable and unchanged, he had demonstrated (in the hybrid lexical forms cited above) that the language in fact depended on the processes of organic hybridization in order to maintain itself as a living language, that it was inevitable that Irish should be open to interactions with other languages (mixing with English, in particular) in accommodating new ideas and realities. O'Nolan had not only shown that Irish was a resourceful and vigorous tongue (contra the claims of the Irish Times) but had also undermined one of cultural nationalism's central claims and, for some, the **raison d'etre** of the revival itself - that the language had remained essentially unchanged throughout the colonial period and, in being driven underground when proscribed by the British, had become sealed off from the larger historical processes that were going on around it, thereby preserving its original purity and remaining impervious to the dangerously degenerative forces of a debased and cosmopolitan English culture.

Just as he had contested the idea that moral purity was intrinsic to Irish dancing or temperance, and that (as such) these activities constituted a mystical expression of an essentially Gaelic way of life, he also contested the idea that there is such a thing as a pure and unadulterated Irish identity which found its essential

expression in an original and unchanging Gaelic language. In laying bare the fact that modern Irish was not pure and self-contained but partly hybridized, he revealed it to be an historical entity, open to the material pressures exerted on it by its geographical proximity to English in particular, and containing within itself traces of its interaction both with that language, and the cultural values which it embodied for the peoples who spoke it (O'Nolan often referred to the English language as 'H.M. English', which is a term that immediately locates it not just geographically but in specific relations of power). In drawing upon the notion of linguistic hybridity in order to critique the orthodox cultural nationalist position concerning the intrinsic character of the Irish language, O'Nolan also problematized the orthodox view concerning its relationship to national identity. Contrary to the view that Irish was not a pure and stable language which retained its 'original' form through time, as cultural nationalism asserted, O'Nolan conceived of the language as a living entity that was constantly developing and changing through its continued interaction with English. As such, there could be no linguistic basis for the claim that a modern Irish identity was something pure and enduring, secured by the existence of a unique and self-contained language. Rather, modern Irish culture and identity were like the language - something hybrid or composite, a synthesis of different ethnic groups and cultural traditions.

It is remarkable how close O'Nolan comes to the cultural positions espoused by an earlier generation of Protestant intellectuals without ever invoking their crucial influence on debates around this issue a few decades earlier. In the early years of independence, George Russell (A.E.) in particular continued to argue for a vision of Irish culture that that took account of the different traditions that had come into contact and partly fused over time, and insisted that Irish identity be regarded as a composite entity rather than something purely Gaelic and untouched by its contact with the English-based cultural affiliations of the minority.[77] In placing such strong emphasis on the notion of hybridity, O'Nolan clearly echoes some of these sentiments, though for him the English language and European culture were more the common currency of the Irish people as a whole than the preserve of a small clique of Ascendancy thinkers

gravitating around the occult figures of Russell and Yeats. As we shall see in the next section, O'Nolan's vision of the potentially constitutive role played by Irish-English in the formation of a non-exclusivist conception of Irish identity also draws upon arguments about the composite or synthetic nature of Irish culture that had been put forward before, though O'Nolan speaks from a position that is fully conversant with the Irish language and cultural traditions which was not the case with many of those who went before him.

As we have seen, the idea that the Irish language existed in a pure and unchanging state and thereby secured national identity as something purely and authentically Gaelic, could not be upheld if it was shown that the language was in fact hybrid. However, O'Nolan doesn't deny that there is an intrinsic link between language and national identity, he only rejects the particular forms of identity that this link has been used to legitimate (ie. that which is grounded in puritanism and xenophobia). In fact, in extrapolating from the hybrid character of the language to the composite or synthetic nature of Irish culture and (hence) Irish identity, he explicitly invokes the idea that there is an indissoluble relationship between a people and its language (or, as we shall see in this case, its languages). O'Nolan draws upon this relationship in order to account for the continuing significance of the language in the specific cultural circumstances of the period, and to assert the need for continued support for the revival. But he does this in a surprising way - by shifting his attention onto the English language and considering Irish-English as the basis for a modern Irish identity. Once again, hybridity continues to operate as the crucial theoretical concept in his work.

- V -

Although cultural nationalism resisted the idea that Irish and English remained anything other than mutually exclusive, the historical relations which occurred between the two languages produced a fundamental contradiction within nationalism itself, namely that the idea of a purely Gaelic identity cannot be asserted without at the same time invoking the presence of the English language. For that

which cultural nationalism defines itself against is thereby inscribed within the very forms in which it is articulated (ie. Gaelic revivalism and cultural separatism). Hence, a modern Irish identity must be seen not just in terms of its difference from Englishness, but also as partly constituted by it. This contradiction appears in its most obvious form in the persistent calls for the de-Anglicization and Gaelicization of Irish culture made by successive generations of Irish nationalists in the English language. From Thomas Davis and Young Ireland, through Douglas Hyde and the Literary Revival, D.P. Moran and Irish Ireland, to Eoin MacNeill and the language debates in the Dail in the twenties - all were required to advocate Gaelic revival in the very language which they argued was unnatural for a member of the Irish nation to use and which they were attempting to displace. David Lloyd points to the historical determinants of this contradiction:

> Irish nationalism emerges in consequence of a relatively rapid though uneven modernization of parts of Irish society in the early nineteenth century, which produced an expanding middle class along with the technical and administrative apparatus capable of producing and disseminating the concept of the nation as a whole. By virtue, however, of the commercial and bureaucratic activities which produced and occupied this class, all necessarily transacted primarily if not exclusively in English, the political doctrines of nationalism are conceived and propagated in English. Simultaneously, the emergence of an increasingly politically conscious middle class coincides with the critical decline of the Irish language as the medium of daily life for the people, a decline that appeared to pass the 50 per cent mark by the mid-1840s. Irish nationalism thus emerges at the moment of virtual eclipse of what would have been its 'natural' language, and mainly among a class which was already, necessarily, estranged from that language. The peculiar forms taken by Irish nationalism develop from this vividly apprehended dislocation and from the consequent absence of the political legitimation available to other European nationalisms through the putatively a priori transcendent unity of a national language.[78]

According to Lloyd, then, Irish nationalism in its revivalist mode is predicated not so much on 'the recognition of the economic and political threat that Gaelic culture faced from British imperialism' in a unified present, as on 'the representation of that culture as lost, past, primitive, fragmented'.[79] Gaelic revivalism aims to restore that which has been lost and has no choice but to articulate that loss in the language which has usurped it.

In the immediate post-independence period, this contradiction was embodied most glaringly in the 1937 Constitution which was not only written in both Irish and English (acknowledging the centrality of the English language in modern Irish culture), but which also spelt out explicitly which language was officially given priority (just in case there was any uncertainty over the issue): while 'the Irish language as the national language is the first official language', 'the English language is recognized as a second official language' (Articles 8.1 and 8.2). Although the formulators of the constitution had attempted to get around the problem of the hegemonic status of English by insisting that Irish was **the** language of the **nation** while English was merely **a** language of **state**, this solution nevertheless betrayed a deeply-rooted anxiety about Ireland's cultural identity and the role that language played in constituting that identity. As Joseph Lee has remarked:

> The fact that the vast majority of the people spoke English did not apparently suffice to have it recognized as either 'the national language' or even 'a national language'. Presumably, Irish would remain the 'national language' even if nobody at all spoke it. Does the idea that the nation exists wholly independently of reality at any given time inform the assumptions underlying this article?[80]

No doubt O'Nolan would have replied yes to this question, at least in his more iconoclastic moments when he denounced the revival for lagging behind the reality of Ireland's linguistic situation.

However, this situation had potentially serious repercussions for the ideology of cultural nationalism. For while the prevailing linguistic trends in Ireland provoked a radical reassessment of the objective of restoring the language to vernacular status by some language enthusiasts in the 1940s, the official language movement could not openly admit that English was undoubtedly the language that most people in Ireland wanted to speak because of the greater cultural prestige attached to it. For this would have been to acknowledge that the main objectives of the revival could not be achieved and that the principle of reviving the language would have to be abandoned. Worse still, it would mean that cultural nationalism itself would be in a state of ideological crisis as the nation could no longer be legitimated through reference to the existence of a unique language

spoken by the people and which acted as the repository of an original and unchanging Gaelic culture. The distinctiveness of the national culture would have to be located elsewhere (in Catholicism, for example) which would mean, in turn, that the continuance of the state's revival project could no longer be justified in explicitly nationalist terms.

In O'Nolan's view, however, an acceptance of the realities of the linguistic situation in Ireland did not necessarily mean that the revival project should be given up completely. Rather, it had to be made flexible enough to accommodate the fact that it would be a struggle simply to keep the language alive given that English was rapidly encroaching on the Gaeltacht, and that the rest of the country was never going to abandon English as its common linguistic currency anyway. Hence, the objective of Gaelic monolingualism had to be modified to suit existing social and cultural conditions, and (more significantly) the intellectual rationale for reviving the language in any shape or form had to be reformulated. As we have seen, the idea that the language existed in a pure and unchanging state (thereby securing national identity as something similarly pure and unchanging) could not be upheld if it was shown that the language tended towards hybridization. In his reluctance to entirely abandon the principle of revival, O'Nolan attempted to recuperate the idea of hybridity for cultural nationalism by arguing for Irish-English as the grounds of Ireland's cultural difference from England and as justification for the revival project (notwithstanding the fact that he saw no prospect of it succeeding given that most Irish people spoke English as their first language).

In one of his most important statements on the subject, written in 1943, O'Nolan described the language in faintly mystical terms as forming part of 'the hidden wells which sustain the western Irishman', and proposed the following justification for its revival:

> There is probably no basis at all for the theory that a people cannot preserve a separate national entity without a distinct language but it is beyond dispute that Irish enshrines the national ethos and in a subtle way Irish persists very vigorously in English. In advocating the preservation of Irish culture, it is not to be inferred that this culture is superior to the English or any other but simply that certain Irish modes are more comfortable and suitable for Irish people; otherwise these modes

> simply would not exist. It is therefore dangerous to discourage the use of Irish because the revival movement, even if completely ineffective, is a valuable preservative of certain native virtues and it is worth remembering that if Irish were to die completely, the standard of English here, both in the spoken and written word, would sink to a level probably as low as that obtaining in England and it would stop there only because it could go no lower.[81]

Although he initially denies the general cultural nationalist precept that nationality is grounded in the possession of a distinct language, the following remark takes him as close as he is able to come to endorsing the premises of cultural nationalism without actually becoming a fully-paid up, card-carrying member of the Gaelic League. For, in spite of the initial qualifying rider, the Irish language **is** held to be ultimately constitutive of national identity, for it 'enshrines the national ethos' and operates as 'a valuable preservative of certain native virtues'. The fact that the precise nature of this national ethos and these native virtues remain unspecified suggests that they are too obvious to require elaborating, which only serves to reinforce the idea that the link between language and nationality is constituted **a priori.** To that extent, this passage can be read as a statement of orthodox cultural nationalist principles.

However, this would appear to be at least partly undermined by the claim that the national ethos is also preserved in the English language by virtue of Irish persisting 'very vigorously in English', at least in the variety of English spoken in Ireland. According to the principles of cultural nationalism, the intrinsic character or 'genius' of a people (what O'Nolan refers to here as the 'national ethos' and 'native virtues') is located solely in the unique culture and language of that people and cannot be expressed in any other language, for another language operates as the repository of the history, culture and identity of another distinct people or nation. However, O'Nolan suggests that, in the case of modern Ireland, two distinct languages serve as the vehicle of the nation's culture, and that national identity finds its expression in both Irish and Irish English. In cultural nationalist terms, such a claim is clearly contradictory. While English may be recognized as a language spoken by the people, it could never be a national language, for the very

existence of the nation depends on its possession of one unique and stable language and not the adoption of an alien tongue (this is the point of the rather unsatisfactory division in the 1937 Constitution between Ireland's first and national language and its second and non-national language). This meant that nationality could never be grounded in the English language even if the whole population spoke nothing but English and Irish became extinct.

O'Nolan saw things differently, however. In the previous section I suggested that he contests revivalist ideology regarding the purity and stability of the Irish language by revealing its potential for organic hybridization. Such hybridization, of course, is a two-way process. Not only is Irish affected by its interactions with English, but English can also change and develop through that very same interactive process. If Irish contains within itself the traces of that which it tries to repudiate in the act of self-definition, then English too can become 'contaminated' or 'invigorated' (depending on your point of view) by that which historically it had attempted to displace and destroy. For O'Nolan, organic hybridization between the two languages didn't just result in Irish passively assimilating aspects of English; Irish was equally capable of fusing with and changing the character of the English language. And this process didn't just entail Irish words or phrases or patterns of speech being incorporated into English and turning it into a sub-standard form of the 'original', as he felt the writers of the Literary Revival had done (see Chapter 5 of this study). Rather, the language underwent a more significant transformation by virtue of it being inflected by 'the national ethos' enshrined in Irish. In other words, the organic hybridization of Irish with English produced what amounted to another language altogether - not just a version of English which differed from the metropolitan form in purely formal terms of vocabulary and syntax (though this was the most obvious sign of its difference), but a form which was invigorated by the special genius of the Irish people (made present through the transformative power of Irish vocabulary and syntax) and which could properly be counted as a national language which was unique to the Irish and alien to the speakers of other varieties of English. In short, a modern Irish identity could be grounded in Irish-English as well as in Irish.

The fact that the national ethos continued to exist outside of Irish and persisted in the English which it had transformed, was precisely the reason why the revival had to be continued in spite of the fact that the chances of success were minimal. In his letter to Patrick Kavanagh (discussed above) he made perfectly clear his reasons for supporting the project even though the death of the language as a vernacular looked imminent.:

> Any notion of reviving Irish as the universal language of the country is manifestly impossible and ridiculous but the continued awareness here of the Gaelic norm of word and thought is vital to the preservation of our peculiar and admired methods of handling English.[82]

In other words, Irish had to be preserved at all costs so that it could continue to exert an influence on the variety of English spoken in Ireland (by organically hybridizing with it) and thereby mark off Irish-English as a distinct and unique language spoken only by the Irish people and operating as the site and sign of their cultural difference from Britain. He made a similar point to Sean O'Casey in their correspondence about An Beal Bocht in 1942. O'Casey had written to him praising the novel for the manner in which it debunked certain revivalist shibboleths, but was careful to point out that this should not entail an attack on the idea of preserving the language itself. 'It is well that we Gaels should come to learn that Gaels do not live by Gaelic alone', wrote O'Casey, 'though, of course, no Gael can really live without it'.[83] O'Nolan agreed, but was much more explicit than O'Casey about the broad cultural significance of the language in a bilingual cultural context:

> I cannot see any prospect of reviving Irish at the present rate of going and way of working. I agree with you absolutely when you say it is essential, particularly for any sort of literary worker. It supplies that unknown quantity in us that enables us to transform the English language and this seems to hold of people who know little or no Irish, like Joyce. It seems to be an inbred thing.[84]

O'Nolan posits a direct correlation between language and nationality, suggesting not only that this essential quality of the language is inherent in all Irish people, but that it is also exclusive to them, preventing 'foreigners' (which included anyone who spoke a different variety of English) from grasping the nuances and ambiguities in the language. As he remarked of Irish literature written in English and of

Joyce's work in particular), 'it is manifest that foreigners **DO** get meanings, but meanings which are other'.[85]

An 'unknown quantity' that is an 'inbred thing' and not accessible to foreigners: this is just another way of referring to 'the national ethos' or, in more orthodox nationalist terminology, the genius of the Irish people and the spirit of the nation. Ultimately, then, O'Nolan attempts to ground Irish identity in the Irish language, just as orthodox cultural nationalists do, albeit in terms which would not be acceptable or comprehensible to those nationalists. This is further emphasised by his repeated insistence that the language can be shown to have characteristics and qualities which are intrinsic to it and which embody the national character:

> Irish has an intrinsic significance which (naturally enough) must be unknown to those who condemn the language. It provides through its literature and dialects a great field for the pursuit of problems philological, historical and ethnological, an activity agreeable to all men of education and good-will. Moreover, the language itself is ingratiating by reason of its remoteness from European tongues and moulds of thought, its precision, elegance and capacity for the subtler literary nuances; it attracts even by its surpassing difficulty, for scarcely anybody living today can speak or write Irish correctly and exactly in the fashion of 300 years ago.[86]

Leaving aside the rather pompous reference to men of education and good-will, O'Nolan makes a number of propositions about the language in this passage that are wholly compatible with a cultural nationalist position. Not only does he recognize that the language is the site and sign of the nation's history which can be traced in its literature and its dialects,[87] but also that the language is unique, remaining wholly distinct from other European languages and embodying 'moulds of thought' that could not be expressed in any language other than Irish. He emphasised the peculiarity and uniqueness of the language on a number of occasions. 'As languages go, Irish is a very difficult language', he wrote in 1960, 'totally alien to the European mould'.[88] Furthermore, Gaelic literature was to be admired for 'its remoteness from the corruption of contemporary European thought'.[89] The reference to the corruption of European thought here clearly implies that Irish thought is, by contrast, pure and vigorous, and is a suggestion that has significant ramifications for O'Nolan's language politics, as we shall in the next section.

Apart from its unique and peculiar status amongst the languages of contemporary Europe, what other inherent qualities is Irish alleged to possess? Although seemingly innocuous, the idea that the language is characterized by its intrinsic precision occupies a central role in O'Nolan's conception of Irish, even though he frequently made wholly contradictory statements about it. He frequently expressed his 'admiration for the beauty and precision of the language',[90] and singled out Thomas O Crohan in particular as a writer in whose hands 'the astonishing precision and beauty' of the language was revealed.[91] However, on occasion O'Nolan also made the opposite claim, that the language was in fact intrinsically ambiguous and that therein resided its inherent value. In his defence of the language against the Irish Times leader (discussed in the previous section), O'Nolan had argued that Irish was fully adequate to the complexities of modern living, and went on to suggest that this was because of its inherent tendency towards ambiguity. This fundamental characteristic of the language, he argued, meant that Irish was eminently suited to the expression of the moral uncertainties generated by a contemporary world in conflict and crisis:

> The Irish language will probably become invaluable as an instrument of self-expression in these changing times, when most of us are sure of nothing. The Irish speaker ... expresses his ambiguous existence by two separate and dissimilar verbs to be - is and ta. If he says is fear me [I am a man], he means that he is the external masculine, fundamentally and utterly a man; but if he says ta me 'mo fhear, he means that he is just man-like with trousers and looking as if he needed a shave as distinct from boy-of-twelve-like with pimples on his jaw and a sling in his pants pocket. ... The ta sense is, therefore, an inferior temporal excrescence on the skin of the timeless and imponderable is.[92]

A few months later, he again celebrated this alleged ambiguity, stressing now that it wasn't just **a** characteristic of the language but its defining feature:

> There is scarcely a single word in the Irish (barring, possibly, **Sasanach**) that is simple and explicit. Apart from words with endless shades of cognate meaning, there are many with so complete a spectrum of graduated ambiguity that each of them can be made to express two directly contrary meanings, as well as a plethora of intermediate concepts that have no bearing on either. And all this strictly within the linguistic field. Superimpose on all that the miasma of ironic usage, poetic licence,

> oxymoron, plamas, Celtic evasion, Irish bullery and Paddy Whackery, and it is a safe bet that you will find yourself very far from home.[93]

Again he invokes the work of Thomas O Crohan, this time as evidence for the polysemic potential of the language rather than its tendency towards absolute precision or univocality, especially by comparison with the impoverished semantic possibilities offered by English. In his book An tOileanach [The Islandman], he claims, O Crohan uses at least a dozen different words to signify the idea of sea-vessel, whereas 'your paltry English speaker apprehends sea-going craft through the infantile cognition which merely distinguishes the small from the big. If it's small, it's a boat, and if it's big it's a ship'.[94]

O'Nolan continued to describe the language in these contradictory terms, regardless of the discrepancies between statements. Like O Crohan's An tOileanach, the work of the lexicographer Father Patrick Dineen (most notably, his Irish-English dictionary Focloir Gaedhilge agus Bearla published in 1904) was held up at one moment as a testament to the inherent ambiguity of the language, and denigrated the next moment for making the language appear hopelessly imprecise: because he had words signify (literally) a plethora of distinct and unrelated concepts, 'most of the words he has in his book, meaning all things, mean really nothing at all'.[95] Whether he argued for precision or ambiguity as the most obvious quality inhering in the language, O'Nolan's line of reasoning is obtuse, for it is not immediately apparent why such qualities should be valued or how they have a bearing on thinking about national identity (which clearly they must do as they are both used to justify the continued pursuit of language revival). Moreover, his claims are theoretically suspect, for precision or ambiguity in the use of language is generated at the level of parole rather than at the level of langue; that is, it is produced in the context of a specific utterance, rather than inhering in the linguistic structure itself, and therefore cannot be an intrinsic feature of the language as such. Hence, to claim that either one or the other inheres in the very structure of a language is really to make a claim about the way in which the language is used and, by extension, thence about its users. In short, it is to produce an essentialist conception of the language which can then be mapped on to

the linguistic community itself, in this instance the Irish nation.

For O'Nolan to argue that Irish (or by extension, Irish English) is inherently one thing or the other is evidently problematic. In a context where Irish is valorized by cultural nationalists because of its intrinsic purity, which is then extrapolated to the moral and even racial purity of the Irish people, any reproduction of this form of argument entails reproducing the kind of essentialism about languages which he had been attempting to contest in the first place (as we saw above). To some extent, the idea that something like ambiguity inheres in a language could be retheorized in more obviously political terms as multi-accentuality or alterity and then turned against that essentialism to undermine it from within.[96] As with the effects of the organic hybridization between languages, any representation of Irish as a pure and stable entity is implicitly contested by the disruptive presence of unstable signs, producing an idea of the language as always other to itself, radically non-identical and thereby unable to operate as the locus and guarantor of a stable and enduring cultural identity. However, the opposing idea of precision or univocality in the language returns as a troubling presence in his thought as a whole, for it lays bare a persistent feature in O'Nolan's thinking about language - the insistence on linguistic correctness and the assertion that the proper forms of both Irish and English are located in the past, both of which propositions turn around the idea of the purity and stability of language. It is this more conservative underside of O'Nolan's thought which will be considered now.

- VI -

I have argued that O'Nolan repudiated the prevailing idea within the language movement that the Irish language was inextricably bound to other cultural practices, such as traditional music and dance, as a natural defence against the incursions of a debased foreign culture and as markers of an authentic and enduring Gaelic identity. As we have seen, he denied that either the Gaelic language or traditional Irish culture existed in a state of unblemished purity, maintaining their original unity and stability against English materialism and degenerate cosmopolitan intellectual influences, and posited against

this notion the fact (as he saw it) of hybridity in terms of Ireland's two languages (Irish and Irish-English) and modern Irish identity. In his view, in reformulating the Gaelic heritage in terms of moral puritanism and xenophobia, and using this as the basis upon which Irish identity was founded, the language movement had betrayed the original cultural ideals of the Gaelic League and the language organizations related to it. O'Nolan made this quite clear in a Cruiskeen Lawn piece from 1946, in which he imagines himself as one of the founder members of the Gaelic Union (founded in 1881 with the aim of preserving and cultivating the language[97]) looking back in disgust at what the language movement had turned into by the over the previous fifty years:

> This much I must make crystal clear, my aim in founding the Gaelic Union was a worthy one. I sought to preserve what was signified [sic !], urbane and adult in the remnants of the gaelic civilization then subsisting. At no time did I authorize the revolting manifestations and exercises which go by the name of 'gaelicism' today. Nothing was further from my thoughts than a 'gaelic revival' that connoted the atrophy of Irish intellects nor did I dream that the publication of a few old tales should become a base pathogenic influence on the minds of the young and innocent. I did not foresee that my labours should in due time lead grown men who were apparently sane to denounce many ideas and practices on the sole ground that they were 'foreign'.[98]

In a rare moment of generosity towards the official language movement, unguarded by his characteristic ironic evasion and qualification, O'Nolan even expressed some nostalgia for 'the early days of the century when the Gaelic League was a great national force, before the language became a racket'.[99]

This is a particularly interesting comment which has important ramifications for our understanding of O'Nolan's conception of modern Irish culture. For while he was clearly able to separate the initial impulses and ideals of the language movement from its contemporary manifestation as an exclusivist organization with extremely narrow cultural sympathies, the language he uses in the passage cited above to describe revivalist discourse in the forties paradoxically reveals a dependence on the very ideas which he is contesting. Phrases such as 'base pathogenic influence' and 'the atrophy of Irish intellects' invoke the same suggestions of disease and cultural degeneracy that

the more extreme exponents of Gaelic purism were using to describe jazz music and the English press. Whereas the latter had advocated the purging of Irish culture of all foreign cultural influence through wholesale Gaelicization in the hope of achieving a pure national culture, O'Nolan seems to be suggesting that it is the exponents of 'Gaelicism' who are in fact responsible for the contemporary malaise around the language, and that the original and authentic Gaelic ideal for which the language movement worked in the early days of the Gaelic League had been contaminated by the puritanism and xenophobia of its more recent adherents. This seems to suggest that while he repudiates the particular forms of cultural purity advocated by the Gaelic League (ie. those that are linked to strict codes of moral purity around issues of sexuality), he isn't denying the importance of the idea of cultural purity or authenticity **per se**, nor its significance in terms of debates around language and cultural identity, as we shall see.

This faintly articulated nostalgia for a moment when the objectives of the language movement were unencumbered by additional ideological baggage that was (in O'Nolan's view) peripheral to the essential aims of the revival, is a significant aspect of his views on the language question and has an important bearing on much of his work on the issue from this period. For the idea of cultural purity leaves a significant trace across his work on the language, particularly that part of it which deals with the notion of linguistic and cultural hybridity. As I shall demonstrate below, O'Nolan's insistence on the hybrid nature of the languages spoken in Ireland paradoxically invokes a yearning for something pure, original and authentic in which Irish cultural identity can be securely grounded in the absence of the one thing which is supposed to constitute that identity - that is, Ireland's unique and original national language. In spite of his insistence that Irish-English might be the sign of Ireland's cultural distinctiveness, nevertheless O'Nolan still hankers after something which can operate as the site of a modern identity without being compromised by its dependence on 'the invigorating influence of H.M. English'.[100]

His adherence at one level to the idea of purity and stability in language and culture (which in other places he contests) is revealed in his insistence on correct usage of the proper forms of

languages in the face of allegedly declining linguistic standards. Returning to one of his cherished subjects, 'the precision of the Irish language', O'Nolan claimed that ambiguity was alien to Irish because it was a language in which all words mean just one thing and nothing else. The significance of this observation, he felt, had far-reaching consequences:

> Therein is the secret why Irish cannot be revived: the present age shrinks from precision and 'understands' only soft woolly words which have really no particular meaning, like 'cultural heritage' or 'the exigent dictates of modern traffic needs'.[101]

This is the corruption of modern European thought that O'Nolan referred to above: imprecision in the use of words. Proper usage has declined as slang and jargon have proliferated, and linguistic degeneration has brought with it the horrors of cultural degeneration (the idea is reminiscent of George Orwell's argument in his essay 'Politics and the English Language' in this respect). Contrary to his earlier assertion that Irish cannot be revived because cultural circumstances militate against it, O'Nolan now argues that the revival is pointless and the language doomed because because people don't know how to speak the language correctly in the first place. The problem has been shifted from the decline in the number of people who speak the language to a decline in the standard of the language which they actually speak.

The notion that the modern age is characterized by widespread linguistic degeneracy, which in turn contributes further to the general cultural malaise, is exemplified by his obsessive analysis of cliche which began in the pages of 'Cruiskeen Lawn' in 1942. In his Catechism of Cliche, he aimed to produce 'a unique compendium of all that is nauseating in contemporary writing' through 'a harrowing survey of sub-literature and all that is pseudo, mal-dicted and calloused in the underworld of print',[102] and went on to describe the offending items in the following terms:

> A cliche is a phrase that has become fossilized, its component words deprived of their intrinsic light and meaning by incessant usage. Thus it appears that cliches reflect somewhat the frequency of the incidence of the same situation in life. If this be so, a sociological commentary could be compiled from these items of mortified language.[103]

O'Nolan is suggesting here that the meanings of words are determined in advance of their use and that they remain fixed and stable (or original and pure, in a slightly different discourse), immune to the historical pressures of semantic conflict and change. Such change is conceived, in fact, as improper usage, and he even described his primary impulse as a satirist as the elimination of such linguistic abuses:

> To induce people who write publicly to know what they are talking about, to have achieved mastery of grammar and syntax, to learn how to spell, to verify any matter or word about which they are in the slightest doubt, ... to denounce what is sloppy, vague, loose ...[104]

'The subject is really important', he wrote a few years later, 'since words are the only tools we have for conveying anything but the simplest and plainest meaning'.[105] In O'Nolan's description and exposure of cliched language, cultural change is figured as cultural debasement, the signs of which are to be located (literally) in language and its improper usage.

As we saw in his response to the Irish Times leader above, O'Nolan was quite capable of seeing linguistic innovation as the fundamental condition of the historical life of languages. In a late article on American English, he observed that the differences between 'the English and American languages' is the result not only of the retention or petrification of older usages, but also of organic hybridization between the various languages of the European settlers and indigenous Americans, and that this had produced a 'situation of lingual flux' which was compounded by the tendency of modern Americans to be 'infinitely resourceful and even witty in inventing new words'.[106] However, he was equally capable of regarding such developments in terms of of a decline from cultural vitality into decadence. 'The civilization that can produce such an absurdity would merit the word decadence were it not for the fact that it never reached any eminence from which it could be said to recede', he wrote of the formulaic language of the law, which he singled out for what he regarded as its Latinate jargon.[107] O'Nolan insisted on the virtues of 'plain English' as opposed to 'Latinities primitive and barbarous of sound' and 'locutions tortuous of syntax, imponderable of meaning and not intelligible save by reference to "asiatic philologies"'.[108] What

he objected to, it seems, was precisely language which had become hybridized in character, an idea that is reiterated in the slippage from language to race that occurs when one of his characters in **Cruiskeen Lawn** insists that 'one must not mate our gentle tongue with negroid importations from regions barbarous of character'[109] The call for clarity of expression and plainer meaning can only be interpreted, in the last instance, as a desire for greater purity.

Much of his analysis of cliche and improper usage relates to English, though the Catechism of Cliche was occasionally extended to include the linguistic monstrosities that allegedly pertained to modern Irish. In O'Nolan's view, the English language had become completely debased, replete with 'dead words' and formulaic phrases, 'a grotesque Puck's castle of civil service formalism, loathsome traditions of priggery, foreign press matter and twice nightly variety shows'.[110] This debasement, however, applied only to English as it was spoken and written in England, not other parts of the United Kingdom or the English-speaking world, and certainly not in Ireland. As we saw above, the English language in Ireland had become revitalized through its hybridization with Irish words and rhythms which, in O'Nolan's view, prevented 'the standard of English ... both in the spoken and written word' from sinking to 'a level probably as low as that obtaining in England', and one could go no lower than 'the fragmented English patois'[111] While this move may appear to be radical in its implications, opening up the possibility of a multi-ethnic, non-sectarian, pluralist identity based on the notion of cultural hybridity, I want to suggest that such an idea is deeply compromised by the very terms which he uses to construct it - namely, hybridity - and that this is evidenced in his insistence on a proper form of Irish which has either receded into the past or needs to be actively forged in the present.

In his book Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race, Robert Young has suggested that to invoke the idea of hybridity - even as a positive term in relation to cultural identity - is to invoke simultaneously the idea of the original purity of the forms which have been hybridized. As Young argues, hybridity is a concept that is rooted in nineteenth-century scientific and anthropological discourses of racial difference, particularly in relation to white

European anxieties about miscegenation. His argument draws attention to the continuity between the racism inscribed in these discourses and reformulations of the notion of hybridity in recent cultural theory, and suggests that rather than operating within a radically different theoretical paradigm, the recent appropriation of the figure of the cultural hybrid for a non-essentialist identity politics emerges from (and thereby reproduces) an intellectual lineage rooted in racism. While we need to be wary of claims that hybridity in its contemporary usage necessarily colludes with the racism which it is attempting to contest and displace (in its crudest form such an argument elides the way in which hybridity is itself a historical concept, dependent for its meaning and political implications upon the particular historical and cultural circumstances in which it is deployed), nevertheless Young's argument is particularly enabling in relation to O'Nolan's conception of the relationship between the languages of Ireland and their bearing on his ideas about national identity. For it points to O'Nolan's dependence upon the idea that the hybridized linguistic forms produced through the encounter of English with Irish are based upon two absolutely distinct languages which once existed in a pure state, but whose purity has been overcome by the inevitable processes of historical conflict and interaction.

One of the key sites upon which the notion of hybridity operates is language, particularly in relation to the nation and the representation of the national language as pure and uncorrupted by dependence upon or contact with other languages. I have suggested that the Bakhtinian notion of organic hybridization is useful for examining cultural nationalism's insistence on the purity of the national language because it demonstrates that hybridity is, in fact, the inevitable result of the historical interaction of all languages. However, in characterizing Bakhtin's concept as an example of 'a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation', Young implies that it shares with all other discourses of cultural hybridity a dependence on the exclusivist notion of cultural purity, thereby betraying its rootedness in nineteenth-century racial discourse.[112] For Bakhtin, however, linguistic hybridity is not the fusion of two pre-existing **pure** forms of language, because a language can never exist in a state of original purity. Rather, languages are

always heteroglot or pluralist, characterized by a multitude of internal differences:

> Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, circles, schools and so forth, all given a bodily form. These 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages'.[113]

As heteroglossia, any national language is always made up of a diversity of different and competing social languages, 'social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age-groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour', all of which give rise to the 'internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence'.[114] To claim that a language is otherwise - unified, self-contained and enduring in its original purity - is only to theoretically construct it as such through the suppression of its heteroglot reality:

> Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given [**dan**] but is always in essence posited [**zadan**] - and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. ... A common unitary language is a system of linguistic norms. But these norms do not constitute an abstract imperative; they are rather the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language, or else defending an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia.[115]

While one national language may be marked off from other national languages in as much as it constitutes a relatively discrete lexical and grammatical system, its apparent unity and stability are always undermined by the perpetual threat of disruption offered by the internal differences which have been suppressed and by the hybridizing impulses of the alien linguistic elements which press upon and attempt

to mix with it.

Although O'Nolan had demonstrated that Irish maintained itself as a living language by organically hybridizing with English (thereby undermining cultural nationalist claims regarding its enduring purity), and that Irish-English was a hybrid language which was capable of forming the basis of a sense of national identity which emphasised the hybrid and pluralist nature of modern Irish culture, the progressive thrust of his argument is blunted paradoxically by the very concept which enables it. O'Nolan's hybrid forms not only depend upon the idea that there is an intrinsic difference between the two forms which have become mixed, but that those forms are (or, rather, were) essentially pure and stable. Rather than arguing for the heteroglot reality of Irish and English, he retains faith in the idea that these languages can exist in a stable state of original purity - at least, they have existed in this form in the past.

This impulse manifests itself most obviously in his insistence that cliches are signs of linguistic degeneration and a wider cultural decadence, and his suggestion that English-English (as distinct from Irish-English) is irredeemably debased in its contemporary form. Clearly this hadn't always been the case. At some point in the dim and distant past, English had been brimming over with vitality and capable of producing great literature: this was the form of 'our beloved tongue that Shakespeare and Milton spoke' (the notion of a unified standard belonging to the past is encapsulated in the one word 'spoke', conflating the differences between written and spoken forms of the language, and referring to it in the past tense).[116]

O'Nolan makes a similar claim about Irish no longer existing in its original (and hence proper) form:

> It is impossible to assess the extent or value of teaching Irish in the schools since the foundation of the State but it is a fair guess that the language learnt, even well learnt, is not true Irish. Scarcely ever anywhere is an acquired tongue the true thing and that holds even where a transposed person is in an environment where nothing but the other tongue is spoken. In fact, as languages go, Irish is a very difficult language, totally alien to the European mould.[117]

'Scarcely anybody today can speak or write Irish correctly and exactly in the fashion of 300 years ago', he wrote in **Cruiskeen Lawn**,[118] for it employs 'a system of grammar and syntax which has disappeared

completely from this, the world we live in'.[119] As such, it is less akin to modern European vernaculars than it is to classical languages with which he frequently draws comparisons:

> Whence comes this incompatibility as between Latin and Irish? Irish **is** Latin ... Latin improved by occidental vernacularity. ... I know of only four languages, viz: Latin, Irish, Greek and Chinese. These are languages because they are the instruments of integral civilisations. English and French are not languages: they are mercantile codes.[120]

In suggesting that Irish is (or, rather, was) the language of an integrated culture, O'Nolan implies that that the language itself was also integrated - that is, unified and internally undifferentiated. In the present, by contrast, it exists in a fragmented form, riven by differences of region and dialect that prevent it from attaining closure and stability. O'Nolan deplored what he regarded as the contemporary trend amongst writers and language enthusiasts for 'the cultivation of a patois pocked with colloquialisms, archaisms, dialect aberrations and studied provincialisms'.[121] Whereas cliche was the primary debasing influence on modern English, colloquialism and local dialect played a similar role with regard to modern Irish, operating as both cause and symptom of the internal decay of the language. The problem with Irish, he argued, is that 'it has three main dialects, each two of which, in the eyes of the other, are "wrong" and "are not Irish at all"'.[122] 'Irish, shorn of the fungus of colloquialism, is the most precise and astringent of languages', he claimed,[123] but 'instead of being standard, objective and accurate, [it] is couched in the local peasant patois'.[124] If the revival were to succeed, he argued, then it would require a stable and uniform form of the language to be forged out of the competing regional variations:

> Irish, we are agreed, cannot be revived because it is a babel rather than a language, a welter of shrill provincial jealousies. It requires to be attacked with a sledge-hammer, made simple, uniform and rational.[125]

O'Nolan actively worked for the reformation of the language through a simplified orthography and the use of a modern typeset, things which began to be officially adopted in the late 1940s.[126] 'The Irish language is not finished', he wrote of his plans for the 'production of a new - modern - vital, Irish language', and confidently asserted that 'the day when standards in **anything** can be dictated by peasant

usage is gone forever'.[127] In the absence of such a modern and vital form of the language, however, all that they were left with was 'the deplorable peasant patois that passes for Irish today'.[128]

O'Nolan's insistence that the correct forms of both Irish and English are located in the past and operate as the standard from which modern usage deviates, suggests that his notion of the hybrid form produced through the encounter of Irish with English is based upon an absolute difference between its two, originally 'pure' constitutive languages. This, in turn, seems to suggest that O'Nolan's account of linguistic hybridisation can be placed at the service of ideas about cultural identity that are as conservative as those he is attempting to displace. While on the one hand his notion of linguistic hybridity embodies a progressive and critical impulse, to the extent that it is used against forms of cultural nationalism which essentialise the relationship between language and nation by showing that the language is subject to historical change, on the other hand, these historical changes are represented in terms of a process of decline and cultural degeneration from a mythologised moment of linguistic purity and cultural unity located in an earlier epoch. As a result, O'Nolan's critique seeks to displace one form of essentialising cultural nationalism, which locates its golden age of cultural unity in a pre-colonial moment and celebrates particular kinds of cultural practices as authentically Irish while denigrating others as unnatural and foreign, with another arguably equally conservative evocation of an 'authentic' past. As we shall see in the next chapter, this conservatism operates around O'Nolan's insistence that the true value of Gaelic culture resides in the forms of social organisation and cultural practice that were typical of the highly stratified social formation of early modern Ireland, which he regards as the true locus of Gaelic culture and tradition before it was dismantled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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It is no coincidence that O'Nolan's one major work in Irish, An Beal Bocht, should have been written at the moment when the language became such an intense object of debate and the more progressive sections of

the language movement began to re-examine the intellectual premises and ideological implications of the revival. As we shall see in Chapter 5, O'Nolan's novel reveals the ideals which motivated the revival to be entirely divorced from the realities of the linguistic situation at this time (namely, the impending death of the language). But its modernist self-reflexivity and irony also demonstrate that the language did not have to be regarded as archaic and as the sole preserve of a backward and impoverished rural way of life. Rather, the language was vigorous, flexible, and wholly adequate both as an instrument of communication in a modern urban context, and as contemporary literary medium. Hence, An Beal Bocht is a testimony to the conflicting impulses which were predominant in the language movement at this moment: a sense of crisis at the rapidly waning fortunes of the language, and a conviction that something new and appealing could emerge from the ruins of the original revival project.

As we shall see in later chapters, it is precisely in the context of this debate about the future of the language that we should view all of O'Nolan's work from this period (not just his writings in and about the language, but his fictional and dramatic writings in English too). Rather than looking back anxiously to the apparently unsurpassable achievements of Joyce, or going beyond his modernist precursors and anticipating the concerns and strategies of postmodernist fiction (as most of his commentators do to one degree or another), we should view O'Nolan's work as firmly rooted in its own historical moment, both reflecting and contributing to the changing intellectual climate around the language question which was taking place in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as intellectuals searched for a cultural practice that would serve (in the absence of the Irish language) to securely ground a modern Irish identity. In spite of the marked generic and stylistic differences between his three novels from this period, in each of them O'Nolan both points to the fictiveness of certain dominant modes of cultural identity while toying with the possibility that something more enduring can be located in some aspect of Ireland's culture and history. It is with these novels, and the search within them for the elusive character in which national identity can be securely grounded, that the rest of this study will be concerned.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Dermot Keogh, Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State, p.141.

2. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.122.

3. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.135; Monique Gallagher, Myles from Dublin, p.15.

4. A brief account of the characteristics and history of Irish-English can be found in Loretto Todd, The Language of Irish Literature, ch.1 & ch.2; see also the essays in Diarmaid O Muirithe (ed.), The English Language in Ireland for more specialized studies of the topic. Tom Paulin argues for the contemporary political significance of the varieties of English spoken in Ireland in 'A New Look at the Language Question' in his Ireland and the English Crisis, pp.178-93.

5. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.188.

6. cit. & trans. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.123.

7. cit. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.135.

8. On the philosophical premises of nationalism see Elie Kedourie, Nationalism, esp. ch.5; see also John Hutchinson, The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism, ch.1.

9. cit. Tomas O Fiach, 'The Language and Political History', in Brian O Cuiv (ed.), A View of the Irish Language, p.111.

10. Sean O Tuama, 'The Gaelic League in the Future', in Sean O Tuama (ed.), The Gaelic League Idea, pp.98-9.

11. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.56.

12. cit. F.S.L. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, p.231.

13. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.58.

14. cit. ibid., p.47. Brown's excellent account of the language revival and its prosecution through the education system in the decades following independence is the best available (see esp. ch.2 and ch.6), and I am indebted to it in the discussion that follows. Other useful accounts may be found in F.S.L. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp.635-45, Donal McCartney, 'Education and Language, 1938-51', in Kevin B. Nowlan and T. Desmond Williams (eds), Ireland in the War Years and After, 1939-51,

pp.80-93, and J.J. Lee, Ireland 1912-1985, pp.132-6 & pp.670-3.

15. cit. Brian O Cuiv, 'Irish in the Modern World', in Brian O Cuiv (ed.), A View of the Irish Language, p.131.

16. For a detailed sociological analysis of the problem see Reg Hindley, The Death of the Irish Language, esp. ch.10 and ch.11.

17. cit. J.J. Lee, Ireland 1912-1985, p.132.

18. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.50.

19. Donal McCartney, 'Education and Language, 1938-51', p.80.

20. J.J. Lee, Ireland 1912-1985, p.135.

21. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.189.

22. cit. ibid., p.189.

23. cit. ibid., p.191.

24. Reported in the Northern Whig and Belfast Post, 13 September 1960, p.5.

25. Cruiskeen Lawn, 13 June 1962, p.8.

26. Reported in the Kilkenny Journal, 19 May 1956, p.7, and the Kilkenny People, 19 May 1956, p.9.

27. See in particular Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn (**FCCL**), The Hair of the Dogma (**HOD**), and Myles Away from Dublin (**MAD**).

28. Northern Whig and Belfast Post, 13 September 1960, p.5.

29. Stephen Jones (ed.), A Flann O'Brien Reader, p.343.

30. Nationalist and Leinster Times, 25 June 1960; **MAD**, p.42.

31. Cruiskeen Lawn, 24 February 1955.

32. Kavanagh's Weekly, 14 June 1952, p.6.

33. cit. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.125. The article from which this quotation is taken was published in Dublin Doings in December 1940 and unfortunately has not been reprinted.

34. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.137.

35. Cruiskeen Lawn, 13 June 1962; **FCCL**, p.99.

36. Cruiskeen Lawn, 11 October 1943; The Best of Myles (**BOM**), p.282.

37. 'A Painful Subject', Kavanagh's Weekly, 7 June 1952, p.5.

38. Kavanagh's Weekly, 14 June 1952, p.5.

39. Irish Times, 23 April 1940, p.3.

40. See F.S.L. Lyons, Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939, esp. ch.3 & ch.6; Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, ch.1; Theodore K. Hoppen, Ireland Since 1800, ch.9; M.A.G. O Tuathaigh, 'Religion, Nationality and a Sense of Community in Modern Ireland', in M.A.G. O Tuathaigh (ed.), Community, Culture, and Conflict: Aspects of the Irish Experience, pp.64-81; Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Religion and Identity: The Church and Irish Independence', The Crane Bag, vol. 7, no. 2 (1982), pp.65-76.

41. For a good account of the relation between the regulation of sexuality by the Catholic Church and the dependence of the social and economic practices known as familism upon that regulation, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, pp.42-3 & pp.59-62. See also Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, ch.1.

42. cit. J.H. Whyte, Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970, p.26. For a full account of the dance-hall scare, see pp.24-34, and also Jim Smyth, 'Dancing, Depravity and all that Jazz: The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935', History Ireland, vol. 1, no. 2 (1993), pp.51-4. O'Nolan's article 'The Dance Halls' cites more than a dozen statements on the evils that lurked in and around the dance-halls and is a useful index of the moral panic surrounding the issue in the period (see The Bell, vol. 1, no. 5 (1941), pp.44-52; MBM, pp.241-9. For a further discussion of this article, see Chapter 4 of the present work.

43. cit. J.H. Whyte, Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970, p.25.

44. cit. Jim Smyth, 'Dancing, Depravity and all that Jazz: The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935', p.54.

45. Eamonn O Gallchobhair, 'The Cultural Value of Festival and Feis', in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), Music in Ireland, p.212.

46. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.147.

47. cit. Ronan Fanning, Independent Ireland, p.58.

48. cit. J.H. Whyte, Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970, p.27.

49. See Tony Crowley, Language in History: Theories and Texts, ch.4.

50. Cruiskeen Lawn, 27 November 1941; cit. & trans. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters',

p.132.

51. Cruiskeen Lawn, 15 March 1943.

52. Flann O'Brien, 'The Dance Halls', p.52; MBM, pp.248-9.

53. Cruiskeen Lawn, 27 November 1941; cit. & trans. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.132.

54. Irish Press, 16 October 1940, p.6. O'Nolan's letter forms part of a series of letters in the Irish Press on the subject of censorship and Irish writing. See 'The Literary Conscience', Irish Press, 25 September - 18 October 1940.

55. Reg Hindley, The Death of the Irish Language, pp.48-62.

56. ibid., p.23.

57. Irish Times, 28 September 1940, p.4.

58. ibid.

59. Irish Times, 4 October 1940, p.4; **FCCL**, pp.13-14.

60. Trans. Kevin O'Nolan, **FCCL**, p.15.

61. ibid.

62. Irish Times, 17 October 1940, p.3.

63. Irish Times, 19 October 1940, p.3; see also 21 & 31 October.

64. Irish Times, 21 November 1940, p.3.

65. Irish Times, 18, 19 & 22 October 1940, p.3.

66. On the importance of the idea of hybridity in nineteenth century theories of culture and race, see Robert Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race. On nationalism's tendency to reproduce the essentialist structure of colonialism's model of cultural identity, see David Lloyd, Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism. On the relation between the formation of a standard form of English and imperialism, see Tony Crowley, The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates.

67. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, esp. ch.2, and Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture.

68. M.M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p.304.

69. ibid., p.358.

70. ibid., pp.358-9.

71. ibid., pp.359-60. On hybrid constructions in novelistic discourse, see Bakhtin's analysis of Dickens' style in The Dialogic Imagination, pp.303-7, and for a typology of hybrid constructions see Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, pp.183-203.

72. ibid., p.360.

73. ibid.

74. ibid.

75. See Tony Crowley, Language in History: Theories and Texts, ch.4.

76. See Michael Adams, Censorship: The Irish Experience.

77. F.S.L. Lyons provides an excellent, albeit overly sympathetic, account of these arguments in his Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939. See esp. ch.6 for the deployment of these ideas in the cultural debates about Irish identity in the early years of the Irish Free State.

78. David Lloyd, Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment, p.44. For a more detailed account of the role played by anglicized intellectuals in Irish cultural nationalism, see John Hutchinson, The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State.

79. ibid., p.45.

80. Joseph Lee, 'The Irish Constitution of 1937', in Sean Hutton and Paul Stewart (eds), Ireland's Histories: Aspects of State, Society and Ideology, pp.87-8.

81. Cruiskeen Lawn, 11 October 1943; **BOM**, p.283.

82. Kavanagh's Weekly, 14 June 1956, p.6.

83. Sean O'Casey to Brian O'Nolan, 2 April 1942; cit. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.129.

84. Brian O'Nolan to Sean O'Casey, 13 April 1942; Stephen Jones (ed.), A Flann O'Brien Reader, p.343.

85. Cruiskeen Lawn, 10 February 1953; **HOD**, p.166.

86. Cruiskeen Lawn, 11 October 1943; **BOM**, p.283.

87. The term 'dialects' here does not refer to forms that deviate from the standard - for there is no standard form of spoken Irish - merely the different varieties of spoken Irish, past and present. This is not to say, however, that O'Nolan wasn't in favour of the idea of a standard form, as we shall see below.

88. Nationalist and Leinster Times, 28 May 1960; **MAD**, p.34.

89. Cruiskeen Lawn, 30 October 1946; **HOD**, p.9.

90. 'Standish Hayes O'Grady', Irish Times, 16 October 1940, p.3; Myles Before Myles (**MBM**), p.256.

91. Cruiskeen Lawn, 26 November 1962.

92. Irish Times, 10 October 1940, p.6.

93. Cruiskeen Lawn 11 January 1941; **BOM**, p.278-9.

94. ibid.; **BOM**, p.279.

95. **BOM**, p.387. See also **BOM**, pp.276-8 and **HOD**, pp.48-9.

96. For the way in which univocal meaning is denied by the multi-accentuality of the sign see V.N. Voloshinov, Marxism and he Philosophy of Language, pp.22-3, and by the sign's alterity see Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp. 49-50. For the development of this idea in terms of post-colonial theory, see Homi K.Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', The Location of Culture, ch.6, and for a reading of O'Nolan's novels (with the significant exception of The Poor Mouth) through a crude application of Derridean ideas, see Thomas F. Shea, Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels.

97. See Tomas O hAilin, 'Irish Revival Movements', in Brian O Cuiv (ed.) A View of the Irish Language, pp.91-100.

98. Cruiskeen Lawn, 30 October 1946; **HOD**, p.9.

99. Cruiskeen Lawn, 30 June 1943 .

100. **BOM**, p.382.

101. **HOD**, p.3.

102. Cruiskeen Lawn, 27 March 1942; **BOM**, p.202.

103. Cruiskeen Lawn, 27 August 1943; **BOM**, p.227.

104. **HOD**, p.59.

105. Nationalist and Leinster Times, 12 April 1963; **MAD**, p.169.

106. Nationalist and Leinster Times, 21 November 1963; **MAD**, pp.208-9.

107. **BOM**, p.225. O'Nolan produces a sustained parody of the language involved in legal proceedings in 'The Cruiskeen Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction' (**BOM**, pp. 137-47), and in 'The District Court' (**BOM**, pp.148-53), in which the defendant frequently resorts to replying to the court in Latin. In 'The District and Other Courts' (**FCCL**, pp.50-65, the satire is pushed further by having one of the defendants respond arbitrarily in Irish,

French, German, as well as Latin.

108. **BOM**, pp.140-1.

109. ibid. p.141.

110. cit. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.125.

111. Cruiskeen Lawn, 11 October 1943; **BOM**, p.282.

112. Robert Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race, p.22.

113. M.M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p.291.

114. ibid., pp.262-3.

115. ibid. pp.270-1.

116. Cruiskeen Lawn, 7 July 1958; cit. Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, p.222.

117. Nationalist and Leinster Times, 28 May 1960; **MAD**, p.34.

118. Cruiskeen Lawn, 11 October 1943; **BOM**, p.282.

119. Cruiskeen Lawn, 17 November 1953; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.272.

120. **FCCL**, p.86.

121. Cruiskeen Lawn, 10 June 1955; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.100.

122. Cruiskeen Lawn, 4 July 1953; cit. ibid., p.269.

123. Cruiskeen Lawn, 16 December 1952; cit. ibid., p.98.

124. Cruiskeen Lawn, 7 February 1945; cit. ibid.

125. Cruiskeen Lawn, 24 April 1944; cit. ibid., p.96.

126. See Mairtin O Murchu, The Irish Language, pp.61-73.

127. cit. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.126.

128. Cruiskeen Lawn, 7 June 1945; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.98.

Chapter Three

Escaping the Nets of Obligation: Creative Freedom and Social Responsibility in At Swim-Two-Birds

> I have been selected because I am out of fashion and out of date like the romantic antiquated stuff the thing is made of.
>
> (W.B. Yeats, The Death of Cuchulain)

- I -

In 1951, the Dublin literary magazine Envoy commemorated the tenth anniversary of Joyce's death with a special issue dedicated to an appreciation of his work by contemporary Irish writers. O'Nolan was invited to be guest editor for the issue because, as John Ryan (then Envoy's editor) later recalled, 'his own genius closely matched, without in any way resembling or attempting to counterfeit, Joyce's'.[1] In his editorial preface, entitled 'A Bash in the Tunnel', O'Nolan approached his subject matter in a characteristically circutitous manner, addressing the question of Joyce's achievement and influence through a seemingly irrelevant anecdote about a man he once met in a Dublin bar who periodically stole into the buffet cars of trains parked in the sidings overnight and locked himself in the toilet to drink the bottle of whiskey which he had lifted from the buffet. The story goes on to tell how on one particular occasion the buffet car in which he had hidden himself was shunted around Dublin before being abandoned in a disused tunnel. There he remained for three days, slowly working his way through the railway company's store of whiskey, and waiting for daylight to appear through the window so that he would know it was time for his lone drunken binge to come to an end and return home. This, concludes O'Nolan, is emblematic of 'the position of the artist in Ireland':

> Surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody

> else's whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word ENGAGED?[2]

Although somewhat elliptical, O'Nolan's image of the contemporary Irish artist perfectly encapsulates the prevailing mood among many intellectuals of the period who felt themselves to be slowly sinking in the mire of cultural stagnation that was independent Ireland. Alienated from the provincial obsessions of official nationalism, dissenting from its prescriptive cultural imperatives and unable to find refuge in more cosmopolitan environments abroad (being constrained by the need to earn a living as well as being cut off from the rest of Europe by the war), O'Nolan likened his position to that of a trespasser trapped in a dark and claustrophobic place, 'an unauthorized person' who suddenly finds himself 'locked with special, unprecedented locks' somewhere 'mute, immobile, deserted'.[3]

In the face of such acute disaffection, it would be tempting to read that word 'engaged' as meaning **engage**, suggesting that the Irish artist is actively committed to a critical exploration of the prevailing cultural climate, submitting to a radical interrogation the ideas and social policies that have produced the contemporary malaise. But the figure in the toilet is slightly more elusive than that: cut off from the world which is oblivious to him, certainly, but voluntarily so. Rather than being forcibly exiled from his native environment by the hostile forces of social conservatism and cultural philistinism, it is the artist who has locked himself away, banishing the world outside from his consciousness and conscience, and remaining preoccupied with a private but futile gesture of excess and oblivion. O'Nolan's is not an image of the morally or politically committed artist, it seems, for 'engaged' in his case means 'otherwise engaged'. Perhaps 'disengaged' would be the more appropriate term.

O'Nolan felt that 'the image fits Joyce' because his life and work was ultimately motivated by 'the transgressor's resentment with the nongressor'.[4] O'Nolan is alluding here to Stephen's declaration of **non-serviam** as the only true artistic creed in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, repudiating allegiance to any and all political philosophies and cultural institutions, devoting himself solely to the pursuit of his transcendent artistic ideals, and remaining wholly elusive as a social and political thinker:

> Perhaps the true fascination with Joyce lies in his secretiveness, his ambiguity (his polyguity, perhaps?), his leg-pulling, his dishonesties, his technical skill, his attraction for Americans. His works are a garden in which some of us may play. ... But at the end, Joyce will still be in his tunnel, unabashed.[5]

While similar ideas about Joyce's supposed lack of commitment to anything other than writing have been irrefutably challenged recently,[6] most critics would argue that O'Nolan's image of the disengaged or non-committed artist probably applies more accurately to O'Nolan himself. Bernard Benstock, for example, has argued that his work is limited by its 'serious lack of commitment in any direction' and that, rather than attempting to resolve the moral and intellectual problems which are established in the novels, he 'opt[s] for the authorial prerogative of remaining non-committal' instead:

> There is little chance of discerning where O'Nolan stands in regard to the Church or to Ireland or to the social conditions in which his characters find themselves. Outside the realistic tradition of the novel, with no directed satirical thrust to his brand of fantasy, he relies exclusively upon irony - an irony without a centre of gravity - for his dominant tone.[7]

In a more recent account of the ambivalences and hesitations that characterize his work, Monique Gallagher has portrayed his ironic stance as a virtue rather than a failing. In her view, O'Nolan's refusal to fully endorse any single point of view or position demonstrates (paradoxically) a firm and consistent commitment to 'dissident humanism', an ultimately subversive position (in her view) which enables him to maintain a 'provocative, irreverent, iconoclastic attitude' towards his subject matter while ensuring that his writing nevertheless remains 'a neutral, non-committal terrain':

> The uncertainty of his position, his double-faced, Janus-like mask, corresponds to an attitude of hesitancy: with irony as his dominant mode, O'Brien remains non-committal. He rejects a multitude of attitudes, but finally does not propose any in exchange. His scathing rigour prevents him from adhering to any ideology because his derisive mind perceives flaws in every choice.[8]

While it is true that O'Nolan is extremely elusive in terms of the intellectual positions he takes, little critical insight will be made into his work by insisting that a coherent statement of ethical and artistic principles be revealed and foreclosed. Benstock argues that 'what must be considered are O'Nolan's religious attitudes, and

as a Catholic novelist he betrays none', which 'denotes a purposefully myopic view of the world'[9]. The point would be, rather, to interrogate the precise impact of O'Nolan's Catholicism on his work (as Benstock does to great effect elsewhere[10]), though it seems to me that the relative lack of philosophical and theological speculation in his work suggests that O'Nolan wasn't beset by the kind of metaphysical crisis that preoccupied the two other great Irish modernists, Joyce and Beckett.

The concluding section of At Swim-Two-Birds is instructive in this respect for it ends with speculations on madness and death which are wholly out of joint with what has gone before it:

> Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop. When a dog barks late at night and then retires again to bed, he punctuates and gives majesty to the serial enigma of the dark, laying it more evenly and heavily upon the fabric of the mind.[11]

While the dialogues of the Pooka and the Good Fairy concerning the metaphysical implications of 'the Good and the Bad numerals' (p.151) have introduced the reader to ideas such as the resolution of contraries and the conflict between Good and Evil (though even here these ideas are expressed in an extremely elliptical manner and sit uneasily alongside the comedy that takes place around them), this passage is unsuccessful as an attempt to produce closure or coherence from the fragments that make up the novel. This is not to suggest that provisional unity and coherence cannot be forged from the disparate elements amd multiple narratives of the text (indeed, this chapter sets out to demonstrate precisely how this can be done), rather that the manner in which it is attempted here makes it appear as the crude imposition of an existential framework of meaning onto the preceding action. The narrative voice is one which we have not come across before and its tone remains largely free from the irony and parodic impulses that are so pervasive in the novel. To that extent, the very style of the passage is out of keeping with the rest of the novel. Even though At Swim is a farrago of dissonant voices and incompatible generic styles, the narrative voice here is marked off from the others by the sudden shift that occurs from the first-person narrative which operates as the framing narrative in the text to a third-person narrative which is not contained by the framing narrative (unlike all

of the other narratives in the novel) but which in fact usurps it.

Furthermore, although insanity is present in the text through the figure of Sweeney, there has been no prior suggestion that this is a primary thematic concern in the novel. As we shall see, Sweeney's significance lies in his alienation from the bonds of social obligation rather than from the instabilities of selfhood. Yet the novel closes with a lyrical mediation on madness:

> Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? It is extremely hard to say. ... Which of us can hope to probe with questioning finger the dim thoughts that flit in a fool's head? One man will think he has a glass bottom and will fear to sit in case of breakage. In other respects he will be a man of great intellectual force and will accompnay one in a mental ramble throughout the labrynths of mathematics or philosophy so long as he is allowed to remain standing throughout the disputations. Another man will be perfectly polite and well-conducted except that he will in no circumstances turn otherwise than to the right and indeed will own a bicycle so constructed that it cannot turn otherwise than to that point. Others will be subject to colours and will attach undue merit to articles that are red or green or white merely because they bear that hue. Some will be exercised and influenced by the texture of a cloth or by the roundness or angularity of an object. Numbers, however, will account for a great proportion of unbalanced and suffering humanity. (pp.314-6)

The idea that sanity and insanity may be indistinguishable from each other, occurring with equal intensity in the same individual, belongs more to the vision of The Third Policeman than to At Swim-Two-Birds, and the details about bicycles, colours, and the shapes and textures of objects echo some of the obsessive concerns of Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen in the later novel. In some ways, this passage should be seen as a bridge across to the following novel, laying the groundwork for the exploration of the discursive and relative nature of truth that takes place there in much more abstract terms than it does in At Swim where such discussion is always determined by the more local concern with the cultural imperatives and identity politics of the Irish Free State.

At Swim resists the kind of philosophical interpretation that this rather self-conscious meta-commentary attempts to impose on the novel, in much the same way that The Third Policeman tenaciously resists the attempt to ground its abstractions about time and space in the kind of local cultural issues and problems that At Swim explores.

It also resists, I would argue, the strictly formalist readings of the text that have dominated readings of the novel and of O'Nolan's work as a whole. While Benstock finds faults with O'Nolan's work for its failure to bring about closure which properly resolves the ethical issues in his novels and demonstrates a clear commitment to some set of moral values, most critics take a position which is similar to Gallagher's cited above, that is of fetishizing the openendedness of the text by focusing exclusively on formal issues and marginalizing other questions that might be asked about these texts, such as what kind of argument is being made about the Irish materials with which the text is concerned, and from which cultural and political position the text engages with its cultural context.

The justification for this critical response lies, it is argued, in the self-reflexive aesthetic formulations that appear in the text as the narrator proceeds with his novel. At the very beginning of the novel, he explains to a sceptical Brinsley his rather peculiar theory of the novel:

> ... it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. ... Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. (p.33)

Since the novel's republication in 1960, it has become commonplace for critics to argue that this 'theory' is a metafictional statement of the novel's own formal procedures, and that At Swim is an 'anti-novel' in terms of the definition proposed by M.H. Abrams in the late fifties:

> This is also the era of what is sometimes called the anti-novel - that is, a work which is deliberately constructed in a negative fashion, relying for its effects on deleting traditional elements, on violating traditional norms, and on playing against the expectations established in the reader by the novelistic methods and conventions of the past.[12]

Hence, Vivien Mercier writing in 1962 suggests that the aesthetic theory proposed by the narrator is 'a manifesto for the anti-novel', and describes At Swim as 'an assault on the conventions of all fiction, but especially on those of the so-called 'realistic' novel.[13]

Most commentators on the novel have tended to agree with this assessment, though greater philisophical significance has been attributed to its form more recently as the concept of 'anti-novel' has metamorphosed into the postmodernist metafictional narrative. At Swim is now commonly numbered amongst a large body of experimental texts which, it is argued, incorporate an account of the processes of their own production within their very structures, foregrounding the conventions of story-telling which they draw upon, and thereby denying the legitimacy of the extrinsic critical discourses that attempt to explain and interpret them. As a result, the novel is more commonly seen as the embodiment of an essentially postmodern vision of the world **avant la lettre** rather than a text which is in dialogue with its dual cultural heritage of the Gaelic literary tradition and European literary modernism.[14]

In spite of the different valuations placed on O'Nolan's apparent refusal to endorse any particular position in his work by Benstock and Gallagher (the former deploring his cultural relativism, the latter celebrating it), both critics are blind to the way in which the prevalence of the specifically modernist narrative procedures which he employs in his work (and in At Swim in particular) both requires a degree of non-commitment in any explicit sense (in the form of modernist impersonality) and reveals a very specific and engaged form of cultural critique (through the use of ironic juxtaposition and 'mythic' structures). This chapter aims to demonstrate that At Swim has a very specific cultural politics attached to it and that this emerges through close attention to the extremely complex structure of the novel. It is precisely through an interrogation of its modernism that the novel's engagement in an active dialogue with the apparently conflicting discourses of cultural nationalism and literary modernism can be traced. Far from remaining a culturally deracinated 'anti-novel' or postmodernist metafiction, At Swim is a text which I would like to read as playing out the central conflict in O'Nolan's relationship to modern Irish culture. On the one hand, the novel clearly positions itself in relationship to the cultural formation of European modernism, yet this reading sets out to explore the extent to which this modernism is underscored by a strain within the text which seeks to locate itself within the Gaelic literary tradition and a

cultural lineage which forms such a central component of the Irish cultural nationalism which the novel apparently satirizes. The locus of this conflict within the text is the role of the artist within a national culture and the question of whether the artist has an obligation to serve family, fatherland and church, as Stephen Dedalus puts it in Portrait, or to express himself in art as freely as he can.[15] At Swim suggests that this is a particularly acute problem for Irish writers confronted by the specific cultural conditions in the 1930s, and I want to discuss the way in which the novel explores and attempts to negotiate this problem through the interplay between traditional Gaelic materials and modernist narrative forms.

- II -

In many ways At Swim is an exploration at the level of literary form of precisely the same problems which we saw explored at the level of language (or languages, rather) in the previous chapter. That is, the novel combines both a critique of prevailing notions of national identity in post-independence Ireland with an attempt to retain some conception of a modern Irish identity which is grounded in cultural phenomena that are uniquely and authentically Irish but which do not entail exclusivist ideas about what that Irishness means. In the case of language, the problem which O'Nolan attempts to resolve is how to retain the Irish language as a constitutive feature of Irish identity without invoking the ultra-conservative identity politics advocated by the official language movement, but which also takes account of the precarious state of the language and the very real possibility that it might soon be extinct. In At Swim O'Nolan poses a similar question about the Gaelic literary tradition, namely how to produce a modern national literature from existing Gaelic materials which is adequate to the novel social and cultural conditions of independent Ireland and which doesn't reproduce the polarized identity politics of the Literary Revival which had done so much to mark the significance of Ireland's Gaelic literary traditions. In short, the novel explores the possibility of forging a national literature that combines the modern with the traditional, the indigenous with that which has come to be assimilated over time through Ireland's interaction with other social

formations, cultural traditions, languages and literatures.

In the previous chapter, I described how the policy of language revival had been vigorously pursued by the state from 1923, supported by the efforts and ideologies of various cultural nationalist movements such as the Gaelic League which argued that only through Ireland's unique language could the vital spiritual life of the nation be truly expressed. I also described how the idea of cultural regeneration that would be made available through the restoration of an essential and authentic Gaelic civilization was linked with fears of cultural degeneration that would result from the nation's exposure to the debasing influences of foreign cultural importations such as the English language, jazz dancing and other forms of Anglo-American mass culture. The puritanical and xenophobic strains within the language movement were reflected at a state level in the social and cultural conservatism that was embodied by successive governments in their attempts to enforce a rigid framework of sexual morality throughout the country. In their zealous efforts to reflect publicly the overwhelmingly Catholic nature of religious belief in the Free State, social policy in the 1920s and 1930s was primarily concerned with issues such as divorce (effectively prohibited in 1925), censorship (enacted in 1929), contraception (banned in 1935), and the contaminating influence of foreign (ie. British) newspapers (taxed in 1933), all of this culminating in the new constitution of 1937 in which legal recognition was given to 'the special position of the Catholic Church' - a backhand way of establishing Church and State in Ireland without infringing the rights of the Protestant minority.[16] Together, the veneration of Gaelic cultural traditions and the prosecution of a strict Catholic moral code combined to produce a highly prescriptive definition of national identity that emphasized social homogeneity over diversity, and cultural isolation and stability in the face of the modernizing influences of European culture.

At one level, At Swim-Two-Birds is a straightforward satire of precisely the kind of narrow conception of national identity that depends more upon strictures about personal and social morality than on the broader cultural determinants with which cultural nationalism was originally concerned. The critique of puritanical and xenophobic

tendencies within nationalism occurs in its most uncompromising form in the novel's framing autobiographical narrative, in which the narrator repeatedly registers his alienation from the petit-bourgeois domestic environment in which he lives with his sanctimonious uncle. In some ways, his uncle stands as the embodiment of the values that inform the dominant conception of Irishness from which the narrator is struggling to break free. Frequently repudiated by him for the indolent and dissipated lifestyle that he leads as a student, the narrator is subjected to an endless series of Christian moral platitudes that constantly invoke the discourse of health and disease which (as we saw in the previous chapter) is so central to orthodox cultural nationalism's insistence on moral, cultural and even racial purity:

> But doctoring and teaching are two jobs that call for great application and love of God. For what is the love of God but the love of your neighbour? ... It is a grand and noble life, he said, teaching the young and the sick and nursing them back to their God-given health. It is, faith. There is a special crown for those that give themselves up to that work. ... Doctoring and teaching, the two of them are marked out for special graces and blessings. ... It is a good healthy life and a special crown at the end of it, said my uncle. Every boy should consider it very carefully before he decides to remain out in the world. He should pray to God for a vocation. (pp.37-9)

Of course, the idea of vocation has dual connotations of both religious and artistic callings (as with Stephen's deliberations between the two conflicting paths in Portrait) and, as we shall see, the novel is to suggest that the two are not as mutually incompatible as the uncle claims in his division between the religious life which is clean and healthy and the artistic life which is dissolute and unchristian.

Like the moral values he imposes on those around him, the uncle is, in the narrator's view, 'abounding in pretence [and] deceit' (p.40), not only for the self-conscious piety which he espouses and prioritizes above all other cultural considerations ('there is little respect for the penny catechism in Ireland to-day and well I know it', he complains at one point, 'but it has stood to us ... and will please God to the day we die. ... It is worth a bag of your fine degrees and parchments' (p.131)), but also for the mere lip-service which he necessarily pays to Gaelic culture and his bigoted adherence to

nationalist cultural ideals. The narrator's seventh reminiscence presents the most explicit discussion in the novel of the question of national identity, and represents a fairly unambiguous criticism of the essentialism that underpins the attempt to produce a coherent and unified national identity out of disparate and irreducible modes of cultural affiliation and belonging.

The episode concerns the organization of a Ceilidhe to celebrate the return of a Dublin emigrant, 'an exile home from the foreign clime' as the narrator's uncle so lyrically puts it. In their efforts to arrange the evening's entertainment, the members of the reception committee find themselves hotly debating whether or not they can allow a 'foreign' dance (the waltz) to be played at an Irish cultural event. The question provokes a fierce exchange between Connors, who is in favour ('Its as Irish as any of them, nothing foreign about the old-time waltz'), and Corcoran, who is opposed to the idea:

> I don't agree with the the old-time waltz at all. Nothing **wrong** with it, of course, Mr Connors, nothing actually **wrong** with it ... But after all a Ceilidhe is not the place for it, that's all. A Ceilidhe is a Ceilidhe. I mean, we have our own. We have plenty of our own dances without crossing the road to borrow what we can't wear. See the point? It's all right but its not for us. Leave the waltz to the jazz-boys. By God they're welcome as far as I'm concerned. (pp.189-90)

The respective positions taken by the two protagonists are straightforward enough. Connors implicitly conceives of Irish culture in broad inclusive terms, allowing any activity to be considered properly Irish if it is something that Irish people do. Within this non-essentialist framework, there can be 'nothing foreign about the the old-time waltz' because (as he points out to the other members of the committee) 'we have all danced it'. Besides that, Connors concludes, 'because a thing is foreign it does not stand to reason that it's bad' (p.190) By contrast, Corcoran proposes a narrow, exclusivist idea of Irish culture based on the kind of xenophobia and puritanism that (as we saw in the previous chapter) O'Nolan felt betrayed the broader vision of cultural nationalism. From this essentialist standpoint, it is held to be inappropriate and somehow unnatural for an Irishman to condone cultural pursuits that are not traditional and indigenous. As Corcoran claims in support of his argument, 'the Gaelic League is opposed to the old-time waltz, ... so

are the clergy', thereby cementing his claim that the waltz is nationally inauthentic and morally debasing.

The episode is one of the few moments in the text when the ideologies of cultural nationalism are explicitly satirized, as the attempt to assert the cultural unity of the nation collapses under the strain of the contradictions that are exposed. While the narrator's uncle plans to greet their visitor with 'a few words in Irish ... a friendly Irish welcome, **cead mile failte**', their meeting is carried on entirely in English, thereby revealing their own inauthenticity in terms of the cultural nationalism which they espouse. (pp,192-3) In a similar manner, any claim to religious homogeneity and piety is undercut by the anti-clerical joke told by Connors to 'general acclamation and amusement' and which not only reveals the company to be 'a mixed one', both Catholic and Protestant, but also exposes the schisms that exist within the Catholic Church between different orders (the joke concerns the alleged greed and hypocrisy of the Jesuits). Furthermore, any concern for the cultural and spiritual significance of the evening they have planned is shown to be merely formalistic as they turn their attentions to 'the inner man' and the number of bottles of stout that will suffice for each of them (pp.193-4). In spite of their apparent veneration of the traditional culture and spiritual values, they lay bare the fictiveness of the orthodox nationalist conception of Ireland as a nation of Gaelic-speaking, tee-total, Catholic-worshipping set-dancers.

That national identity is forged from disparate materials, some of which are excluded as inauthentic, rather than simply 'naturally' given, is indicated in the uncle's vain attempts to impose order on the chaos into which the meeting descends over the issue of the waltz and his insistence on policing the interventions of the other committee members so as to efface the signs of cultural differences within the nation (Irish-speaking and English-speaking, Catholic and Protestant), as well as the widespread non-observance of 'properly national' modes of behaviour (dancing 'foreign' dances, telling anti-clerical jokes, and drinking). Furthermore, the very reason for the Ceilidhe - the return home from America of an emigrant or economic exile - testifies to the fractured nature of the Irish nation living its diasporic experience in other cultures, other languages, other traditions. While

the uncle's attempt to impose unity on the proceedings and contain the disruptive differences that constantly threaten to dissolve entirely any pretence of cultural homogeneity and coherence, the narrator remains entirely peripheral. Incorporated into the proceedings as secretary against his will, he sits as a detached observer, recording the contradictions within the nation that his uncle is vainly trying to conceal, surrounded by faces that are 'strange and questioning' and which reiterate his alienation from the particular form of cultural nationalism which they embody.

After a particularly fractious encounter with his uncle, Brinsley asks the narrator whether Trellis, the main protagonist of the novel he is writing, is 'a replica of the uncle', to which the narrator does not reply (p.40). Brinsley's suggestion establishes yet one more correspondence between characters that have their ontological existence on different planes of the text (ie. in different narratives embedded within each other), thereby indicating patterns of meaning across the text through the counterpointing of repeated motifs, situations and types. Not all of these are significant (some are in fact deliberately misleading, giving the impression of total randomness which makes the real correspondences in the text that much more elusive), and while there are much firmer grounds for establishing meaningful correspondences between the narrator, Sweeney and Trellis (as we shall see below), Brinsley's suggestion points to the reiteration of the novel's principal cultural critique at a deeper level of the text.

The narrator's novel concerns Trellis's frustrated attempts to write a novel of his own on the subject of 'sin and the wages attaching thereto'. Trellis has become concerned about the declining standards of public morality, and is particularly appalled by contemporary codes of sexual behaviour which he reads about in sensationalist newspapers. As 'a philosopher and a moralist', he decides to write 'a salutary book on the consequences which follow wrong-doing' (pp.47,85). Trellis is used to continue the satire of religious puritanism that is initiated in the framing autobiographical narrative, and like the uncle's failed attempt to enforce strict moral codes, Trellis's effort only serves to reveal the extent to which that puritanism doesn't emerge from the people as an expression of the

national consciousness or spirit but is imposed from above in the cause of advancing the institutional interests of church and state. This clearly emerges in the narrator's description of Trellis's novel and the motives that inform it:

> Trellis wants this salutary book to be read by all. He realizes that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Therefore he is putting plenty of smut into his book. There will be no less than seven indecent assaults on young girls and any amount of bad language. There will be whisky and porter for further orders. ... His book is so bad that there will be no hero, nothing but villains. The central villain will be a man of unexampled depravity, so bad that he must be created **ab ovo et initio'**. (pp.47-8)

As this suggests, like any attempt at repression or censorship, the censoring agent only serves to invoke that which is being denied in the very act of denying it, thereby liberating proscribed behaviour or activities at least into the realm of discourse.

Trellis's novel is thus a pointed jibe at the kind of repressive measures taken in state legislation and church pastorals in the twenties and thirties over the allegedly immoral influence of cultural practices such as jazz-dancing and British newspapers. In particular, it attacks the idea that such puritanism be legitimated in explicitly nationalist terms as proper and natural to the Irish people, as is indicated in the slippage that occurs between moral and national concerns:

> It appeared to him that a great and daring book - a green book - was the crying need of the hour - a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity. ... In his book he would present two examples of humanity - a man of great depravity and a woman of unprecedented virtue. They meet. The woman is corrupted, eventually ravished and done to death in a back lane. presented in its own **milieu**, in the timeless conflict of grime and beauty, gold and black, sin and grace, the tale would be a moving and salutary one. **Mens sana in corpore sano.** What a keen discernment had the old philosopher. How well he knew that the beetle was of the dunghill, the butterfly of the flower. (pp.48-9)

Although presented as a book about the vagaries of the human condition, the overriding concern here is with the moral degeneracy of the Irish nation in particular, as the reference to his book being 'a green book' makes clear. And the references to disease and corruption reproduce precisely the same kind of language about moral purity, and

the concomitant imperatives to cultural and national purity, that formed the cornerstone of the triumphalist Catholic-nationalist ideology that prevailed at this time.

This elision of Catholic moral puritanism and nationalism, whereby the latter is conceived partly in terms of the former, is reiterated in Trellis's insistence on reading and writing 'only green books':

> Trellis practiced another curious habit in relation to his reading. All colours except green he regarded as symbols of evil and he confined his reading to books attired in green covers. ... On being recommended by a friend to read a work of merit lately come from the booksellers, he would enquire particularly as to the character of the bindings and on learning that they were not of the green colour would condemn the book (despite his not having perused it), as a work of Satan. (pp.139-40)

The 'orthodoxy of all books' is decided not just on moral grounds but on national grounds too, the intergrity of the two spheres being mutually interdependent and exclusive of all other concerns and interests which are dismissed in precisely the same excessive terms as, for example, jazz-dancing had been condemned from the pulpits - as 'a subterfuge of Satan' (p.141). While this satirizes the puritanism and xenophobia of the narrower form of populist cultural nationalism to which the uncle subscribes and from which the narrator is largely alienated, it also examines this exclusivist conception of national identity as a specific problem in terms of art. For Trellis's novel, and the set of attitudes that inform it, is a caricatured version of the prescriptions for a properly national literature laid down by Daniel Corkery in his book Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, published in 1931.

Corkery had attempted to demonstrate that a truly indigenous literature is one in which the imagination submits itself to:

> the three great forces which, working for long in the Irish national being, have made it so different from the English national being, [which] are: (1) The Religious Consciousness of the People; (2) Irish Nationalism; and (3) The Land.[17]

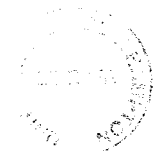
The Irish mentality, in Corkery's view, is 'chiefly the result of the interplay of these three forces', and without an awareness of all three of these forces, no writer can claim to express the realities of (what he terms) 'the Ireland that counts' - that is Gaelic, Catholic

Ireland, divorced from the modernizing influences of European culture.[18] Corkery was willing to concede that not all writers could write about rural life with any degree of intimacy or authenticity, because the land was not 'as universal' in Irish life as religion and nationalism, and hence 'one cannot therefore predicate its breaking in upon every page'.[19] However, 'at every hand's turn that religious consciousness breaks in upon it, no matter what the subject matter', while 'that spirit of Irish nationalism expresses itself in almost every page, no matter what the nature of the expression may be'[20].

Trellis's novel embodies two of the three prescriptions set down by Corkery, albeit in a comically reductive fashion. A nationalist consciousness not only informs his story, expressed in the concern with cultural debasement and moral purity, but is signified literally by the very covers within which the pages of his story are contained. Moreover, his concern with sexual morality exemplifies the religious consciousness of the Irish people, even though sex is graphically depicted. For according to Corkery,

> ... this religious consciousness is so vast, so deep, so dramatic, even so terrible a thing, occasionally creating wreckage in its path, tumbling the weak things over, that when one begins to know it, one wonders if it is possible for a writer to deal with any phase whatever of Irish life without trenching upon it. ... So firm is the texture of that consciousness that one may somtimes think that only about Irish life can a really great sex novel be written in these days; for the subject can have no great attraction for the serious artist except where the moral standards are rigid, and the reactions transcend the lusts and the shiverings of the mortal flesh.[21]

While the description of Trellis's novel given above seems to conform to the ideas expressed in this remarkably naive passage (any attempt to represent sex even where 'the moral standards are rigid' would have resulted in censorship under the legislation that was inspired by precisely the same religious consciousness that Corkery refers to here), the ultimate irony is that this is a novel that cannot be written. Trellis is unable to make progress with his project because some of his characters refuse to comply with the demands of his plot and take on a semi-autonomous, self-determining existence of their own beyond the moral imperatives that he has laid down. Thus, whilst engaging with the world of Trellis's text, Trellis's novelistic intentions are shown to be impossible, as this particularly rigid form



of religious consciousness, this 'exemplary' text of Irish national identity, is shown to be wholly at odds with the everyday lives and practical behaviour of the Irish people who are supposed to embody it.

If Corkery's prescriptions for an authentic national literature are undermined in Trellis's novel by the refusal of his characters to conform to the moral strictures that they are supposed to embody, this criticism is replicated at the 'higher level' of the narrator's novel which parades its cosmopolitan literary affiliations through a variety of references and allusions to contemporary modernist fiction. Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley and Denis Devlin are all cited as writers whose work is 'indispensible to all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature' (p.12). There are further allusions to the work of European modernists throughout in the form taken both by his own experiences as he records them and his novel about Trellis. Andre Gide's novel The Counterfeiters is invoked through the structure of embedded narratives and novels within novels; Luigi Pirandello's play Six Characters in Search of an Author serves as the inspiration for Trellis's characters coming to life and determining their own destinies; Kafka's The Trial is immediately invoked in the episode of Trellis's nightmare trial at the hands of his own characters; and even Proust's Remembrance of Things Past is alluded to in the narrator's awakening from his reverie by a pain in his tooth. Add to these O'Nolan's use in At Swim of Eliotic fragments taken apparently randomly from high cultural and popular cultural texts (from Heine to cowboys), and the Joycean use of a mythic structure to give them some meaning (discussed below), and we see that the novel registers its dissent from the prevailing cultural ethos by addressing its readers in a self-consciously modernist mode, looking to cosmopolitan Europe rather than provincial Ireland for its imaginative structures and materials.[22]

However, while the modernist consciousness which informs the novel as a whole registers dissent from a conservative identity politics that produces extremely restrictive accounts of what Irishness entails in terms of cultural traditions and social norms, I also want to read this modernism against the grain, and against the dominant assumption that it must automatically operate against forms of cultural nationalism, in order to explore the ways in which it also

works to produce a conservative cultural politics of its own which invests heavily within notions of an authentic Irish culture. This is to suggest, as I did in the previous chapter, that O'Nolan's rejection of the dominant formation of cultural nationalism cannot be read as signifying a rejection of nationalism per se, but rather involves an attempt to relocate the terrain of national identity in a different set of cultural coordinates. In the vision of contemporary Irish culture that the novel presents and distances itself from, the influence of the modernism of Joyce and Eliot in particular are of crucial importance.

In what follows I shall look at those aspects of the text which draw upon the methods and cultural critiques of those writers in more detail specifically in relationship to a discussion of the text's complex engagement with the mythic traditions which underpin its structure. I want to locate O'Nolan's modernism, as something more complex than an outright rejection of nationalism by a European cosmopolitan sensibility. For while the dominant strain of cultural nationalism is critiqued in the novel, the way in which the text produces this critique involves an implicit veneration of an earlier moment of apparent cultural unity and vitality. As I shall trace through the representation of Finn and Sweeney, the way in which contemporary Irish culture is shown to be a degenerate form of particular 'authentic' cultural traditions registers a deeply conservative impulse to return to an earlier social and cultural formation in which the artist is accorded a privileged position and, consequently, a desire to secure cultural identity in deep historical structures and literary traditions rather than the crudely populist nationalist vision embodied by the narrator's uncle.

- III -

'Death by fire, you know, by God it's no joke' remarks Furriskey in conversation with Lamont, to which the latter replies, 'they tell me drowning is worse' (p.222). This allusion to Eliot's The Waste Land implicates the fictional world of Trellis's novel in Eliot's apocalyptic modernist vision of contemporary cultural degeneration, recalling the descriptions in the poem of the spiritually evacuated,

detritus strewn modern metropolis. Eliot's vision of the coarseness and vulgarity of modern culture, typical, as Andreas Huyssen has argued, of a particular modernist aversion to mass cultural forms, resonates throughout At Swim.[23] Brinsley interrupts the narrator's description of Teresa's cheap 'corset of inferior design' to point out its symbolic significance as 'the ineluctable badge of mass-production ... created to a standard pattern by the hundred thousand' (p.43). Drinking in pubs, gambling, advertising slogans, gramophone records, all operate as signs of the degeneracy of modern life in the framing autobiographical narrative, whilst the banality of modern existence is signified by the repetitious nature of the narrator's social interactions with his uncle and college friends, and the stasis that surrounds the Furriskey household in their purposeless circular conversations.

What is significant about this representation of mass cultural forms and popular cultural practices as empty and debased, is that, unlike Eliot's text which draws its references from the whole range of European literatures to convey a cultural malaise that is prevalent throughout modern European culture, in At Swim the object of this critique is confined to modern Irish culture and is articulated in specifically national terms. Whereas for Eliot, cultural degeneration is a result of the growth of mass-democracy and the denial of the European spiritual and intellectual inheritance, for O'Nolan it is the result of nationalism's inability to assimilate properly the Gaelic cultural heritage without reducing it to the puritanical populist forms that prevailed in the 1930s. Towards the end of the novel Trellis is described as suffering from 'an inverted sow neurosis wherein the farrow eat their dam' (p.314). This is an obvious allusion to Stephen Dedalus's bitter description of Ireland as 'the old sow that eats her farrow',[24] though whereas Stephen's metaphor refers to the manner in which the spiritual freedom of Ireland's young is shackled by the constraints of familial, religious and patriotic obligation, O'Nolan reverses the metaphor to suggest that it is the modern generation of Irish men and women who remain culturally and spiritually impoverished through their ignorance and perversion of the Gaelic cultural tradition, leaving the defining narratives of this tradition 'twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a

story-teller's book-web', as Finn remarks to Conan (p.24).

In terms of twentieth century Irish culture, the attack on popular taste in At Swim was not without precedent. In 1901, Joyce had railed against the Irish Literary Theatre's surrender to the 'commercialism and vulgarity' of 'the popular will', and Yeats saw in the Playboy riots of 1907 a lamentable sign of the nationalist movement having become the preserve of 'a new class ... without exceptional men' made up of 'shopkeepers and clerks'.[25] But in the 1930s such sentiments were expressed with much greater frequency and increasing bitterness by Ireland's writers and intellectuals. Writing on the subject of 'literary provincialism' in 1932, Sean O'Faolain consciously invoked Joyce's pamphlet, 'The Day of the Rabblement', in testifying to his 'weariness with the provincial rabble',[26] and in 1934 Francis Stuart similarly invoked Yeats in his denunciation of the atrophied state of of cultural life in Dublin in particular which, he claimed, was held under the philistine influence of Ireland's petit-bourgeoisie:

> I walk through those streets that I once fought to defend, feeling a little like a stranger. ... It was this spirit of deadness and smugness that we fought against and were defeated by. The spirit of liberal democracy. We fought to stop Ireland falling into the hands of publicans and shopkeepers, and she has fallen into their hands.[27]

The alienation registered by Stuart and others of his generation is commonly ascribed to the deflation of the heroicizing impulses that informed the cultural projects of the Literary Revival and the political struggle for freedom from British rule. In resurrecting the myths and legends of the Irish past, the writers of the revival had placed them at nationalism's service as a summons to the Irish people to emulate the heroism of their ancestors from the distant past in the fight for national independence.[28] While such idealism about Ireland's mythological past played a central role in the process of nation-formation, operating as the imaginative counterpart to more material cultural projects such as language revival and the recovery and dissemination of the Gaelic literary tradition,[29] it did not fare particularly well in the aftermath of the independence struggle when confronted by the more prosaic formalities of state-building.

The subordination of this idealism beneath what Stuart termed the 'spirit of smugness and deadness' of cultural life in the

thirties, that is the complacent belief that everything significant had been achieved now that national independence had been won, is a central preoccupation of At Swim in which the heroic has been overtaken by the mundane and vulgar routines of everyday life in post-independence Ireland. The notion of the heroic as somehow exhausted and anachronistic in a changed cultural and political context is registered in the text by the depiction of the warrior Finn MacCool as a tired old man, reluctantly tolerated by the contemporary world which has little respect or reverence for him:

> Finn in his mind was nestling with his people. ... the old greybeard seated dimly on the bed with his stick between his knees and his old eyes staring far into the red fire like a man whose thought was in a distant part of the world or maybe in another world altogether (pp.89, 87).

That the cultural impoverishment of contemporary Irish life is figured in terms of a violence towards the heroic narratives of the past, the 'trampling' and 'torturing' of Finn's stories and the 'emasculation' of the warrior himself, indicates a critique of the discrepancy between nationalism's aspirations of cultural regeneration and the depressed and fractured actuality that is modern Irish culture. In the grotesque descriptions of Finn in the 'quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology' (p.16) with which the novel opens, the text clearly announces its critical distance from the mythologizing impulses of the Literary Revival through its parody and humour, suggesting the inability of Ireland's heroic literature to function as a model for contemporary political action and values:

> Finn MacCool was a legendary hero of old Ireland. Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development. Each of his thighs was as thick as a horse's belly, narrowing to a calf as thick as the belly of a foal. Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his backside, which was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass. (p.10)

The rapid shift from epic hyperbole (common to all heroic literatures) in the second sentence to the fantastically grotesque in the third sentence, paradoxically diminishes the hero's epic grandeur through exaggeration and disproportion, thereby reducing Finn to a figure of comic absurdity - the complete antithesis of the noble and fearless warrior that was appropriated for cultural nationalism in the Literary Revival.[30]

Finn is persistently subject to mockery and debasement in the novel, firstly at the hands of Trellis who uses him as a minor figure in his novel to enforce the moral law in the face of other characters' sexual transgressions, but who in fact goes on to commit sexual misdemeanors himself (p.85), and later at the hands of Trellis's own characters who embody the kind of philistinism that the uncle also evinces in denigrating the narrator's pursuit of an artistic rather than religious vocation. In this guise, Finn is used to attack the limited initiatives of those who have inherited the Literary Revival's cultural idealisms, and this is achieved through the ironic counterpointing of the mythic and the modern. Through the simple modernist device of juxtaposing epic with contemporary, heroic past with squalid present, O'Nolan contrasts Finn with the contemporary characters in the novel not so much as a summons to heroic action, but as a testimony to the huge gulf that exists between the social and cultural ambitions of successive generations in Ireland. This emerges most forcefully when Finn recounts the 'the Frenzy of Sweeney' to Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont and becomes subject to a barrage of bigotry and philistinism that is seen as characteristic of the diminished cultural vision of the Free State rabblement:

> Right enough he is a terrible man for talk. Aren't you now? He'd talk the lot of us into the one grave if you gave him his head ... For a man of his years, said Lamont slowly and authoritatively, he can do the talking. By God he can do the talking. He has seen more of the world than you or me, of course, that's the secret of it. ... His stories are not the worst though, I'll say that, said Lamont, there's always a head and a tail on his yarns, a beginning and an end, give him his due. ... I mean to say, said Lamont, whether a yarn is tall or small I like to hear it well told. I like to meet a man that can take in hand to tell a story and not make a balls of it while he's at it. I like to know where I am do you know. (pp.88-9)

This diminished vision emerges most clearly in the modern alternatives to Finn's tale of Sweeney that Shanahan offers his audience. Like Finn, Shanahan is a bit of a storyteller (his name echoes that of the poet Seanchan - pronounced Shanahan, as Yeats informs us in the list of characters - in Yeats' play The King's Threshold), and he likes to embellish his anecdotes by endowing them with semi-mythical dimensions that only serve to underscore the poverty of contemporary imaginative resources. As the interpolations from the press make clear, his story

about the battle of Ringsend (pp.73-83) concerns nothing more than a bout of drunken vandalism, but Shanahan presents it as a cowboy story about a gunfight over some cattle-rustling. There are clear echoes here of the 'cattle-raid' genre in heroic literature, in which one tribe plunders the cattle of another who then pursue the raiders to exact revenge (the most famous being Tain Bo Cuailgne or 'The Cattle-Raid of Cooley' in the Ulster Cycle of mythological tales). But in presenting his tale in the form of a cowboy romance, Shanahan inadvertently testifies to the culturally debased state of modern Irish culture which can no longer structure its experience according to the traditional Irish narratives, but relies instead on the impoverished form of a popular American genre.

In a similar manner, Shanahan interrupts Finn's tale of Sweeney, repudiating the traditional Gaelic narrative in favour of the proletarian doggerel of Jem Casey, 'Poet of the Pick and Bard of Booterstown', an inspiration to the Dublin working man and Ireland's finest living poet. In some ways Casey is Finn's contemporary counterpart, albeit a grossly diminished version of the warrior figure. Like his heroic predecessor, Casey is able to combine single-handed feats of strength with the higher calling of art. Membership of the Fianna is conditional on the fulfilment of a number of demanding feats, which require combining physical with intellectual prowess:

> Till a man has accomplished twelve books of poetry, the same is not taken for want of poetry but is forced away. No man is taken till a black hole is hallowed in the world to the depth of his two oxters and he put into it to gaze from it with his lonely head and nothing to him but his shield and a stick of hazel. Then must nine warriors fly their spears at him, one with the other and together. If he be spear-holed past his shield, or spear-killed, he is not taken for want of shield-skill. ... (pp.19-20)

Casey is likewise able to combine extraordinary physical feats with more cerebral pleasures, and Shanahan's description of his legendary abilities is reminiscent of Finn's account of the qualities of the Fenian warrior, albeit in the slightly more prosaic circumstances of working for the gas-board in a hole in the road:

> Here is my nabs saying nothing to nobody but working away at a pome in his head with a pick in his hand and the sweat pouring down off his face from the force of his work and his bloody exertions. ... Not a word to nobody, not a look to left or right but the brain-box going there all the time. Just Jem Casey, a poor ignorant labouring man

> but head and shoulders above the whole bloody lot of them, not a man in the whole country to beat him when it comes to getting together a bloody pome - not a poet in the whole world that could hold a candle to Jem Casey, not a man of them fit to stand beside him. ... Give them the shaft of a shovel into their hand and tell them to dig a hole and have the length of a page of poetry off by heart in their heads before the five o'clock whistle. (pp.102-3)

Furthermore, in eulogizing the crassly material, in contrast to the more spiritual dimensions of Sweeney's lays, his poem 'The Workman's Friend' represents a celebration of values which are a complete antithesis of the higher aspirations of a cultural nationalism that seeks to ground its identity in that which is unique and enobling, rather than merely material, popular and quotidian:

> When money's tight and is hard to get
> And your horse has also ran,
> When all you have is a heap of debt -
> A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN. ...
> When food is scarce and your larder bare
> And no rashers grease your pan,
> When hunger grows as your meals are rare -
> A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN. (p.108)

Although Finn's tale of Sweeney is paid lip service on the grounds that it is 'the real old stuff of the native land', it is Casey's work that is praised as having 'permanence', 'pomes written by a man that is one of ourselves and written down for ourselves to read' and which will 'be heard wherever the Irish race is wont to gather' (p.109). The suggestion that the authenticity of the 'real old stuff' has been displaced by philistinism and ignorance is underlined when Sweeney's attempt to reclaim lost spiritual values is shown to collapse in the face of modern vulgarity, as his lament for 'the squeal/ of badgers in Benna Broc/ ... the stagbelling stag/ of antler-points twice twenty' is interrupted and usurped by Shanahan's doggerel adaptation: 'When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the colour of bran, when a badger bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN!'. (pp.112-13) The grafting of the repetitious refrain of the advertising slogan onto an ancient lay indexes a familiar modernist reaction to the contemporary plight of culture and the dissolution of cultural hierarchies. This deeply pessimistic perception of modern

Irish culture is emphasised by the ironic inference that the vitality of this culture is embodied by Jem Casey, as the following description of him implies:

> Jem Casey was kneeling at the pock-haunched form of the king [Sweeney] pouring questions into the cup of his dead ear and picking small thorns from his gashed chest with absent thoughtless fingers, poet on poet, a bard unthorning a fellow-bard. (p.179)

This passage clearly places Casey at the end of a native Irish literary tradition. However, the incongruous juxtaposition of Sweeney as warrior-poet and Casey as workman and rhymster implies a trajectory of decline and the denigration of that tradition as it collapses into empty phrases and formulaic responses to a world characterised by mass-production. Jem Casey's other poetic venture, 'The Workin' Man' (pp.172-3), reproduces the repetitive stanzaic form and patterns of rhythm and rhyme of 'The Workman's Friend', suggesting a poverty of themes, forms and responses and an inability to break away from the standardising effects of contemporary culture.

In placing Casey at the end of the native tradition, as the spiritual descendent of Finn and Sweeney, the novel represents modern Irish culture as torn between the conflicting imperatives of cultural nationalism's attempt to revive Ireland's ancient cultural traditions as the means of national regeneration, and a modern mass culture which marks (in O'Nolan's view) the dissolution of those traditions and the descent into degeneracy. The verbal violence directed against Finn and the physical violence perpetrated against Sweeney registers the destruction and collapse of heroic narratives in the face of a modern sensibility blind to their unifying powers.

While the novel's response to this collapse is symptomatic of the kind of modernist vision espoused in The Waste Land and is registered in the fragments and ironic juxtapositions that make up its form, its depiction of the violence done to Finn by Trellis and his characters must be read in the specific national context of post-independence disenchantment with the limited cultural initiatives and achievements of the Irish Free State. For what is significant is that the debasement of Finn is carried out by the 'rabblement' of Shanahan and Casey, by the puritanical - yet sexually prurient - Trellis, and is framed by the parody of a Revivalist investment in myth and legend.

By placing Finn in a modern Irish environment (represented by the fictional worlds of the narrator's autobiography and Trellis's novel), the critical impulses of the novel are directed at the specific context of post-independence cultural nationalism, and locates that collapse in the adherence of the masses to puritanical and philistine notions of Irish tradition and identity.

However, just as Eliot's The Waste Land aspires through an appeal to myth to spiritual revitalization and cultural regeneration beyond the collapse and cultural disintegration it conveys through its literary fragments, At Swim suggests a residual enchantment with the very traditions that it shows to be exhausted.[31] For whilst the novel persistently parodies Finn, rendering him grotesque and absurd, he nevertheless dominates the text, appearing on every narrative level as an agent of cohesion, drawing all the fragments and narratives together. In spite of all the interruptions by Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont, Finn completes his story and continues to act as an enduring presence throughout the novel, and is even endowed with a kind of ontological reality that is denied to all the other characters, appearing to break into the 'real' of the framing autobiographical narrative rather than remaining contained within the imaginative writings of the narrator (as all the other characters are):

> I closed my eyes, slightly hurting my right stye, and retired into the kingdom of my mind. For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism. The bright square of the window was faintly evidenced at the juncture of my lids. ... After an interval Finn MacCool, a hero of old Ireland, came out before me from his shadow ... (p.15).

Likewise, despite his own refusal to provide his contemporary audience with exemplary narratives through which to make sense of the modern cultural condition (pp.24-5), the central myth which structures the novel ('The Frenzy of Sweeney') is in fact narrated by him. As I shall demonstrate in the next section, through the relationship between Finn, Sweeney and the main narrator, the text strives to offer an alternative vision of Irishness to that which is embodied by the uncle, Trellis and his characters. As such it seeks to delineate a social and cultural formation within which Irish identity can be more securely grounded precisely because it reasserts the cultural hierarchies which are seen to have collapsed, and because it accords a

privileged role to the artist who is restored to his rightful position as guardian of tradition and spokesman for an authentic and vital culture.

- IV -

As I suggested in the previous section, despite the narrator's parodic representation of Finn as a grotesque and absurd figure, and the violence to which he is subjected by Trellis and his characters, the text does not preclude a more constructive use of traditional Irish materials. If the present appears deracinated from the values embodied in the traditional literature of Ireland's heroic age, it does not follow that the literature of that period fails altogether to offer the guiding principles by which the present may be rejuvenated. On the contrary, despite the novel's portrayal of an impoverished contemporary culture (represented in the celebration of Jem Casey's poems at the expense of more traditional literary forms), Finn speaks to the present in a very literal way, addressing the alienating social forces of contemporary Ireland not as hero but in his other guise as poet, storyteller and purveyor of myths.[32] Finn's earlier refusal to tell the stories from the Ulster and Fenian epic cycles requested by Conan and other members of the Fianna for fear of the 'ill-usage' and 'dishonour' that may be brought upon Ireland's heroes by recounting them to a contemporary audience (p.25), testifies to their anachronistic status as imaginative resources in the present as well as to the violence that had to be done to them in their appropriation for cultural nationalism in the first place. However, the value and meaningfulness of the Gaelic tradition is not altogether subordinated as Finn searches in his mind for a story that will address the contemporary cultural condition and finds a 'myth' for the modern age in the middle-Irish romance of 'The Frenzy of Sweeney', a tale which unifies the fragments of the text and shores up the ruins (to adapt Eliot's phrase from the end of The Waste Land) that constitute O'Nolan's vision of modern Irish culture

The figure of Sweeney provides the novel with its most intense expression of the narrator's alienation from the prevailing ideologies of cultural nationalism which he feels in his everyday relations with

his uncle and which he projects onto Trellis and his characters in the novel he is writing. Like Finn, Sweeney is both a warrior and a poet, and is subject to a particularly intense form of alienation from the social order and the most extreme forms of mental and physical suffering at the hands of that order's most powerful institutions, much as Finn is subjected the abuses and degradations of Trellis **et al.** In being forced into exile because of his refusal to reconcile himself with his family, his tribe and (crucially) the new Christian dispensation, Sweeney functions emblematically in At Swim as the displaced artist figure **par excellence.** For Seamus Heaney, who has recently published a translation of the tale, Sweeney represents not simply the figure of the artist in abstraction but a specifically Joycean configuration of it, with the trajectory of the artist's alienation and exile being determined by cultural conditions specific to modern Ireland:

> The literary imagination which fastened upon him as an image was clearly in the grip of a tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament. ... This alone makes the work a significant one, but it does not exhaust its significance. For example, in so far as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation.[33]

For Heaney, Sweeney represents the painful fate endured by the artist who is forced into exile by his refusal to reconcile himself to the intolerable burdens of familial, national and religious allegiances, just as Stephen refuses to do in Portrait in his exchange with Cranly:

> I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life and art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile and cunning. ... I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned, for another or to leave whatever I have to leave.[34]

In At Swim, Sweeney is described in terms that self-consciously allude to Stephen's declaration of artistic freedom in Portrait when he tells Davin that 'when the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those

nets.'[35] Significantly, Sweeney is similarly 'besieged with nets' (a phrase that appears in neither O'Keefe's nor Heaney's translation of the tale) by the caretaker of a church (p.97). Furthermore, Sweeney is a literal birdman to Stephen's metaphorical one, travelling throughout Ireland by hopping from tree to tree, living on watercress and berries, and lamentably reciting 'melodious poem[s] on the subject of his personal hardship' (p.95) in an attempt to free himself from social obligation and the restrictive boundaries of established culture:

> He was filled with a restless tottering unquiet and with a disgust for the places that he knew and with a desire to be where he never was, so that he was palsied of hand and foot and eye-mad and heart-quick and went from the curse of Ronan bird-quick in craze and madness from the battle. (p.92)

This echoes the motif of flight in Portrait invoked in Stephen's surname and in his determination to 'fly by those nets' of religious, political and domestic obligation. Like Stephen, Sweeney longs for a literal freedom from social constraint, his flight into exile into the wilderness, and his subsequent evasion of all efforts on the part of his family and tribe to reassimilate him into the social order, reflect his insistence in pursuing the freedoms of both his moral and artistic conscience.

O'Nolan also points to the analogy between Sweeney and Stephen as dislocated and alienated artists through the clear identification that is made between Sweeney and other artist figures in the novel who are also constrained by modern-day representatives of Stephen's triple nets. I have already pointed to the similarity between the plight of Sweeney and that of Finn (as he exists in the world of Trellis's novel), bringing the two figures together as testimony to the disabling pressures faced by the artist confronted by a hostile disregard for the ancient art of story-telling and poetic composition. Orlick is also endowed with the Joycean stamp, having been imbibed with 'the seeds of evil, revolt and non-serviam' by the Pooka, which he then turns on Trellis in an act of literary retribution (p.214). However, like Trellis's novel before him, Orlick's is a narrative that cannot be completed on its own aesthetic terms as it is subject to frequent interruptions by Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont (just as Finn's narrative was) who crave the sensationalism of 'a nice simple

story with plenty of the razor' rather than 'the fancy stuff' of Orlick's carefully crafted tale of sin and redemption. 'This tack of yours is too high up in the blooming clouds', complains Lamont to Orlick, 'it's all right for you, you know, but the rest of us will want a ladder' (pp.239,242). While the tradition is seen to persist through Orlick's dependence on the Sweeney structure, it persists only in a somewhat bastardized and hesitant form. Orlick tries three times to start his narrative through recourse to the Sweeney theme, and ultimately fails to contain his material within its structure, as once again his narrative is usurped by the philistinism and vulgarity of modern popular culture when Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont takes turns to write their own extremely violent version of the frenzy of Trellis into Orlick's manuscript while he is in the toilet.

In spite of Trellis's apparent conformity to the moral norms represented by the uncle and against which the narrator is attempting to assert himself, Orlick's narrative surprisingly identifies him also as a Joycean **poète maudit** assailed by the forces of piety and philistinism. In writing him into his novel as punishment for his ill-treatment of his own characters (Sweeney was cursed by Ronan for his ill-treatment of the clerics at Mag Rath), Orlick inflicts upon him 'a wide variety of physical scourges, torments, and piteous blood-sweats' reminiscent of the wounds and sicknesses that rack Sweeney's body (p.250). Further, Orlick partly reproduces the story, structure and language of the Sweeney tale by reducing Trellis to a state of 'wind-quick, eye-mad' frenzy (p.254), before taking to the air with the Pooka and flying to Cluain Eo (one of Sweeney's resting places) where he spends the night perched in a tree, 'Trellis at his birds'-roost on a thin branch surrounded by tufts of piercing thorns and tangles of bitter spiky brambles' (p.265). His sufferings reach a pinnacle in the trial that takes place at the hands of his own characters 'in a large hall not unlike the Antient Concert Rooms' in Dublin (pp.279-80). This is the building in which Yeats' play The Countess Cathleen was first performed in 1899, resulting in what was arguably the first modern example of protest against the Irish theatre in the name of populist nationalism, and the allusion (which encompasses the more famous protests that accompanied Synge's The Playboy of the Western World in 1907 and O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars in 1923) further indicates

the identification between Sweeney and Trellis as Joycean artist figures subject to abuse and rejection at the hands of the puritanical and philistine 'rabblement'. Characteristically, however, the values of the rabblement have prevailed for, as the site of Ireland's first national theatre has been transformed into the Palace Cinema in Pearse Street, the site of the nation's cultural debasement through its earliest contact with mass-culture:

> That place is a picture-house now of course, said Shanahan's voice as it cut through the pattern of the story, plenty of the cowboy stuff there. ... Oh, many a good hour I spent here too. A great place in the old days, said Lamont. They had tenors and one thing or another in the old days. Every night they had something good. And every night they had something new, said Shanahan. (p.281)

If every night they had something new, now all they have is the same thing repeated over again. Once again art is seen to have been usurped by mass culture, the 'aura' of the unique by the mass produced.[36]

O'Nolan is wholly in accord with many other writers of his generation in appealing to the Joycean paradigm as representative of the position of the artist in Ireland labouring under the provincial cultural imperatives of language, nationality and religion. As Terence Brown has argued, while some writers turned to Dubliners and Portrait as the model to be emulated in the realistic exploration of the contemporary cultural malaise ('We need to explore Irish life with an objectivity never hitherto applied to it', wrote Sean O'Faolain, 'and in this Joyce rather than Yeats is our inspiration'[37]), others took their inspiration from the radical literary experiments of Ulysses and those portions of Finnegans Wake that had been published under the title of 'Work in Progress' and turned their attention away from Ireland onto language and narative form ('Here form **is** content, content **is** form' wrote Beckett of 'Work in Progress'[38]).To some extent O'Nolan draws upon both the earlier 'realist' and later 'experimental' Joyce in At Swim. While the style and the structure of the novel have clear affinities with Joyce's narrative experiments in Ulysses (the narrator's parody of Finn recalls the giganticism of the 'Cyclops' episode, Trellis's trial has the same nightmare quality of the 'Circe' episode, and the self-conscious juxtaposition of different literary styles and genres resembles 'Oxen of the Sun'), the **Bildungsroman** structure of the framing narrative and the narrator's

self-conscious adoption of a Stephen Dedalus persona (wandering the streets of Dublin, 'talking about God and one thing and another' and expounding his aesthetic theories (p.31)) clearly draw upon Stephen's experiences as a student and fledgling writer in chapter 5 of Portrait.[39]

The fact that Sweeney (as Joycean artist-figure) is the only character in the novel presented without any trace of irony whatsoever, seems to suggest that O'Nolan is in full imaginative sympathy with Joyce's analysis of modern Ireland as the locus of spiritual paralysis for the contemporary artist (as Lamont observes, in a passing allusion to Joyce's diagnosis of Irish culture in Dubliners, 'paralysis is certainly a nice cup of tea' (p.228)). However, his sympathy with this Joycean paradigm of the relation between the Irish artist and his or her society is qualified in a significant way which transforms the whole texture of the novel and has a crucial bearing on the text's politics. To the extent that the Sweeney narrative is emblematic of the alienation experienced by the other artists/story-tellers in the novel, it constitutes the 'mythic' structure that holds all the fragments together and brings all of the narratives into a provisional unity and imposing a structure of meaning upon them. But it differs from the Joycean paradigm with which it is analogous in one crucial respect. That is, it brings about a resolution of the central conflict in the tale when Sweeney is finally reconciled with the Church.

The resolution of this contradiction between free imagination and social obligation is, in turn, replicated at the other narrative levels. Having done well in his final exams, the narrator reciprocates his uncle's conciliatory gesture, overcoming his alienation and inertia at a stroke as the sounds of the world outside (church bells significantly) impinge upon his consciousness for the first time (p.312). As a direct result of this reconciliation, Trellis is 'saved' from the punishment inflicted upon him by his characters when Teresa inadvertently burns the manuscript which 'contains' them, thereby further suggesting that the narrator has become reconciled to the populist values embodied by his pious uncle and the puritanical Trellis. Unable to break free from the social obligations of family, church and nation, the narrator appears to capitulate, having no

alternative but to abandon his art altogether, bringing the text which has embodied his alienation from those obligations to a premature and unsatisfactory ending.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, this closure has caused critics consternation as it appears lacking in any kind of coherent textual motivation and seems to suggest, particularly in terms of the narrator's abandonment of his novel, that his alienation as an artist was largely illusory or contrived. For the main part of the text, the narrator's dissent and alienation from the cultural values represented by his uncle result in what appears to be a complete lapse into inertia. His response takes the form not so much of a considered analysis of the ideology from which he dissents as complete withdrawal from the world of everyday social relations into the isolation of his bedroom and of his mind, effectively shutting his environment out of his consciousness altogether in a manner reminiscent of the quest for total solipsism embarked upon by Beckett's Murphy: 'I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression' (p.9). When afflicted by the irritating presence of his coarse and vulgar uncle,

> I ... went to the tender trestle of my bed, arranging my back upon it in an indolent horizontal attitude. I closed my eyes ... and retired into the kingdom of my mind. For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism. (p.15)

This lapse into inertia and indolence appears as the only appropriate response to his inablity to resolve the tensions and contradictions that surround him at the level of social relations, namely (in Heaney's terms) 'the quarrel between the free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation'.

While the narrator responds with disdainful indifference to his uncle's accusations of sloth, the reader is never led to believe that he is anything other than mentally indolent and physically degenerate. Certainly his own portrait of the squalid and dissipated lifestyle he leads renders his examination success and consequent sentimental reconciliation with his uncle unsatisfactory from a structural point of view. It is precisely this inconsistency in the text that critics of the novel have found unconvincing, seeing the unexpected reversal

of the narrator's attitudes and values as a reneging on the cultural critique which precedes it. I would like to suggest, however, that the premature termination of the narrator's novel does not represent a capitulation to the forces that are figured in the text as debilitating constraints on the exercise of the free imagination, but is symptomatic of the actual resolution of these contradictions at a deeper level of the text - wherein the free creative imagination is redefined precisely in terms of the social forces from which it has attempted to insulate itself. This is achieved through recourse to another determining myth - that of the role of traditional Irish bard in the ancient Gaelic polity.

One of the peculiarities of the narrator's lifestyle is its resemblance to the daily routines of the bardic institutions or schools at which the the poet learned his craft before seeking the patronage of a tribal lord, and which occupied a central place in the Gaelic social framework up until the seventeenth century. The dark and sparsely-furnished character of the narrator's bedroom - in which he constantly takes refuge from the social forces afflicting him - is described in terms almost identical to an early eighteenth-century account of the cubicles in which the bardic students lived. These rooms functioned not only as sleeping quarters but as chambers for private study and the composition of assigned poetic exercises which, according to the account were worked at 'each by himself upon his own bed, the whole ... day in the dark'.[40] Likewise the narrator describes his chosen life-style in similar terms:

> A contemplative life has always been suitable to my disposition. I was accustomed to stretch myself for many hours upon my bed, thinking and smoking there. ... My bedroom was small and indifferently lighted but it contained most of the things I deemed essential for existence - my bed, a chair which was rarely used, a table and a washstand. The washstand had a ledge upon which I had arranged a number of books. (pp.11-12)

And it is in his bedroom where the narrator writes, registering his alienation from the pieties and populism of his uncle in his novel about the trials and tribulations of a novelist beleaguered by the philistine rabble.

In the context of these textual allusions to the bardic students, the narrator's reconciliation with his uncle and the implied

reversal of the attitudes that have informed his behaviour throughout the text can be read as textually motivated by his apparent indolence. Rather than being chronically disabled by the experience of social alienation, that experience is represented instead as a form of cultural apprenticeship - as the necessary prelude to his successful reintegration into the social framework, rather than the prelude to his exile from Ireland, away from the parochial concerns of modern Irish culture towards an engagement with the 'universal' problem of the 'word', as is the case with Stephen Dedalus.

I want to suggest, then, that to locate the novel's apparently contrived closure in terms of its determining relationship with the bardic motif in the text is to read the novel as an appeal to a social framework in which the artist is accorded a privileged role, as he was in the old Gaelic polity. Writing on the revival of Gaelic culture in 'Cruiskeen Lawn', O'Nolan argued that little had been done 'to bring the old native civilization back' in spite of all the talk about the national language and culture:[41]

> I can't think of a single thing that has been done to bring back **an seana-shaol.** Take the political organization of society. The ancient native order was patriarchal and aristocratic, the people knew their place (ie. the scullery) and 'democracy', God help us, was unheard of. The administration of law was speedy and simple, because only a handful of people had 'rights'. An exclusive caste of poets discharged the functions of commentator and recorder, and these men acknowledged **no one** as their superiors. They were maintained in great luxury and treated with the reverence and circumspection that are reserved for those who are feared, for they could ruin a man with a poisonous couplet. They were the journalists of their day, and they had a traditional right to libel whom they pleased. What is the position of the journalist today? ... You can't revive Gaelic civilization overnight but you **can** reassemble it piecemeal. Reinstate the journalists in their ancient office of privilege, re-entrust the building arts to monks, and you have made a beginning. Then proceed to revive the various Gaelic **fonctionnaires** who have been permitted to disappear completely in the shabby secondhand conditions of today.[42]

This, arguably typically modernist configuration of the 'shabby' and democratic present age in relation to a hierarchical and vital past, specifically the early modern Gaelic polity in which the bardic caste was accorded an extremely privileged and powerful position, encapsulates the conservatism of O'Nolan's vision of Irish culture

which is presented in much more oblique terms in the novel. Crucially, this passage also expresses O'Nolan's impulse to forge a position for himself as a writer and intellectual which has the same privilege and social prestige as that which was enjoyed by the ancient bards. His sense that this role should be both revered and central to the cultural and social life of the nation to some extent informs his own view of his position as satirical columnist in the Irish Times in which he attempted to intervene within public debate on behalf of 'the plain people of Ireland' and 'common sense' values, even though the column's frame of reference indicated that he was speaking to the country's intelligentsia.[43] This perception of the integral place of the bard within an emergent public sphere (evidently an anachronistic figuration intended to privilege a particular cultural formation and notion of the the role of the intellectual within a contemporary Irish context) is shared by Gaelic scholars of the period. So, for instance, Robin Flower characterises the bardic institution as 'an intellectual aristocracy', while Osborn Bergin describes the bardic poet as a public official and chronicler of Gaelic social life in terms reminiscent of O'Nolan's comments above.[44]

Significantly O'Nolan's appeal to the apparent virtues of the Gaelic political structure is also an appeal to an idea of Gaelic culture that is wholly compatible with that of cultural nationalism's chief ideologue, Daniel Corkery - whose position has been repeatedly satirized throughout the novel through the narrator's appeal to modernist over revivalist literary models and the novel's parodic treatment of nationalist ideology ('That's one thing the Irish race is honoured for no matter where it goes or where you find it - jumping' (p.119), notes Shanahan, in a textual allusion to the Gaelic Athletic Association). For Corkery, the bardic school system was quintessentially the 'institution of the Gael' - 'the one national force that overshadowed and dominated all others', and without knowledge of which, it is 'impossible to understand Irish history as a whole'.[45] For the bards were the guardians of the literary tradition, maintaining through the centuries (according to Corkery) the spiritual and intellectual inheritance that was the essence of national life in the absence of centralized political institutions. The bardic order, claimed Corkery, 'served at the one time as seed-bed and harvest of

the mind of the Gaelic nation'.[46]

O'Nolan's recourse to the bardic institution in terms of the portrayal of the narrator and his growth to maturity and social integration thus reasserts a conception of the essentially Gaelic national identity that he appears to dismiss as an ideological fantasy in the face of the cultural conditions prevailing in Ireland in the 1930s. This apparently contradictory strain in O'Nolan's thought, whereby he simultaneously repudiates and invokes the Gaelic cultural tradition as integral to a modern sense of what it means to be Irish, has clear affinities with his attitudes towards the Irish language that I traced in the previous chapter. For while the novel appears to dismiss cultural nationalism wholesale in favour of a cosmopolitan conception of culture and art, it is nonetheless possible to locate in the text an impulse to forge a vital imaginative link between a modern metropolitan culture and the values of the old Gaelic social order. This relationship between the modern and the traditional is reiterated within the text's deployment of the **Bildungsroman** form yet in terms which specifically allude to a bardic cultural formation. For this implicates the narrator's personal development with the formation of a specifically Gaelic cultural identity grounded in tradition yet, at the close of the novel, integrating the old with the new through the sound of the Angelus. As a commemoration of the Annunciation and Incarnation, this conveys the notion of a 'spiritual' rebirth and reintegration into the larger community of the nation, conceived here in Catholic as well as Gaelic terms.

In spite of the novel's critique of the specific forms taken by cultural nationalism in the production of a narrow conception of national identity located around a moral puritanism and a parochial rejection of the foreign, the text nevertheless strains towards another way of thinking about cultural identity which does not abandon the basic premises of cultural nationalism regarding the persistence of a unique and enduring cultural heritage. Significantly the text which haunts <u>At Swim</u> is Heinrich Heine's 'The Harz Journey', a book which the narrator asks his uncle to pay for but which never gets bought. This text comes to encapsulate the acrimonious relationship between the narrator and his uncle, operating both as the sign of the uncle's philistinism (in his reluctance to spend five shillings on a

book (p.44)) and as the site of their possible connection and identification ('the redness of his [the uncle's] fingers as he handed out his coins ... revealed for an instant his equal humanity' (pp.44-5)). This reference to another text produced at a crucial moment in the ideological formation of German nationalism (and, hence, of European nationalism more generally), traces the journey of a young male narrator who is equally scathing about the philistinism of bourgeois nationalism and seeks to make contact with a more authentic and vital expression of the national culture in the practices and stories of the folk. Like the narrator in 'The Harz Journey', O'Nolan's narrator may reject the bourgeois nationalism embodied by his uncle and the characters in his novel, yet his autobiographical narrative and the novel as a whole (to the extent that it engages with Gaelic myths and traditions) suggests the possibility of forging a more authentic form of national culture from the scraps and fragments of Gaelic tradition that persist into the present.

That this conception of national culture is grounded in a different organization of social relations than those in place in the Free State (one based upon hierarchy and privilege rather than democracy and merit) testifies to the conservative cultural politics that underlie O'Nolan's formal narrative experiments. The discrepancy between the radical textual fragmentation in At Swim (effected through the interweaving and counterpointing of disparate narratives, genres and styles), and the deep structural unity that emerges from the 'mythic' use of Sweeney and the bardic schools, underscores a tension which persists throughout O'Nolan's early writings and is indicative of his own difficult relationship to the discourses of cultural nationalism and its cosmpolitan alternatives at this time. For as an Irish-speaking intellectual, conversant with Gaelic tradition and scholarship, and a modernist writer plundering from the canon of European culture, he remained equally on the margins of the dominant form of Irish cultural nationalism in this period and of English language modernism. Placed literally and metaphorically at the limits of these formations, he is both compelled to intervene in debates about the national culture and yet denied any cultural authority by his cosmopolitan 'inauthenticity', compelled to assert the broader European significance of the Gaelic tradition yet overshadowed in the

attempt by Joyce's classical precedent in Ulysses.

Arguably this tension informs O'Nolan's ultimate figuration of the Joycean paradigm as an atrophied and imprisoning imaginative resource, as is witnessed by Orlick's repeated but unsuccessful attempts to write Trellis into his story by using the structure of the Sweeney narrative. The Sweeney/Joyce paradigm is no longer able to contain within itself the contradiction upon which it was originally premised, that is the conflicting imperatives of cultural nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, social obligation versus the free creative imagination. Hence Orlick's text persistently collapses beneath the weight of his audience's narrative expectations until it is finally usurped completely by that audience wresting it away from him and completing it according to its own moral prescriptions. Orlick eventually capitulates to the values of the rabble, seeing no alternative but to submit his imagination to the limiting creative structures that he is offered by his co-conspiritors. This is the real source of the narrator's immobilizing anxiety, and can be read as emblematic of O'Nolan's own problematic position - of being caught between contrasting inherited frameworks and identities without being able to reconcile them satisfactorily - between the assumed and inauthentic figure of the artist wilfully exiled from his social environment by the pietistic and philistine preoccupations of a populist cultural nationalism, and the equally spurious figure of the artist compelled to place his art at its service. As I intend to explore in the following chapters, these conflicts lead O'Nolan to return to the same problem over again, reworking it in different genres, different styles and even different languages in the course of his first three novels.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. John Ryan, A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish, p.?? The articles that were published in this edition of Envoy are reprinted here alongside a number of other pieces on Joyce by his compatriots.

2. Brian Nolan, 'A Bash in the Tunnel', Envoy, vol.. 5, no. 17 (1951), p.9; **Stories and Plays** (SP), p.173.

3. ibid., pp.8,7; SP, p.171.

4. ibid., p.9; SP, p.173.

5. ibid., p.11, SP, p.175.

6. See especially James Fairhall, James Joyce and the Question of History, and Emer Nolan, James Joyce and Nationalism.

7. Bernard Benstock, 'The Three Faces of Brian O'Nolan', pp.54-5.

8. Monique Gallagher, Myles from Dublin, pp.18-20.

9. Bernard Benstock, 'The Three Faces of Brian O'Nolan', pp.56,58.

10. Bernard Benstock, 'Flann O'Brien in Hell: The Third Policeman'. On the question of O'Nolan's Catholicism, see also Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, pp.104-6 & pp.157-8.

11. Flann O'Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds, p.314. All further references to the novel in this chapter will be included in parentheses in the text.

12. M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, p.122.

13. Vivien Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, p.40.

14. See, for example, Rudiger Imhof, 'Two Meta-Novelists: Sternesque Elememts in Novels by Flann O'Brien', Marguerite Alexander, Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodrnist British and American Fiction, ch.2, and Richard Kearney, Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture, ch.4.

15. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, pp.268-9.

16. See J.H. Whyte, Church and State in Modern Ireland, ch.2

17. Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, pp.19.

18. ibid.

19. ibid., p.22.

20 ibid., pp.20-1.

21. ibid., pp.19-20.

22. As a point of interest, Huxley's novel Point Counterpoint which is commonly held to be the source for the idea of novelists writing novels about novelists writing novels, was one of the first books to be banned under the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. The refernce to Huxley, then, is simply an allusion to one of his literary influences but a clear statement of the narrator's cosmopolitanism in flounting orthodox opinion concerning what constitutes moral literature.

23. Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide; Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, ch.3.

24. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p.220.

25. James Joyce, 'The Day of the Rabblement', in The Critical Writings of James Joyce, p.70.

26. cit. John Harrington, The Irish Beckett, p.57.

27. cit. ibid., p.57.

28. See William Irwin Thompson, The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916, and John Wilson Foster, Fictions of the Literary Revival: A Changeling Art.

29. See John Hutchinson, The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism, chs 2-4, and David Cairns and Shaun Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, chs 2-4.

30. For an extended analysis of literary representations of Finn, see James MacKillop, Fionn mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature.

31. For a discussion of Eliot's cultural politics in these kinds of terms see Franco Moretti, 'From The Wasteland to the Artificial Paradise', in Signs Taken for Wonders, pp.209-39, and Terry Eagleton, 'T.S. Eliot and the Uses of Myth', in Exiles and Emigres: Studies in Modern Literature, pp.138-78.

32. Discussion of the representation of Finn in the novel can be found in James MacKillop, Fionn mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature, ch.4, Eva Wappling, Four Legendary Irish Figures in **At Swim-Two-Birds**: A Study of Flann O'Brien's Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy, ch.2, and Cathal G. O Hainle, 'Fionn and Suibhne in At Swim-Two-Birds.

33. Seamus Heaney, Introduction to Sweeney Astray, n.p.

34. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, pp.268-9.

35. ibid., p.220.

36. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Illuminations, pp.217-51.

37. Sean O'Faolain, 'Fifty Years of Irish Writing', pp.100-1.

38. Samuel Beckett, 'Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce', in Disjecta, p.27.

39. A catalogue of allusions to Joyce's work in the novel can be found in Bernard Benstock, 'The Three Faces of Brian O'Nolan', and in Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, pp.106-15.

40. See James Carney, The Irish Bardic Poet, and Osborn Bergin, Irish Bardic Poetry. For discussions of the bardic allusions in the novel see Thomas B. O'Grady, 'At Swim-Two-Birds and the Bardic Schools', and Patricia O'Hara, 'Finn MacCool and the Bard's Lament in Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds.

41. Flann O'Brien, The Hair of the Dogma, pp.5-8.

42. ibid., pp.5-6.

43. A fascinating contemporary account of O'Nolan's cultural position can be found in Thomas Hogan, 'Myles na gCopaleen'.

44. cit. Daniel Corkery, The Hidden Ireland, pp.68-70.

45. ibid., pp.60-1.

46. ibid., p.74.

Chapter 4

Figuring the Landscape, Framing the Self: Place and Identity in The Third Policeman

> I tell you, we can make this country - this world - whatever we want it to be by saying so, and saying so again. I tell you it is the knowledge of this that that is the genius and glory of the Gael.
>
> (Denis Johnston, The Old Lady Says 'No!')

- I -

O'Nolan began work on The Third Policeman in the early months of 1939, while At Swim-Two-Birds was still in preparation at Longmans.[1] When the novel was completed early the following year, he sent the manuscript to his publishers who promptly rejected it on the grounds that it was too 'fantastic' for the contemporary market.[2] Stung by this rejection, O'Nolan shelved his plans to publish the novel and subsequently The Third Policeman remained unpublished until 1967 when it was rediscovered after his death the previous year. Whilst the appearance of the novel cemented O'Nolan's reputation in Ireland as one of the country's foremost novelists, the fantastic aspect of the text which was responsible for its initial rejection became the central factor in its success. Readily incorporated into the canons of an emerging postmodernism, like At Swim which enjoyed a similarly belated critical acclaim when it was republished in 1960, postmodernism seemingly provided a hermeneutic framework through which the novel could be read and its narrative strategies made sense of. Hence O'Nolan became established as an early practitioner of what we have come to know as postmodernist fiction. Given these circumstances of publication and reception, the dominant critical approach to the novel has been to focus upon its engagement with postmodernist concerns such as textuality and metafictionality, reading it as playfully emblematic of the process of narrative itself and raising the question of the (im)possibility of ever fixing meaning in

writing.[3]

While there is no doubt that the novel does engage with some of these concerns (in fact arguably in a more much radical way than has hitherto been recognised) an exclusive critical emphasis upon the novel's affinity with the formal procedures of contemporary postmodernist fiction has been predicated upon a disengagement of the novel from the specific historical moment of its production. This has tended to efface the extent to which the novel emerges out of, and is in dialogue with, the cultural concerns of this historical moment. Whereas in At Swim and The Poor Mouth an Irish cultural context is made explicit (these novels are, in fact, primarily an exploration of that context), The Third Policeman does not explicitly engage with ideas about Irish cultural identity or with Irish literary traditions in the manner of these two novels which chronologically frame it. Whilst there is clearly some continuity between At Swim and The Poor Mouth in terms of their engagement with the discourses of cultural nationalism, The Third Policeman does appear in some senses to be an anomaly. This is reflected both in the relative critical neglect of this text (in comparison with At Swim and The Poor Mouth) in Irish literary studies, and, as I noted above, in the way in which the concerns of the critical literature around it have focused primarily upon issues of narrative and textuality and the sources of the text's scientific and philosophical speculations.[4]

Of course, on one level The Third Policeman lends itself to such a reading, with its foregrounding of narrative procedures and its preoccupation with temporality and, most obviously, in the way in which the narrator's quest for the black box operates as a suggestive sign of the endless deferral of meaning and displacement of desire both for the narrator and the reader. However, both At Swim and The Poor Mouth share these general concerns with narrative and textuality, but in both novels these concerns arise from, and remain grounded in a discussion of representations of the nation's history and contemporary identity. Both novels thus work dialectically between the general and the particular, exploring culturally specific discourses whilst they foreground the constitutive character of discourse itself. Whilst The Third Policeman appears to engage primarily with the latter, drawing its illustrations, not from culturally rooted discourses of Irish

nationalism, but from the apparently culturally transcendent and ideologically neutral discourses of Western science and metaphysics, there is, nevertheless, a layer of meaning in the text which is wholly implicated within the cultural concerns of its own historical moment.

So to the extent that At Swim and The Poor Mouth can be read as extrapolating general conclusions about discourse and narrative from specific cultural and historical discourses, I would suggest that The Third Policeman localises its general concerns in the sense that its apparently culturally abstract discussions about science are contained within and articulated through a highly local - if not parochial - framework. This, I will suggest, implicates the novel within those discourses about cultural nationalism which we have encountered in his other work of this period - and I want to approach The Third Policeman as a text which sets out to work through some of the problems encountered in At Swim and to argue that the failure to resolve these problems is the starting point of The Poor Mouth. This is to read The Third Policeman as a text in dialogue with the two texts which frame it and hence with the cultural concerns within these texts and O'Nolan's engagement with a particular moment of crisis in Irish nationalism.

Evidently, in arguing this one is confronted by a particular problem: the paucity of explicit reference to the kinds of debates explored in the other novels and the fact that the text seems to work against any attempt to assimilate whatever references are present within it into a coherent argument/statement about contemporary Irish culture. However, what is significant about this most elusive of texts is that it was produced at the same time as O'Nolan wrote a number of articles for the journal The Bell. As self-conscious interventions in debates about Irish cultural life and national identity, these articles provide an illuminating insight into O'Nolan's response to prevailing discourses of cultural nationalism, whilst they also provide a highly enabling frame through which to approach The Third Policeman. What is of particular interest is both the way in which these pieces engage critically with dominant ideas about Irishness, and crucially the way in which the rhetorical strategies which they employ render this engagement oblique. Through an analysis of one of these articles, 'Going to the Dogs', I want to suggest that an

interrogation of the complex modes of address deployed by O'Nolan in this 'non-fictional' writing for The Bell opens up a new way of thinking through the formal 'problems' presented by The Third Policeman in a fully historicised context receptive to the novel's relationship to those cultural concerns which circulate around the margins of the text, to which the novel obliquely refers yet doesn't explicitly address. Crucially, such a discussion also begins to lay bare the tension between O'Nolan's radical literary practice and ultimately conservative cultural politics.

- II -

The Bell was founded in 1940 by Sean O'Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell as a journal dedicated to the dispassionate exploration of contemporary Irish culture in the face of the narrow and insular orthodoxies of official discourses of cultural nationalism. As well as serving as a forum for new literary writing, the journal committed itself to a kind of sociological analysis of Ireland's cultural diversity, with particular emphasis upon positing the actuality of contemporary Irish society against idealised representations of the Irish past and the deployment of these representations in the production of a vision of a socially homogeneous national culture in the present. In its opening editorial, Sean O'Faolain summarised the journal's defining aims as follows:

> The Bell is quite clear about certain practical things and will, from time to time, deal with them - the Language, Partition, Education, and so forth. In general The Bell stands, in all such questions, for Life before any abstraction, in whatever magnificent words it may clothe itself. For we eschew abstractions and will have nothing to do with generalisations that are not capable of proof by concrete experience.[5]

The fundamental mode of analysis of the journal which marked its departure from earlier journals such as The Irish Statesman was its commitment to empiricism as a means of critiquing dominant representations of Irish nationhood, described by Terence Brown as 'a documentary empirical exploration of Irish social life from which a portrait of national diversity would emerge'.[6] This adherence to empiricism was a key feature of all of O'Faolain's cultural criticism.

Writing in 1936, for example, O'Faolain attacked Daniel Corkery for propagating what he saw as a fraudulent evocation of a Gaelic way of life which had endured substantially intact since the period before the Tudor conquest:

> To us the Irish fishermen and the Irish farmer and the Irish townsman is the result of about one hundred and fifty years struggle. And that, for history, is long enough for us. To us, Ireland is beginning, where to Corkery it is continuing. We have a sense of time, of background: we know the value of the Gaelic tongue to extend our vision of Irish life, to deepen it and enrich it: we know that an old cromlech in a field can dilate our imaginations with a sense of what was, what might have been, and **what is not**: but we cannot see the man ploughing against the sky in an aura of antiquity.[7]

For O'Faolain, the value of Gaelic culture lies not in the fact that it retains a purity beyond the operations of colonialism as Corkery argued in The Hidden Ireland, but that it is an historical testimony to the ravages of colonial administration. This recognition of the difference between Irish culture as it was and as it is today informed O'Faolain's intention to retain a sense of 'what is not' in the present as well as a sense of 'what was'; a recognition of the fact that the ideology of Irish Ireland is wholly untenable in the face of contemporary Irish realities.

On the central question of language, O'Faolain urged the Irish people to be 'honest and realistic and admit that our object is not unilingualism, but that we should speak, according to our moods and needs, both Gaelic and English'.[8] This imperative to be pragmatic about the language was grounded in a recognition that neither the Irish people, nor the Irish language could be hermetically sealed from the dynamic of historical and cultural change brought about by colonialism and Ireland's relationship with the community of European nations: 'the sum of our local story is that long before 1900 we had become part and parcel of the general world process - with a distinct English pigmentation.'[9] O'Faolain went on to suggest that the reality of modern Ireland was not only that English was now an indigeneous language, but that the greatest literary achievements of modern Irish culture had been produced in English: 'Irishmen writing in English have won distinctiveness for an Irish literature which stands apart from, and even challenges, the achievements of contemporary writers

elsewhere.'[10]

As I discussed in Chapter 2, O'Nolan shared precisely this pragmatic view of the linguistic situation in contemporary Ireland, in other words, arguing that the Irish language should be revived but only for the more realistic objectives of bilingualism, given that the hegemony of English was irreversible, and that modern Irish literature was written in English as well as Irish. The affinities between O'Nolan and O'Faolain on the question of language, on one level, extends to their response to contemporary Irish culture as a whole, with O'Nolan sharing O'Faolain's critical approach towards the values of the dominant strain of cultural nationalism. This emerges clearly in the three articles which he wrote for The Bell in 1940, 'Going to the Dogs', 'The Trade in Dublin', and 'The Dance Halls'.[11] These pieces focused upon certain aspects of contemporary Irish culture, namely greyhound racing, jazz dancing, and the proliferation of lounge bars in Dublin, and thus purported to document recent trends in modern Irish leisure activities.

O'Nolan's articles, however, do not explicitly engage with nor contest orthodox ideological positions in the way that O'Faolain's work clearly does. Nor, despite his apparent commitment to an empiricist mode analysis as a means of laying bare the reality gap between idealised representations of 'authentically' Irish cultural practices and contemporary cultural life, can O'Nolan's articles for The Bell be unproblematically described as disinterested empirical accounts. In fact, what occurs in these articles is an extremely sophisticated manipulation of different rhetorical modes of address. Whereas O'Faolain, in some senses, can be described as producing a straightforward polemic directed against writers such as Corkery's form of nationalism in which the object of his attack is absolutely apparent and articulated through the documentation of the brute 'realities' of modern Ireland, O'Nolan's technique is more accurately described in Bakhtinian terms as a 'hidden polemic'.

In the chapter on language I showed how Bakhtin's notion of linguistic hybridisation was useful in exploring O'Nolan's ideas about the interaction of languages in Ireland. In his account of hybridisation, Bakhtin makes the distinction between an 'organic hybrid' and an 'intentional hybrid'. While 'organic hybridisation '

refers to the condition of the historical life of all languages, 'intentional hybridisation' is the artistic merging of two distinct voices within a single utterance - what Bakhtin elsewhere terms 'double-voiced' discourse, that is discourse which 'has a two-fold direction - it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward **another's discourse**, toward **someone else's speech**'.[12]

In his discussion of discourse in Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin produces a typology of double-voiced discourse in which he codifies various methods of incorporating two or more voices, and hence two or more world views, within represented speech. These forms include parody, stylization, and **skaz** (the representation of oral narrative). What we have in double-voiced discourse is the coexistence in a single utterance of two semantic intentions, one which is directed towards the referent, and the other which is directed towards another person's speech about the referent. For example, in parody, another person's utterance is appropriated and inflected with an authorial intention which is contrary to the original meaning of the utterance, while stylization is the objectification of another person's style which is then used to refer to an object which would not conventionally be described in that style:

> Stylization forces another person's referential (artistically referential) intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions. The stylizer uses another's discourse precisely as other, and in so doing casts a slight shadow of objectification over it.[13]

In both of these forms, the words or style of another person are appropriated, and made to serve, the specific ironic intentions of the author. O'Nolan uses both of these techniques pervasively in At Swim and The Poor Mouth in order to call into question the claims to truth of a variety of literary and cultural discourses. However, there is another form of double-voiced discourse in Bakhtin's typology which is particularly useful for critically analysing those aspects of O'Nolan's work which critically engage with the discourses of Irish cultural nationalism in much more oblique or 'silent' ways than those that deflate cultural nationalism's more untenable claims through recourse to parody and stylization. I refer here to the notion of 'hidden polemic' in which 'the other person's discourse remains

outside the limits of the author's speech, but the author's speech takes it into account and refers to it'.[14] Unlike parody and stylisation where the other person's actual words or style are used, in 'hidden polemic' another person's discourse is not reproduced, rather 'it acts upon, influences, and in one way or another determines the author's discourse, while itself remaining outside it'.[15]

To read the work O'Nolan produced for The Bell through this notion of 'hidden polemic' reveals a strategy which operates in such a way as to gesture towards an appearance of detachment and neutral observation; the narrator is conversant with local history of his subjects, yet clearly not a participant in the practices he records and, typical of this kind of social documentary, the articles interpellate an audience who are equally detached from the cultural practices under observation. And yet if the form of this kind of writing suggests a disinterested objectivity, the O'Nolan pieces are both implicitly in dialogue with, and critical of, cultural discourses which are not directly cited in the essays.

This is exemplified, for instance, in the short article 'Going to the Dogs', written for the first issue of The Bell in October 1940. 'Going to the Dogs' is a report on the huge success of greyhound racing in Ireland during the previous decade. The article opens with a brief account of the history of the sport in Ireland since its introduction in 1927, then goes on to provide an account of a typical race meeting which the narrator invites the reader to observe with him. The discourse adopted by the narrator is that of the detached social observer entering into an unfamiliar cultural space, inhabited by people engaging in strange ritualistic practices:

> Let us take a tram to Shelbourne Park. This place is nicely situated (as a guidebook would say) between a gasworks, a tidal river full of old buckets, and a sort of dockland hostel where sea-going tramps lie up for intervals to have oil-cake, maize and the like extracted from their stomachs. Nonetheless, it is a neat clean place, enlivened by sea breezes and an antiseptic tarry aroma thrown out gratis by the gasworks - wholesome breathing for man and dog.[16]

O'Nolan here employs a narrational strategy which is typical of the social documentarist, leading his readership into the area and object of interest from a point beyond it - a physical/geographical and cultural 'outside'. Yet the apparent objectivity of this style, is

undercut by the evident discrepancy between the mode of address and the object of description. This discrepancy is crystallised in the reference to the touristic guide which records the gasworks and a garbage filled tidal river. This is clearly not an innocent description. The gasworks, old buckets and industrial smells evoke a vision of a cultural wasteland, making the Liffey reminiscent of Eliot's detritus strewn Thames in 'The Fire Sermon' section of The Waste Land, a description which recalls O'Nolan's diagnosis of the cultural degeneration of contemporary Ireland in At Swim. The irony here is generated by the purported detachment of the narrator, yet this clearly problematises the text's implicit appeal to an empiricist paradigm in the production of an unmediated account of reality.

O'Nolan's landscape of physical, urban decay expressed in the bodily image of the vomiting cargo ships, frames the description of the races in such a way as to collapse both locale and popular cultural practice into a vision of social decline and cultural impoverishment. Given the context in which the article appears, this clearly contains within itself a hidden polemic which challenges nationalist ideologies of social homogeneity and cultural authenticity. Implicitly directed against visions of Irish culture as a rural idyll of Gaelic purity, O'Nolan counterposes the mass appeal of the dog track, imported from England, set in a decaying urban context as the central site of a modern Irish cultural identity, all differences collapsed into the banality of a common unifying interest:

> There are many 'characters', 'cards', people who are different from others in some mild entertaining way. Yet when the lights go out, the starting bell clangs and the dogs come streaking around the track at forty miles an hour, they are all suddenly reduced by the tension of the spectacle to uniform pin-points of attention. The instant the race is over, they disintegrate into their multiple diversities, all reassuming their distinctive eccentricities as readily as one puts on a garment - the shrugging spasms, the gawky eye, the trick of interminable muttering.[17]

Despite the apparent shift from 'mass' to monad charted in this passage, the implication is that individual identity for this audience is purely artifice, something worn, like a garment. For, of course, the 'multiple diversities' of the people are precisely what do not get recorded, only the quirks of character which function metonymically

here to emphasise the otherness of the documentarist's subject and their significance only in the context of their uniformity and their automatic, uncritical consumption of the mass cultural event. The dual impulse of the narrator's address enables O'Nolan to locate mass cultural consumption as degenerate and debasing, while forging a position from which to critique those discourses of cultural nationalism equally set against the incursions of mass culture into the fabric of national life. This strategy is exemplified in the narrator's description of the races as something which 'seemed to fill perfectly a void which (in the absence of horse-racing at night) had existed in the spiritual and intellectual consciousness of the people'.[18] This statement denigrates popular culture through its incongruous juxtaposition of dog racing with a state of 'spiritual and intellectual consciousness' whilst simultaneously casting an ironic 'sideways glance' (as Bakhtin puts it) at cultural nationalism's rhetorical investment in the spirit or genius of the nation and its attempt to locate this spirit in a set of residual cultural practices which have been superseded by the greyhound track. Thus an ideology is unmasked as empirically false through the revelation of the apparently 'real' state of affairs, while that state of affairs is itself presented as valueless and shallow. Win or lose at the races, the whole country is 'going to the dogs' it seems.

So if this text attempts to gain the reader's consent to a vision of contemporary popular culture as shallow and spiritually debased, it also uses this idea of modern Irish culture as a weapon with which to attack nationalist representations of Ireland as a Gaelic paradise, sealed off from the degenerative influences of modernity by an enduring Gaelic way of life. Whereas the ironic vision of contemporary popular culture is actively invoked in the article, however, the discourses of cultural nationalism with which it is in dialogue remain outside of the text and need to be inferred from oblique allusions.

To open up the text's complex cultural politics through the notion of hidden polemic reveals the modernist consciousness at work in the essay which undermines the apparent solidity of the social documentarist's empiricist mode of address. The closing paragraphs of the article are worth quoting at length because they begin to

articulate much more directly O'Nolan's recognition of the problems that come with an adherence to an empiricist method in cultural analysis, and they point towards one of the central concerns of The Third Policeman. That is, the epistemological problem of perspective or the point of view of the observer. While O'Faolain's opening editorial insisted on the validity of empirical observation as the only means of ascertaining the truth about modern Irish life, in the very first issue of the journal O'Nolan proceeds to dismantle such a claim under the very guise of neutral reportage. Not only does he ironically employ the mode of address of the detached and ironic observer, gently mocking the assured and neutral tones of the ethnographic voice, thereby calling into question that voice's authority. But he goes on to further undermine the assumption of neutrality by showing how the character of the subject under discussion is determined by the point of view adopted towards it:

> How you leave Shelbourne Park is more important than how you enter it. If you leave it with the feel of strange greasy notes in your pocket, you will find it a wide clean place, magnificent well-appointed stands on each side and grass of an unusually green hue in the centre. Attendants in spotless white coats (which have been subjected to a patent antiseptic process) will be around you retrieving benign-faced hounds from an innocent after-race frolic. All around you handsome men and women will be walking with quiet dignity to their gleaming cars. They will be dressed in cool expensive linens and will carry in their faces the mark of clean living. A cool breeze will temper the genial evening.
>
> But if you happen to depart leaving all your money in the bag of a bookmaker, you will be appalled at the dreariness of your surroundings. Thunderous clouds will be massed above the ramshackle stands, ready to vomit their contents on you when they get you away from cover. Loathsome dogs, their faces lined with vice, will lear at you in mockery. Your demoniacal fellow degenerates, slinking out beside you, will look suspiciously like drug addicts. Every one of them will have lost his entire week's wages notwithstanding the fact that he has a wife and seven children to support, each of whom is suffering from an incurable disease. There will be a bad smell in evidence, probably from the bucket-strewn river. If you notice any odd patron walking out jauntily, it will be safe to infer on such an occasion that he has given himself the needle behind the grand-stand.
>
> At Shelbourne Park and at every other park, there are two ways of it, and the pity is that you cannot be at the choice of them.[19]

This passage suggests that unmediated apprehension of reality is impossible. A verifiable account of what constitutes reality cannot be produced because something will always intervene between the knowing subject and the object known. In this instance, a particular state of consciousness is interposed (either joy or despair, depending on the punter's fortunes). This suggestion that reality is mediated and therefore partly constituted by consciousness is one of the central preoccupations of modernism. Such epistemological uncertainty is reflected in fiction in Conrad's embedded first-person narrators and Woolf's juxtaposition of interior monologues, techniques which attempt to dismantle the notion that truth can be arrived at independent of an individual's consciousness and the particular experiences that constitue a subject's personal history and cultural identity.[20]

In this sense, then, 'Going to the Dogs' opens up one of the central problems for the narrator of The Third Policeman - how to arrive at epistemological certainty in a world whose laws of logic and causality contradict those experienced in daily life. However, this article doesn't itself arrive at those conclusions in a totally convincing fashion, for it still implies a residual adherence to an empiricist framework in the way that the second paragraph cited above echoes the narrator's own description of the environs of the dog-track and reinforces his implicit diagnosis of cultural degeneracy (the repeated reference to the smell of the bucket-strewn river suggests that the depressed social scene is not entirely a figment of consciousness but is independently verifiable if one is able to sufficiently disengage oneself from contemporary popular culture).

Yet the problem of perspective which the article registers can clearly be read in terms of O'Nolan's own problematic relationship to the idealising impulses of cultural nationalism's urge to ground national identity in an authentic and enduring set of cultural practices and his modernist disenchantment with the perceived cultural decay of contemporary life. This tension, which I began to explore in my discussion of At Swim recurs in The Third Policeman, in this instance mediated through the novel's representation of different landscapes. The notion of 'hidden polemic' is useful here because it enables a reading which brings out those other aspects of the text which have, to all intents and purposes, been elided in critical

accounts of the novel, revealing an engagement with a cultural discourse which, as Bakhtin notes, 'cannot be fundamentally or fully understood if one takes into consideration only its direct referential meaning'.[21] Bakhtin's concept also crucially begins to deconstruct the critical oppositions between O'Nolan's non-fictional and fictional writings and the assumption that the former are concerned purely with the local and the parochial and the latter with more general issues of language and representation. Both, as the above reading suggests, inflect each other and attempt to negotiate similar cultural problems. The section which follows traces the novel's complex and often elusive engagement with problems of cultural identity specifically in relation to the grounding of Irishness in notions of the land and ruralism.

- III -

One of the central problems for the reader of The Third Policeman is that while the fictional world in the novel demands to be read as a metaphor, the novel itself doesn't provide us with any conclusive suggestions as to what it might be a metaphor of. In a letter to the American writer William Saroyan, O'Nolan claimed that his protagonist moves 'in a sort of hell which he earned for the killing [of Mathers]', and this explanation has been accepted by his commentators even though there is nothing within the text itself to suggest that it is set in an infernal afterworld.[22] Anne Clissman, for example, argues that 'the importance of The Third Policeman lies in its presentation of a vision of hell which implies man's reliance on order, pattern and harmony'.[23] Bernard Benstock, however, finds it 'difficult to accept Flann O'Brien as a serious moralist' and prefers to see the novel's vision of the afterlife as itself standing for certain aspects of this world in the present: 'it is tempting not to wonder whether hell is not a metaphor in The Third Policeman for the rural Ireland of his time ... a sick society divided against itself'.[24] Anthony Cronin is even more specific about the geographical location of this metaphorical hell, suggesting that 'the landscape of hell in The Third Policeman is ... unmistakably that of the Irish midlands, where he had spent a good part of his boyhood, apparently enjoying an idyll. Hell is situated somewhere near Tullamore'.[25]

However, the suggestion that fictional world of the novel is 'hell' occurs outside of the frame of the novel itself, in the publisher's note, as if such a metanarrational and metaphysical explanation cannot in fact be contained within the terms of the text itself. To the extent that it emerges as a supplement which bestows meaning on the events narrated after the fact, rather than being explicitly suggested within the novel itself, it resembles the final section of At Swim in which the 'new' and detached narrative voice speculates on madness in a last-ditch effort to bestow a pattern of coherence and universal meaning on the fragmented narrative which precedes it. Similarly in The Third Policeman, although Divney's revelation of the fact that he had killed the narrator provides the reader with a retrospective frame through which to account for the strange nature of the narrator's experiences, there is no explicit textual evidence to support the suggestion that the narrator has been sent to hell for his crimes. In fact the idea that the novel provides a 'vision of hell', or the complementary notion that this hell operates as a metaphor for rural Ireland in the 1930s, oversimplifies the complexity of the text's insights into the relationship between world and text, the real and the fictive.

Such a reading implicitly assumes that 'hell' is a straightforward metaphor for a fixed and stable referent in the real world. Yet the reading of the novel that I offer below sets out to interrogate the text's engagement with issues of identity and place and the way in which these are structured by O'Nolan's response to dominant discourses of cultural nationalism in this period. As such, it firmly locates the novel in relationship to its proper cultural context while remaining sensitive to the novel's complex exploration of the relationship between language and reality, and its inference that there can be no unmediated access to the real.

*

In The Third Policeman the narrator moves through a disorienting world which persistently disturbs the epistemological frameworks through which he attempts to make sense of the world he inhabits. Whereas in At Swim, John Furriskey 'entered the world with a memory but without a

personal experience to account for it'[26], in this text neither personal experience, sense impressions, nor memory can be relied upon to ground knowledge securely and, as if to destabilise the narrator further, the form which this disorientation takes constantly shifts throughout the text. For instance, when the narrator is confronted by the figure of Mathers whom he knows to be dead and buried, he is unable to reconcile the apparent certainty of this knowledge with the disturbing evidence presented to him by his senses:

> In the terrible situation I found myself, my reason could give me no assistance. I knew that old Mathers had been felled by an iron bicycle-pump, hacked to death with a heavy spade and then securely buried in a field. I knew also that the same man was now sitting in the same roon with me, watching me in silence ... I decided in some crooked way that the best thing to do was to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory.(pp.25-6)

If the problem here is one of a disjunction between the fidelity of memory and the immediacy of perception, later in the text perception itself is thrown into crisis when the narrator encounters Sergeant Pluck's 'Atomic Theory' regarding the transference of molecules between disparate bodies:

> I looked carefully around me ... The scene was real and incontrovertible and at variance with the talk of the Sergeant, but I knew that the Sergeant was talking the truth and if it was a question of taking my choice, it was possible that I would have to forego the reality of all the simple things my eyes were looking at.(p.86)

What we have here is a situation in which the grounds of knowledge constantly change as he moves through an unstable reality, which appears to be created anew in each discursive utterance of those who inhabit it. As the narrator's newly discovered soul Joe remarks 'Apparently there is no limit ... Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed' (p.86). The problem faced by the narrator is not just that he is confronted by a world that he does not quite understand, but that all the faculties he might bring to bear to make sense of that world are always inadequate to the task. Both memory and observation either fail him entirely or have to be trusted even though the one blatantly contradicts the other.

The epistemological and perspectival crisis into which the narrator is thrown and which render him unable to impose any structure

and meaning on his experiences is clearly expressed in the novel as a crisis of personal identity. I want to trace this perpetual disorientation as a crisis in individual terms, yet one which is also deeply bound up with broader cultural determinants. Although the novel does not deal with the issue of national identity in a direct and explicit fashion, nevertheless identity in a more general sense is one of the novel's primary concerns, as it was in At Swim and as it is to be again in O'Nolan's next novel The Poor Mouth. As with both of these novels, the theme of identity is signalled most obviously in the problems surrounding the protagonist's name. Whereas the narrator of At Swim remains nameless throughout, and the narrator of The Poor Mouth is told by the schoolmaster that his name is not what he says it is, the narrator of The Third Policeman is unable to remember his name at all, once he has returned to Mathers' house to retrieve the murdered man's cashbox:

> I was shocked to realise that, simple as it was, ... I did not know my name, did not remember who I was. I was not certain where I had come from or what my business was in that room. I found I was sure of nothing save my search for the black box. ... I had no name. (p.31)

Even when memories of his past life suddenly return to him, his name is still the one thing that continues to elude him: 'I remembered who I was - not my name but where I had come from and who my friends were. ... John Divney, my life with him ... !' (p.39)

This problem of identity in the text is played out in relation to the 'black box', the object of Divney's and the narrator's original crime which initiates the strange chain of events in the novel and which functions as the key object of desire for both the narrator in his attempt to recover Mathers' money and for the reader his or her attempt to elicit meaning from the disorienting and curious logic of the narrative. That the black box is implicated in the narrator's quest for self-realization (a motif which again echoes At Swim's concern with the production of selfhood through its deployment of the **Bildungsroman** narrative structure) emerges most clearly in the narrator's belief that it will enable him to achieve personal and intellectual fulfilment through the publication of his research into the life and work of de Selby. As he comments about the primary motivation for the theft of the box and the murder of Mathers, 'it was

for de Selby I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin.' (p.9) If we read 'de Selby' as a metaphor for the self (**das Selbst**) as Clissman and Asbee suggest, the desire for intellectual satisfaction in the production of the definitive scholarly work on de Selby, is also enmeshed with a desire for some ultimate 'self' satisfaction and resolution.[27] 'I knew that if my name were to be remembered', comments the narrator, 'it would be remembered with de Selby's' (p.10).

The identification of the black box with such a desire is clearly signalled in its immediate transformation from mere receptacle, as the container of Mathers' money, to a fetishized object in itself, endowed with an increasingly exorbitant value. As the narrator's explanation for his shadowing of Divney indicates ('I knew that he was sufficiently dishonest to steal my share of Mathers' money and make off with the box if given the necessity' (p.18)), the box gradually comes to be separated from the financial wealth it contains to be endowed with a more abstract and symbolic value, finally ending up as the sole object of the narrator's quest:

> My mind was strangely empty. I did not feel that I was about to end successfully a plan I had worked unrelentingly at night and day for three years. I felt no glow of pleasure and was unexcited at the prospect of becoming rich. I was occupied only with the mechanical task of finding a black box.(p.22)

The pursuit of the box itself becomes obsessive for the narrator and is fetishised within the text itself as the pursuit of this elusive object becomes inextricably tied to the prospect of narrative resolution and revelation. To the extent that it remains throughout the primary object of the narrator's desire and the text's focus, the box is held up as the only possible site of closure and hence as the one stable value in this text. Yet it is radically unstable. For if it remains stable as a signifier, its signified constantly changes, as it is transformed from a container of values (a cash-box) to the ultimate site of value in itself (as the source of omnium - ultimate knowledge and absolute power). Moreover, the suggestion that the attainment of selfhood is contingent upon the possession of the box is radically undercut by the fact that the only physical contact that the narrator ever makes with the box isn't contact at all, for the box the narrator apparently touches under the floorboard in Mathers' house

is actually a mine and thus literally marks the disintegration of the self as the bomb blows him to pieces.

The suggestion is that, contrary to the narrator's expectations, full subjectivity and the plenitude of self-realization are objects of a desire that can never be achieved. The impossibility of the narrator's quest is foregrounded throughout the text. When the narrator questions Mathers about the whereabouts of the cash box, Mathers' refuses to tell him, pointing out that if he hasn't a name he cannot take possession of the box:

> 'What is your name?', he asked sharply.
>
> I was surprised at this question. It had no bearing on my own conversation but I did not notice its irrelevance because I was shocked to realise that, simple as it was, I could not answer it. ...
>
> 'I have no name', I replied.
>
> 'Then how could I tell you where the box was if you could not sign a receipt? That would be most irregular. I might as well give it to the west wind or to the smoke from a pipe. ...' (p.31)

This suggests that while identity is predicated upon the possession of the box, possession of the box is itself dependent upon the 'security' of identity - the box and the narrator's identity (in the form of his signature) are interchangeable, of equal value and (as it turns out) equally unattainable.

This is reiterated in the narrator's rather confusing exchanges with Sergeant Pluck at the barracks, whom he hopes will enable him to recover the box (which he now claims is a gold watch which has been stolen, in order to disguise the true object of his search). Once again, however, his lack of a name persists as a source of frustration as the Sergeant puts yet more obstacles in the way of his quest:

> 'The trouble will only be beginning when we find it', he said severely.
>
> 'How is that?'
>
> 'When we find it we will have to start searching for the owner.'
>
> 'But I am the owner.'
>
> Here the Sergeant laughed indulgently and shook his head.
>
> 'I know what you mean', he said. 'But the law is an extremely intricate phenomenon. If you have no name you cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not exist and when it is found it will have to be restored

> to its rightful owner. If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on you although they look as if they were from where I am sitting. On the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you.' (pp.61-2)

Crucially, this exchange also gestures towards the problem of identity in relation to the institutions of the state. As a policeman, Pluck represents, in a very literal way, the authority of the state, and this confers upon him the power to enforce the law. However, in this nightmarish world Pluck comes to embody a vision of a state which confers upon itself not simply the right to legistlate but the power to create the world anew, shifting the boundaries of the legal and the prohibited, the knowable and the unknowable, the sayable and the unsayable.

The sense that the world is subject to the discursive pronouncements of the policemen is manifest in Pluck's Atomic Theory, and the fantastical inventions of MacCruiskeen which redraw the limits of the scientific rationality to which they purport to adhere through their strict application of logical first principles **ad absurdum.** These outlandish explanations of the physical world clearly recall the equally eccentric theories of de Selby to which the narrator has dedicated his life's work. Yet if de Selby's theories represent the individual aspirations of the narrator and are tied to his quest for personal realisation, they ultimately embody his failure to exert any control, or produce any satisfactory explanation of the world he finds himself in. If the 'uselessness' of de Selby's ideas is registered by their literal marginalisation in the narrative digressions and footnotes to the text, it is significant that the theories of the policemen dominate a major part of the narrative and are endowed with a constitutive power to impose and determine identity. When Joe reminds the narrator of the Sergeant's claim that he is immune from the constraints and procedures of the law 'on account of [his] congenital anonymity' (p.99), in the wake of the death sentence he receives for a crime he has not committed, the narrator's lack of 'self-possession' in the face of the law is apparent. Divested of both personal agency and any stable sense of identity, he reveals himself to be wholly subject to the inescapable defining powers of an external, seemingly omnipotent, body:

'Do you recall that you told me that I was not here at all

> because I had no name and that my personality was invisible to the law? ... Then how can I be hanged for a murder, even if I did commit it and there is no trial and preliminary procedure, no caution administered and no hearing before a Commissioner of the Public Peace?' ...
>
> 'I think the case can be satisfactorily met', [the Sergeant] said pleasantly, 'and ratified unconditionally. ... It is true', he said, 'that you cannot commit a crime and that the right arm of the law cannot lay its finger on you irrespective of the degree of your criminality. Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true. ... For that reason alone', said the Sergeant, 'we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at best) but only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralised and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of the spinal string. If it is not a lie to say that you have been given the final hammer behind the barrack, equally it is true to say that nothing has happened to you.' (pp.99-100, 102)

At the end of this exchange, the narrator registers a sense of the complete disintegration and dispersal of his very being, as if 'the little empire' of the self had been smashed 'into small fragments' (p.102). This constellates the text's figuration of identity in terms of a conflict between established authority and an essential self and personal freedom, analogous to the conflict traced in At Swim between the constraints and 'nets' of social obligation and the freedoms of the creative imagination. In The Third Policeman, however, the conflict is clearly much more acute and much more polarised. Here de Selby represents a solipsistic withdrawal from reality into pure imagination, where the liberating possibility of 'flight into exile' is translated as the crippling futility of sitting in a hotel room and imagining a journey, surrounded by 'picture postcards of the areas which would be traversed on such a journey, together with an elaborate arrangement of clocks and barometric instruments and a device for regulating the gaslight in conformity with the changing light of the outside day' (p.51). Social obligation, on the other hand, becomes the terrifying power of authority to determine and define both identity and the parameters within which the subject operates, marking a total loss of control and agency.

This conflict between freedom and authority, imagination and obligation, then, can be read as one which is continuous with the

central concern of At Swim, yet which, in playing out this conflict in a more abstract sense, arguably registers a more intense sense of personal crisis as it is articulated on both a thematic and structural level through the narrator's own confusing quest for the box and the disorienting narrative turns of the text itself. I would argue that it is vital to read this crisis not as an expression of existential angst in the manner of Beckett, nor as some kind of postmodernist celebration of fractured selfhood or split subjectivity, but as a conflict which is grounded in O'Nolan's relationship to the specific form of identity politics which circulated around cultural nationalism in this period. As I traced in my analysis of 'Going to the Dogs', O'Nolan's engagement with popular culture in Ireland is underscored by an ambivalence emerging from his own critical relationship to both the modern cultural practices he records and the idealising vision of the nation as pastoral idyll which he undermines in the very process of documenting modern Irish reality. To interrogate O'Nolan's figuration of this apparent discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, between a cultural investment in the traditional and a recognition of the hegemony of mass culture, is crucially to raise the issue of where O'Nolan stands in relation to these cultural formations which clearly fail to interpellate him within the cultural communities they delineate. If this opens up the question of how O'Nolan locates himself in relation to the national culture, it is perhaps this anxiety around the question of identity and how it is constituted and 'who' it is determined by which haunts the text of The Third Policeman. For what emerges clearly is that despite the suggestion that identity can never be secured and that individual agency is a fiction, the text's overriding anxiety about the nature of identity implies that the longing and desire to secure it through reference to something stable and enduring is overwhelming. In the following section I am going to trace this desire through the novel's representations of the landscape and its critical relationship to cultural nationalism's figuring of national identity in terms of the land, Corkery's third essential determinant of an authentic Irishness.

- IV -

I want to argue that the issue of naming and identity in The Third Policeman is not just played out on an abstract level but is mediated in the text in terms of the landscape, the representation of which localises this problem in an Irish context. As Homi Bhabha argues, the landscape operates as a recurrent metaphor for the cultural identity of the nation, as that which bears the signs of a national history and marks the vitality of the present.[28] Significantly, the first sign of the epistemological crisis that confronts the narrator on his visit to Mathers' house to retrieve the box is the unexpected and inexplicable transformation which takes place in his immediate environment:

> ... something happened. I cannot hope to describe what it was but it had frightened me very much long before I understood it even slightly. It was some change which came upon me or upon the room, indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable. It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye; perhaps all of these and other things happened together for all my senses were bewildered at once and could give me no explanation. (p.23)

This is a crucial moment in the text for it establishes the inextricable link between personal identity and natural environment that constantly recurs as one of the controlling ideas in the novel. For the sudden change which takes place in the world around him occurs at precisely the moment when he tries to pull the box up from under the floorboards (which, as the reader learns later, is not the cashbox at all but a mine planted by Divney) and which marks the moment of his physical fragmentation in the ensuing explosion. The dissolution of identity is identified here with a transformation in nature, and is figured in the first instance in such a way as to suggest that a metaphysical or cosmic dimension is attached to it. When the ghost of Mathers coughs, for example,

> ... the utterance of the cough seemed to bring with it some more awful alteration in everything, just as if it had held the universe standing still for an instant, suspending the planets in their courses, halting the sun and holding in mid-air any falling thing the earth was pulling towards it. (ibid.)

The negation of the self is figured, then, as a violation of the natural order of the universe, tentatively suggesting perhaps that identity is conceived as something given by nature rather than culturally constituted, and thus operating as a counter to the attempt made by Pluck to impose an identity on the narrator which is wholly artifical. When the narrator first begins to speculate on the significance of his sudden anonymity (the ultimate sign of the effacement of the self), the strangeness of having lost his name is somehow echoed in the fact that the landscape around him has lost customary character and has taken on a new and altogether unfamiliar identity :

> There was nothing familiar about the good-looking countryside which stretched away from me at every view. I was now but two days from home - not more than three hours' walking - and yet I seemed to have reached regions which I had never seen before and of which I had never even heard. ... My surroundings had a strangeness of a peculiar kind, entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has never been before. Everything seemed almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made. (p.39)

The landscape here is both something to be desired and something to be feared, as the perfection of its proportions threaten to transform themselves into something disturbing, 'almost too pleasant, too perfect'. In other words, the landscape in The Third Policeman is uncanny, in Freud's sense of 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar',[29] which is to suggest that its unfamiliarity is not registered as something wholly strange and unknown, but emerges rather from the scenery's very familiarity, which is (as the narrator notes) 'entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has never been before'. This sense of the 'strangeness' of his surroundings is inextricably tied to the narrator's inexplicable inability to remember his name. In similar terms to this description of the land, he knows himself and yet doesn't know who he is, an uncanny defamiliarisation of the self:

> Blank anonymity coming suddenly in the middle of life should be at best alarming, a sharp symptom that the mind is in decay. But the unexplainable exhilaration which I drew from my surroundings seemed to invest this situation merely with the genial interest of a good joke. (p.40)

John Wilson Foster has argued for the centrality in modern Irish

literature of the idea of the self as being bound up with the places it comes from and inhabits. In his view, 'place' operates ' as an unseverable aspect of self' and 'preoccupation with place is a preoccupation with the past without which Irish selfhood is apparently inconceivable'.[30] To some extent, the narrator of The Third Policeman ultimately has no option but to try to conceive of his personal identity in terms of the place that he now inhabits, even if that place is only strangely familiar to him and apparently bound by laws which are at odds with his received experience of the world. After all, there is little else for him in which to ground his identity in any satisfactory or fulfiling way. To begin with, he is severed from his own family lineage (the most obvious source of an inherited identity) by the early death of his parents, and his deracination is further emphasised by the seemingly clumsy and self-consciously detached manner in which this fact is reported in his narrative (pp.8-9). In the absence of a real father, de Selby becomes a kind of surrogate father figure, operating as the source of intellectual authority for the narrator and as an oedipal figure for all the commentators who write on his life and works and whom the narrator is attempting to supersede. If, however, de Selby is some kind of objective correlative of 'the self, the narrator appears to become a figure who is entirely self-begetting, locating his identity entirely in relation to his own person in the present and divorced from the determining influences of the past.

However, from the very beginning of the text, place is posited as an 'unseverable aspect of self'. The death of his parents results in the narrator being sent away to boarding school, a place which he describes as 'strange' and 'filled with people I did not know' (ibid.). Despite its initial unfamiliarity (a feeling that seems to dominate his responses to the places he visits), the school is the first place that impinges on the narrator's consciousness in any significant way and has a crucially formative influence on his personal growth and self-awareness, for it is there that he comes into contact for the first time with the works of de Selby, the ultimate object of his quest for self-fulfilment. However, in spite of spending time abroad (in other strange and unfamiliar places), self-fulfilment is only possible for the narrator by returning home. Only there, it

seems, does he have the leisure to work on the definitive commentary on de Selby by which he intends to make his name.

Moreover, that both name and native place remain anonymous in the novel, further underlines a bond between self and surroundings, implicitly suggesting that both are implicated within each other and mutually determining. To this extent the novel is not simply an exploration of the narrator's personal identity, but also persistently locates the transformations of this identity in relation to the identity of the landscape through which he travels. This is to further suggest that one of the primary concerns of The Third Policeman is the interplay of personal identity and the identity of a specific geographical and cultural space, in other words, Irish national identity. For the character of the land is a dominant concern of Irish literature, functioning as a metaphor for the broader issue of the cultural identity of the Irish people. As John Wilson Foster argues:

> Even when it is difficult to ascertain where in Ireland a particular novel or scene is meant to be set, the force of place frequently remains through the novel's dependence upon creating and distinguishing **kinds** of landscape. For example, rural Irish novels set among small farmers often derive their plots from the deeply-rooted ancestral bonds families have with particular fields and townlands, and from the uprooting force of land-hunger and its effects, land-grabbing or forced migration. In such fiction, as in real life, the distinction between green and fertile lowland and poor, often barren upland is paramount. So important, indeed, are such distinctions that kinds of terrain - town and country, uplands and lowlands, island and mainland, lake and river - carry imaginative values in fiction.[31]

As I noted earlier in the chapter, the indeterminacy of The Third Policeman's setting has generated a critical anxiety manifested in a desire to read the text as a straightforward metaphor for a particular place, although this desire is clearly linked to the novel's disorienting and 'uncanny' narrative which actively militates against any attempt to directly locate the text in a given area. The novel is full of references to Ireland and Irish culture and yet resists any attempt to harness these to readily identifiable referents. Yet perhaps the central question is not where the text is set, given that any attempt to locate it definitively in relation to a specific place can only be speculative, but what kind of places does it imagine and what kind of values are invoked by them.

The landscape appears in the text in three different forms and is mediated by different forms of perception on the narrator's part. To begin with, there is the landscape which the narrator **sees** before him on his journey from Mathers' house to the police barracks, and which is highly artifical and stylized. As I shall argue below, this landscape is reminiscent of the pastoral idyll of cultural nationalist rhetoric in its apparent purity and perfection. As a counter to this is the landscape which the narrator **remembers** as characteristic of the farm he owns. This is a scenery constituted of land which has failed and stands in need of revitalization, in contrast to the highly aestheticised vision of the land before his senses in the strange new world he inhabits. This second representation of the land is reminiscent of the 'the broken land' of modern rural Ireland recorded by writers such as Sean O'Faolain and Patrick Kavanagh in their critique of nationalist idealizations of rural life. And finally there is the landscape which the narrator **imagines**, a land which is characterized by natural plenitude and operating as the site upon which identity is ultimately fulfilled, for in merging the self with this landscape, existential contradictions are resolved and selfhood is achieved.

One of the unnerving aspects of the 'too pleasant, too perfect' description of the landscape given above is that it is highly aestheticized and lacks the kind of natural immediacy suggested by the narrator's perception of its clarity and purity:

> Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing or of being confused with it. The colour of the bogs was beautiful and the greenness of the green fields supernal. Trees were arranged here and there with far-from-ususal consideration for the fastidious eye. The senses took keen pleasure from merely breathing the air and discharged their functions with delight. I was clearly in a strange country but all the doubts and perplexities which strewed my mind could not stop me from feeling happy and heart-light and full of an appetite for going about my business and finding the place of the black box. (p.39)

In fact, the scene is 'aesthetic' in two senses. As a representation of the land, it is clearly artifice, having been 'finely made' and self-consciously 'arranged' for the discerning eye of the detached observer. But it is also aesthetic in that it fuctions to resolve or transcend contradiction, in the sense that the narrator's encounter

with such a scene produces a sense of balance and harmony within him. This dual sense of aestheticization is reiterated later in the text where the landscape not only appears to the narrator to be a two-dimensional construction ordered and arranged for an aesthetic effect, but is also the site of the effacement of conflict between humanity and nature:

> I looked carefully around me. Brown bogs and black bogs were arranged neatly on each side of the road with rectangular boxes carved out of them here and there, each with a filling of yellow-brown, brown-yellow water. Far away near the sky tiny people were stooped at their turf-work, cutting out precisely shaped sods with their patent spades ... Sounds came from them to the Sergeant and myself, delivered to our ears without charge by the west wind, sounds of laughing and whistling and bits of verses from the old bog-songs. Nearer, a house stood attended by three trees and surrounded by the happiness of a coterie of fowls, all of them picking and rooting and disputing loudly in the unrelenting manufacture of their eggs. The house was quiet in itself and silent but a canopy of lazy smoke had been erected over the chimney to indicate that people were within engaged on tasks. (p.86)

This is a vision of unalienated labour where the natural order and material production are integrated into a unified and harmonious framework and all signs of social conflict are effaced, as the agricultural labourers whistle like birds as they go about their work and the birds are engaged in the 'manufacture' of their eggs.

I want to suggest that this evocation of a perfect Irish landscape is polemically alluding to a cultural nationalist investment in rural Ireland as the location of the essential Irish way of life. The form of the description clearly echoes Eamonn de Valera's much quoted excessive idealization of rural Ireland as 'a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens'.[32] Yet the appearance of this vision of an Irish pastoral idyll in the nightmarish world of the text, with its merry peasants heartily singing bog-songs as they labour, immediately foregrounds the unreal and 'fantastical' nature of such a vision. While, on the one hand, the landscape is portrayed as pure and crystalline, as if all ambiguities and contradictions are erased upon its wholesome terrain, on the other hand, it is foregrounded as wholly

artificial, as the trees, hills and bogs are 'arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made' (p.37). That this description expresses a highly organised representation of the land rather than something organic and vital underlines the highly artificial and imposed nature of the descriptions of the land and peasantry which formed a central ideological tenet in Irish cultural nationalism in the period. This is clearly emphasized by the fact that this landscape differs significantly from the landscape which the narrator recalls in his memeories of life on the farm with Divney.

For this highly aestheticised landscape is haunted by a much darker, wintry landscape that dominates the opening of the novel and is later described as 'a dull silent murk of gloom' (p.194) in contrast to the bright sunshine and sharp outlines of the world into which the narrator is suddenly plunged. This is the landscape constituted by the narrator's farm which is constantly 'in a poor way' because of Divney's idleness (p.10), and is a far cry from the essential integration of worker and land described above. If the descriptions cited above evoke de Valera's conception of Ireland as a nation of 'cosy homesteads', this kind of dark landscape echoes the much bleaker vision of rural life contained within two seminal literary critiques of the cultural nationalist celebration of the land, Sean O'Faolain's 'The Broken Land' (1937) and Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger' (1942). These works point to the physical and spiritual bleakness of the landscape and of the people who live and work on it, exposing the pastoral vision as a lie which ignores the poverty and desperation at the root of rural life, and the flight from the land to something more promising in the cities or overseas in Britain and America.

Significantly, the landscape described in the first chapter of the text is implicated in Divney's and the narrator's crime, as the evening sky casts a sinister shadow over the land and appears to be complicit in the murder of Mathers:

> The evening when it came was in the depth of winter; the light was already waning ... The lowering skies seemed to conspire with us, coming down in a shroud of dreary mist to within a few yards of the wet road where we were waiting. Everything was very still with no sound in our ears except the dripping of the trees. (p.16)

Like O'Faolain's description of a land and a people in which 'life was

lying broken and hardly breathing',[33] this equates the physical bleakness of the terrain with the moral bankruptcy of those who live on it. Divney is motivated by nothing other than his avaricious desire for money for nothing which informs his financial exploitation of the narrator and his land, the theft of his customers' money, and the violent murder of both Mathers and the narrator for the contents of the cash-box. This is a locale which is bereft of the natural and organic relation between the land and its people that is portrayed in the description of the labourers working the bogs cited above. This is a land which has lost its natural vitality, being 'starved away to nothing for the want of artificial manures that can't be got for love or money' (p.14), peopled by crooks like Divney, and fractured by economic conflict and jealousies (Mathers, it should be noted, is a large cattle farmer rather than a small subsistence farmer, grazing the land rather than growing it and who (despite the narrator's initial scepticism) confesses to being part of a manure ring that artificially inflates prices and financially cripples the smaller farmers in the vicinity).

The text's critique of cultural nationalism's veneration of rural life as the source of national vitality, which is initially implied in the idealized 'portrait' of a landscape endowed with organic unity and social harmony, is further compounded by this more disenchanted vision of the land as a place that is physically and spiritually sterile. If this registers a discrepancy between a degenerate 'actuality' and an arcadian vision, the suggestion that an integrated and wholesome relationship between the people and the land can only be the stuff of fantasy is clearly implied towards the end of the text when the narrator contemplates what he will do with 'omnium' once he is in possession of the black box:

> Sitting at home with my box of omnium I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination ... I could write the most unbelievable commentaries on de Selby ever written ... A leg of flesh and bone yet stronger than iron would appear magically upon my left thigh ... I would bring de Selby himself back to life to converse with me at night and advise me in my sublime undertakings (p.189)

If this suggests that the box will effect a personal, intellectual, and physical regeneration at an individual level, it also promises to

revitalise the landscape, to produce a pastoral idyll which functions as the dominant expression of national well-being and self-fulfilment in the rhetoric of Irish cultural nationalism:

> Fruits and crops surpassing anything ever known would flower on my farm, in earth made inconceivably fertile by unparalleled artificial manures ... I would improve the weather to a standard day of sunny peace with gentle rain at night ... My sow would farrow twice daily and a man would call immediately offering ten million pounds for each of the piglings ... (p.189)

This vision of agricultural plenitude and fecundity marks the assimilation of personal aspiration and national vitality, the self with the land. Yet the very exorbitancy of the narrator's grandiose desires and the impossibility of 'omnium' foregrounds the fictive nature of such an ideal figuration of the land. Like the black box, this rural paradise is something that can only ever be desired but never attained, imagined but never realised.

As with the documentation of the vulgarity of the masses in At Swim and 'Going to the Dogs', the text thus counterpoints the real against the ideal in a harsh (albeit only implied) rebuke to conceptions of Irish identity that are grounded more in the rhetorical ploys of nationalist discourse than in anything more stable and enduring. The focus on the landscape, particularly in relation to the problems of identity experienced by the narrator, thus frames these problems of identity in culturally specific terms, given the centrality of representations of the land around discourses of Irish national identity in the period. The text can thus be read as registering a disjunction between the ideal of a rural Ireland as pastoral idyll so closely bound up with the notion of an ideal, unalienated essential cultural identity and the kind of criminal activity and exploitation which mark Divney and the narrator's aspirations in relationship to their environment and its failure to fulfil their personal desires. If this conflict mirrors the polarisation of the traditional and the contemporary, the ideal and the real, which we encountered in the juxtaposition of Casey with Sweeney and Shanahan with Finn in At Swim, in a similar vein to At Swim there is an attempt to overcome the immobilizing effects of this polarization through recourse to an alternative figuration of cultural authenticity, in this case, a lyrical vision of the land as a source

of plenitude.

When contemplating his imminent execution at the hands of the Sergeant, the narrator lapses into a moment of intense lyrical reverie as he considers the nature of selfhood in relation to an imaginary landscape:

> Down into the earth where dead men go I would go soon and maybe come out of it again in some healthy way, free and innocent of all human perplexity. I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river or be personally concerned in the ageless perfection of some rank mountain bearing down upon the mind by occupying forever a position in the blue easy distance. Or perhaps a smaller thing like like movement in the grass on an unbearable breathless yellow day, some hidden creature going about its business - I might well be responsible for that or some important part of it. Or even those unaccountable distinctions that make an evening recognisable from its own morning, the smells and sounds and sights of the perfected and matured essences of the day, these might not be innocent of my meddling and my abiding presence. ... Or perhaps I would be an influence that prevails in water, something sea-borne and far away, some certain arrangement of sun, light and water unknown and unbeheld, something far-from-usual. There are in the great world whirls of fluid and vaporous existences obtaining in their own unpassing time, unwatched and uninterpreted, valid only in their essential un-understandable mystery, justified only in their eyeless and mindless immeasurability, unassailable in their actual abstraction; of the inner quality of such a thing I might well in my own time be the true quintessential pith. I might belong to a lonely shore or be the agony of the sea when it bursts upon it in despair. (pp.159-60)

This passage constitutes a most extraordinary moment in the text, for it punctuates the narrative with a discourse that is wholly different from anything that precedes it, suggesting a desire to ground identity in nature, in spite of the text's prior suggestion that personal identity and the land can only be brought together in either an artificial or a debased form, through the contrived and imposed version of cultural identity suggested in cultural nationalism's idealization of rural life or through the morally bankrupt reality that is contemporary life. The descriptive language and elegiac tone of this passage are unlike anything else in the novel, hitting a lyrical note and depth of feeling of which the narrator has hitherto shown himself to be incapable (the strained credulity of the narrative voice, particularly in the earlier chapters, seems to work against

this degree of personal integrity and insight). In some senses, the language used here is reminiscent of Sweeney in At Swim, merging the self with the landscape in an attempt to transcend the vicissitudes of ordinary life. Like Sweeney in the trees reciting his nature lays, the narrator looks down from his elevated position on the scaffold and is suddenly struck by the thought that,

> the breezes high above the ground are separate from those which play on the same level as men's faces: here the air was newer and more unnatural, nearer the heavens and less laden with the influences of the earth. Up here I felt that every day would be the same always, serene and chilly, a band of wind isolating the earth of men from the far-from-understandable enormities of the girdling universe. ... I sighed sadly. (p.158)

These descriptions locate the essences of things as being beyond the scope of sensory perception and of reason ('eyeless and mindless'), pointing to a truth which lies beyond the two frames of reference (seeing and remembering) which alternate as the sources of the narrator's epistemological crises earlier in the text. Significantly also, these passages are interwoven with and counterpointed against Pluck's story about the man in the balloon. In the same way that the Sweeney tale operates as a metaphor for the narrator's condition in At Swim, this story operates as an allegory for the narrator's attempt to locate his essential self in a sphere which is transcendent, registering an impulse to escape not merely from the world in any abstract sense but from 'the rabblement' that denies the limitless possibilities of free creative imagination. Reacting against the balloon-man's refusal to disclose what he has seen in the sky, the people, as Pluck puts it:

> ... decided to get out their shotguns the next day and break into the man's house and give him a severe threatening and tie him up and heat pokers in the fire to make him tell what happened in the sky the time he was up inside it. That is a nice piece of law and order for you, a terrific indictment of democratic self-government, a beautiful commentary on Home Rule. (p.159)

Yet if the Sergeant's story reflects the desire for an escape from the violence and petty concerns of the mob which is further implied in the echoes of the Sweeney motif in the narrator's discourse at this point, the immersion of the narrator in this vision of nature is so intense as to render him impervious to Pluck's voice, 'I had heard the

Sergeant's words and understood them thoroughly but they were no more significant than the clear sounds that infest the air at all times' (p.159). This is the moment at which the narrator is able to break free from the all-encompassing and determining discourse of the policeman, marking the dissolution of this authority and its power to define his identity.

This bizarre moment in the novel punctuates the text and gestures towards the possibility of escaping the imprisoning circularity of the narrative which obliges the narrator endlessly to repeat his journey, always questing yet never arriving at his goal to possess the box. It also offers a way of moving beyond the two landscapes and formations of identity that mark the narrator's disempowerment (the dark land of the 'real' of the text and the aestheticised, 'too perfect' terrain of the strangely familiar place he finds himself in) by suggesting that a form of self-realisation can be achieved through an encounter with the kind of lyrical invocation of the landscape encoded in medieval Irish nature poetry. (As I point out in Chapter 1 this was the subject of O'Nolan's MA dissertation and clearly plays a central role in At Swim through Sweeney's lays). Yet the kind of resolution The Third Policeman tentatively gestures towards is clearly less assured than the recourse to the bardic motif in At Swim, as Sweeney's attempt to find escape in the trees becomes a fleeting moment of imagined freedom upon a scaffold. This marks a far more pessimistic trajectory than the earlier novel as the possibility of negotiating a position beyond the crippling parameters of the degeneracy of the modern and the distorting idealisation of the traditional in the name of cultural nationalism becomes increasingly difficult. As I shall argue in the next chapter, the trajectory traced through these two novels reaches its terminus in The Poor Mouth where there is no longer apparently any possibility of locating a cultural identity beyond the 'nets' and webs of discourse that entrap one.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, p.21.

2. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Mater: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.111.

3. See Keith Hopper, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Postmodernist, Thomas F. Shea, Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels, M. Keith Booker, 'The Bicycle and Descartes: Epistemology ibn the Fiction of Beckett and O'Brien', Jerry L. McGuire, Teasing After Death: Metatextuality in The Third Policeman', and Lorna Sage, 'Flann O'Brien'.

4. See Charles Kemnitz, 'Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions: A Relativistic Reading of The Third Policeman', Mary A. O'Toole, 'The Theory of Serialism in The Third Policeman', Richard F. Peterson, 'Flann O'Brien's Timefoolery', and J.M. Silverthorne, 'Time, Literature and Failure: Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman.

5 Sean O'Faolain, 'This is Your Magazine', in Sean McMahon (ed.), The Best from the Bell, pp.15-6.

6. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.202.

7. The Dublin Magazine, vol.11, no.2, (1936), pp.60-1.

8. The Bell, vol.5, no.5, (1943), p.339.

9. The Bell, vol.6, no.3 (1943), p.183.

10. The Bell, vol.3, no.3, (1941), p.169.

11. Flann O'Brien, 'Going to the Dogs! A Discourse on Greyhound Racing in Dublin', The Bell, vol.1, no.1 (1940), pp.19-24; 'The Trade in Dublin', The Bell, vol.1, no.2 (1940), pp.6-15; 'The Dance Halls', The Bell, vol.1, no.5 (1941), pp.44-52. These pieces are reprinted in Myles Before Myles (MBM), pp.228-49.

12. M.M. Bakhtin, Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics, p.185.

13. ibid., p.189.

14. ibid., p.195.

15. ibid.

16. MBM, p.229.

17. ibid., p.230.

18. ibid., p.228.

19. ibid., p.232.

20. See for example Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Woolf's Mrs Dalloway.

21. M.M. Bakhtin, Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics, p.196.

22. Publisher's note to The Third Policeman, p.200. All subsequent references to the novel in this chapter will be included in parentheses in the main body of the text.

23. Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, p.180.

24. Bernard Benstock, 'Flann O'Brien in Hell: The Third Policeman, pp.75,77.

25. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Mater: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, pp.115-6.

26. At Swim-Two-Birds, p.9.

27. Anne Clissman, Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, and Sue Asbee, Flann O'Brien.

28. Homi K.Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), Nation and Narration, p.295.

29. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in The Complete Psychological Works, p.220.

30. John Wilson Foster, 'The Geography of Irish Fiction', pp.89,90.

31. ibid., p.92.

32. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.146.

33. Sean O'Faolain, 'The Broken Land', p.173.

Chapter 5

'Putting on the Poor Mouth': O'Nolan and the Western Peasant

No hope. No lust.
The hungry fiend
Screams the apocalypse of clay
In every corner of this land.
(Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger')

- I -

In Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, Terence Brown argues that the early 1940s were marked by momentous social changes which enabled a more radical questioning of the essentializing discourses of cultural nationalism than had been possible in the first two decades of independence. He describes the 1920s and 1930s as a period in which:

> conservative ideology and the social fabric were bound up with one another, both expressive of the atavistic and widespread conviction that the essential Irish reality was the uniquely desirable, unchanging life of small farm and country town in the Irish-speaking west. There was neither competition from other equally compelling conceptions of the nation's life, nor pressure for ideological innovation in the dynamics of social complexities or large-scale rapid change. For despite the degree to which much of rural Ireland had been penetrated by modernizing influences in the early decades of the century, and the ways in which change had been at work there since the Famine, much of the social life of the countryside as it had developed in the late-nineteenth century remained apparently intact ... until well into the 1930s. It was only in the early 1940s that things began to change more rapidly and noticeably. [1]

In an earlier chapter I described the early 1940s as a crucial moment in the fortunes of the Irish language in so far as it had become increasingly evident that the state's attempt to reverse the long-term decline of the language had failed. Emigration from the Irish-speaking

districts was continuing, the government's schools policy was subject to attack by teachers and even some politicians, and the largely English-speaking towns and cities were showing few signs of a widespread adoption of Irish for everyday purposes. This resulted in a general loss of faith in the revolutionary aim of replacing English with Irish as the mother-tongue of most Irish people, and a resigned acceptance of the fact that Irish would only survive as a second language if it were to survive at all. The new cultural initiatives aimed at preserving and disseminating the language were motivated partly by the realization that revival could not be achieved solely through a dependence on state apparatuses (such as the schools) but needed to be complemented by independent grass-roots organizations and new publishing ventures, and partly by the recognition that the language suffered from a debilitating lack of cultural prestige due to its popular association with rural impoverishment and deprivation. While official ideology continued to yoke together the language and rural life by persisting with the idea of the western Gaeltacht as the symbolic centre of the nation, the language movement began to be driven by a more metropolitan consciousness as 'young men and women began to assert their right to espouse Gaelic revival in a modern urban manner, satirizing the professional rural Gaels who vulgarized a distinguished intellectual tradition in their employment of Gaelic as a tool of advancement in the state bureaucracies'.[2]

However, if the war-years marked a watershed in the efforts to revive the language, it was also a time of crisis and change in Irish rural life more generally. While language enthusiasts in the towns and cities became increasingly dissatisfied with the dominance of the west in the nationalist imagination, inhabitants of the west itself began to reject the patterns of social and economic life which prevailed in the countryside in reality. Economic deprivation, social deterioration, and cultural stagnation coalesced to bring about a widespread shift in rural consciousness, expressed in new attitudes towards, and motivations for, emigration from the land. Whereas prior to this date emigration to the towns and cities or to Britain and America was accepted as part and parcel of rural life for those who would neither inherit land nor could find work on it (emigration was a necessary structural feature of a rural social and economic formation which

depended on the the undivided transmission of farmland from father to eldest son), from the early forties the depressed condition of social and cultural life in the countryside had become so acute that many country people were no longer prepared to tolerate it. As a result, emigration began to represent less an acquiescence in traditional economic patterns than 'an outright rejection of rural life'.[3]

The drastic decline in the rural population which ensued was one of the main reasons why the prospects for the revival of Irish looked so bleak at this time. Without a sustained effort to tackle the economic crisis in Irish rural life (and in the Gaeltacht in particular), the Irish-speaking communities of the west would disintegrate and the language would, in all probability, die out as a living tongue. It was precisely the precarious state of the language in its 'natural' habitat that forced upon language enthusiasts the realization that both the aims and the strategies of the revival had to be reconsidered if the language was to to revitalized. Hence, the shift from restoration to preservation, from monolingualism to bilingualism, from the country to the city, which I outlined in Chapter 2.

However, any change in revivalists' conceptions of their objectives and strategies necessarily entailed a reconsideration of what constituted a modern Irish identity, for the continued decline of the language and an increasing dissatisfaction with and repudiation of traditional patterns of rural life meant that two of the three symbolic resources of cultural nationalist discourse were retaining less and less popular appeal and intellectual viability as Ireland proceeded to modernize itself. National identity in the Irish Free State was officially and popularly conceived of in terms of language, religion and the land: the Irish language, the Catholic religion and the rural economy and social order were variously defined as constitutive of an essentially Gaelic way of life which had endured and survived intact the ravages of colonialism and the imposition of an alien culture. By the 1940s, however, only Catholicism remained as the most obvious mark of cultural homogeneity within the Free State and of cultural distinctiveness outside it, particularly in relation to the peoples of Great Britain with whom the Irish shared not just a

language but a complex network of economic relations which belied Ireland's claims to uniqueness and autonomy in this sphere. With the Irish language apparently in its death throes, and the traditional patterns of rural life no longer able to be sustained in the face of mass communications and mass emigration, modern Ireland could no longer look to the Gaelic past for the primary symbols of its national identity, or at least it could not do so without recognizing and accommodating the extent to which modernity had impacted upon them:

> Many continued to write, speak and sermonize on the features of Irish identity that only rural people authentically possessed. But for some the ideological challenge of the new social reality could not easily be set aside. Very quickly ideological and intellectual innovation began to be evident as aspects of the social process of change set in motion by new attitudes in the country.[4]

As a result, the idea that rural Ireland (and the Irish-speaking areas of the western seaboard in particular) was the true site of a traditional Gaelic way of life, embodying the national ethos and forming the cornerstone of an enduring national identity, was subjected to an exacting critique by writers and cultural commentators searching for a way of thinking about Irishness which would reflect the social realities of modern Ireland and the diverse cultural aspirations of its people.

Writing in The Dublin Magazine in 1936, Sean O'Faolain called upon contemporary writers to discard the symbols of national identity which had sustained the revival in favour of a more realistic understanding of modern Irish life, thereby articulating a disenchantment with romanticized views of the Gaelic cultural heritage which was becoming increasingly common at this time:

> We have a sense of time, of background: we know the value of the Gaelic tongue to extend our vision of Irish life, to deepen it and enrich it: we know that an old cromlech in a field can dilate our imaginations with a sense of what was, what might have been, and **what is not**; but we cannot see the man ploughing against the sky in an aura of antiquity.[5]

O'Faolain was not insensitive to the Gaelic cultural heritage as a source of continuing vitality and inspiration for the modern Irish writer. In many ways he was perfectly in tune with his contemporaries in his assessment of the Gaelic language and literary tradition as 'a

well in whose dark silence one sees an image of that shadowy other-self which is our ancestral memory'.[6] However, he urged the revivalists to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the language, and argued that its precarious condition required them to be 'honest and realistic and admit that our object is not unilingualism, but that we should speak, according to our moods and needs, both Gaelic and English'.[7] In affirming the continuing significance of the language in Irish cultural life while at the same time recognizing its secondary status in the social lives of most Irish people, O'Faolain is reiterating a view of the revival which (as I demonstrated in Chapter 2) was becoming widespread at this time. Indeed, the fact that his comments on the language overlap noticeably with O'Nolan's attitudes towards the revival only serves to emphasise the extent to which O'Nolan himself was a product of his generation in this respect, rather than the singular consciousness which he is often represented to be.

However, unlike O'Nolan and other writers of the time whose disillusionment with post-revolutionary cultural life led to a similar questioning of the symbols of the national culture, O'Faolain had a shrewd understanding of the way in which the intellectual crisis around the language, for example, was intimately bound up with the social and economic crisis on the land. In his editorials in The Bell, he suggested that Ireland was now experiencing 'the full force of the cold blast of social change' as a result of 'the wholesale exodus from the countryside', and that these unprecedented changes 'will ultimately, if not altogether in our time, alter the whole appearance and conditions of Irish society'. O'Faolain clearly recognized that the new social patterns that were beginning to emerge in the countryside as a result of prolonged economic decline and social collapse would require significant intellectual changes on the part of the Irish people as a whole, especially with regard to prevailing ideas about the social fabric and cultural identity of the modern Irish nation, and he berated the country's intellectuals for their refusal to 'do nothing better than wail for the past' when faced by the reality that 'old patriarchal, rural Ireland is slowly beginning to disintegrate'. 'The really terrible threat to Ireland is an intellectual one', he concluded, 'we are not really wide-awake at all,

not keeping pace at all with the irresistable movement of life'[8]

O'Faolain hoped that the disintegration of traditional rural Ireland would finally put an end to the veneration of rural life which had been an integral part of cultural polemic since the Literary Revival, and which had prevented the Irish people from striving for a more comprehensive notion of Irish identity which took account of the diverse material conditions in which people actually lived. In particular, he attacked the romanticization of country people as noble peasants inhabiting a Gaelic idyll cut off from the processes and products of modernization. To continue to ground Irish identity in an idealized social order and an antiquated notion of the virtuous peasant, he suggested, was to sustain an illusory idea of Ireland which could no longer be justified in terms of the enabling symbolic power it might have possessed in more recent past:

> If there once was an old association of the Peasant with Liberty it is all over. The romantic illusion, fostered by the Celtic Twilight, that the West of Ireland, with its red petticoats and bawneens, is for some reason more Irish than Guiness' Brewery or Dwyers' Sunbeam-Wolsey factory, has no longer any basis whatever.[9]

'The Noble Peasant is as dead as the Noble Savage', he was to declare a few years later, 'old symbols of national longing' were quite simply 'over and done with'.[10]

The 'old symbols of national longing' at work in the cultural imagination of modern Ireland since the Literary Revival were twofold: the mythological heroes of Gaelic legend who (it was hoped) could be resurrected in spirit to inspire contemporary Ireland to feats of cultural and political greatness, and the figure of the western peasant who (it was alleged) survived into the present in a material rather than spiritual fashion, inhabiting a world sealed off from European modernity by an ancient language and an indigenous folk culture that reflected an essentially primitive way of life. Both of these figures - the legendary hero and the western peasant - were appropriated by various 'factions' within cultural nationalism to symbolize the continuity between past and present, indicating that the essential identity of the nation had endured despite colonialism's attempt to destroy the Gaelic social order and culture. However, after independence had been achieved and the heroic national imaginings of the previous half-century were suddenly replaced by the the more

prosaic project of state-building, the mythic heroes of the past which had preoccupied so many writers during the Literary Revival no longer seemed adequate symbols for expressing the new social order, and were either abandoned as an imaginative device or subjected to satirical critique. The mythic figures of Irish legend were shown to be either too 'heroic' to be encompassed by the drab realities of the Irish Free State (witnessed by the displacement of of the gigantic Finn MacCool as storyteller and transmitter of myths in At Swim-Two-Birds), or as a disabling cultural inheritance which prevented the development of a less mystical and more inclusive idea of Irishness (witnessed by Neary's assault on the statue of Cuchulain in the G.P.O., despairingly head-butting its bronze backside in Beckett's Murphy).

However, while dependence on heroic images and themes declined in the immediate post-independence period, the idea of the noble Gaelic peasant continued to exert a strong influence upon the national imagination. As Terence Brown has argued, while the heroic vision of Ireland was entirely deflated by what many writers felt to be 'the mediocre dullness of the new democratic Irish State' (an idea expressed most famously - and in a wholly partisan manner - in Yeats' 1939 poem 'The Statues'):

> The image of Ireland as a rural, almost pastoral nation, which had also preoccupied the writers of the Literary Revival, maintained its hold. In the 1920s it was the notion of the virtuous countryman that writers, artists and commentators accepted as the legacy of the Literary Revival period, rather than the heroic aristocratic figures of the mythological cycles. ... They celebrated a version of Irish pastoral, where rural life was a condition of virtue in as much as it remained an expression of an ancient civilization, uncontaminated by commercialism and progress. In so doing they helped to confirm Irish society in a belief that rural life constituted an essential element of an unchanging Irish identity.[11]

While Brown is right to point to the fact that pastoralism continued to dominate nationalist rhetoric in the immediate post-independence period, it is important to realize that this didn't just entail the displacement of the heroic by the pastoral as the most appropriate rhetorical mode for embodying and legitimating nationalist aspirations in the Irish Free State. It also involved the rejection of other versions of Irish pastoral which had become prevalent in the Literary

Revival. As David Cairns and Shaun Richards have argued, in the early 1900s the figure of 'the peasant' was a site of struggle between contending groups of intellectuals attempting define the nation in terms of their own particular vision of Irish rural life and social relations. Writers and polemicists for both Anglo-Ireland and Irish-Ireland sought to forge a hegemonic position for themselves within cultural nationalism by mobilizing an idea of the Irish peasant as the locus of a simple, ageless and essentially spiritual way of life set over and against the crass materialism of English culture. However, while both groups shared a belief in the western peasantry as the source of an innate vitality that would lead to national regeneration, they differed crucially over what form that peasant spirituality took. For Anglo-Irish writers such as Yeats, anti-materialism and spiritualism meant the essentially pagan vision of the world embodied in Irish folklore, whereas for Irish-Ireland writers such as D.P. Moran it entailed the specific religious practices of the people which meant Catholicism:

> Paradoxically, both groupings argued for their vision as encapsulating the Irish essence, but for one that essence lay in the peasant to the extent that the movement of centuries had failed to eliminate an innate paganism, albeit one which frequently necessitated the maintenance of a complementary corollary of a 'warrior' aristocracy. For the other, however, it lay in the extent to which the contemporary reality of peasant Ireland was founded on a purity buttressed by the priesthood. ... The essential literary function of the peasant was to show forth an image of the Irish in which avoidance of the English vices was achieved through acceptance of the rigid moral guidelines of Irish Catholicism as enforced by the priest.[12]

Hence, the figure of the idealized peasant was not only used to define the essential character of the Irish people in opposition to British stereotypes of the barbarism and savagery of rural life (by countering Saxon materialism with Celtic or Gaelic spiritualism, English degeneracy with Irish vitality), but it also served to crystalize the fundamental differences between Anglo-Ireland and Irish-Ireland on the question of the social and cultural character of the Irish nation as a whole. While the former envisaged Ireland as pagan and aristocratic, the latter represented it as Catholic and bourgeois, and in both of these visions the peasant was used as the sign and site of conflicting

ideas about what constituted the essential and enduring identity of the Irish nation.

The idealized noble peasant which continued to be used in cultural polemic after independence - now as the dominant symbol of national identity - is clearly Irish-Ireland's Catholic Gael rather than Anglo-Ireland's pagan Celt. That this particular version of the Irish peasant should have overcome rival representations is hardly surprising given that the new state was now in the hands of the forces of a triumphant Catholic bourgeois nationalism. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that writers in the early forties, such as O'Faolain, were not simply attacking a singular idea of the peasant and the value of rural life, but attempting to critique a highly specific representation of rural communities, one which historically had occluded alternative ideas about rural life and marginalised the significance of the city in its figuration of national identity.[13] Furthermore, this idealized vision of the peasant, inhabiting a rural idyll also elides the realities of economic and social change that were transforming rural life in this period. As these changes became more visible in the form of population decline and emigration, the rhetorical dependence of nationalist ideology upon this vision became increasingly excessive, reaching its ultimately exorbitant expression in de Valera's St Patrick's Day speech in 1943 which I cited in the previous chapter. Yet in order to buttress itself against the material reality of the economic crisis on the land, the nationalist imagination was compelled to move further and further west in pursuit of the authentic, essential Irish community, untouched by modernisation. As John Wilson Foster notes of this quest for an ever-receding locus of rural 'Irishness', 'the Irish peasantry became of interest to the revival proportionate to their distance westwards from Dublin'.[14]

It is in this context that the vogue for island reminiscences emerged in the early 1930s, as this nationalist rhetoric reached its physical/geographical and discursive limits in the country's periphery, The Blasket Islands. With the publication of An t-Oileanach by Tomas O Criomhthain in 1929, (translated by Robin Flower in 1934 as The Islandman with the author's name anglicized to O Crohan), the island reminiscence or peasant autobiography emerged as a hugely

popular literary sub-genre, producing a first-hand account of rural life by a native inhabitant. O Crohan's text, along with Fiche Bliain ag Fas by Muiris O Suilleabhain, published in 1933 (translated in the same year as Twenty Years A-Growing) and Machtnamh Seana Mhna by Peig Sayers, published in 1939 (translated in 1962 as An Old Woman's Reflections), all of which came out of one small island off the Kerry Coast, Great Blasket, traced the way of life on the Blasket islands from the 1860s to the 1930s, charting the changes that occurred in the traditional culture of the islands and looked ahead to the end of the island communities there (the Blaskets were finally deserted in 1953). The contemporary interest generated around this small body of texts registered a movement away from previous literary accounts of western life. Not only did these works represent a new locale upon which to ground a notion of an authentic Irish identity which had hitherto been overlooked due to the cultural prestige of the Aran Islands in the early decades of the revival, they also presented an 'insider's' account of rural life, thus marking a two-fold departure from Synge's 'detached' anthropological account of life on the Aran Islands and his literary representation of it in Riders to the Sea.

The extent to which O'Nolan simultaneously attacks and reproduces revivalist ideology concerning 'the peasantry' is best illustrated in his comments about Synge's relation to the rural types which he portrayed in his plays and the people of the Aran Islands in particular. From his early days as a writer for the college magazine Comhthrom Feinne and his own short-lived publication Blather, O'Nolan had consistently expressed a pronounced dislike for the Abbey Theatre, especially its artistic emphasis on Peasant Quality in setting and characterization - naive country-folk living against a backdrop of bogs and turf fires and speaking a form of English heavily inflected by Gaelic syntax, rhythms and interjections. In 1933 he wrote a brief parodic sketch for Comhthrom Feinne called 'The Bog of Allen', 'a wholesome Irish play, racy of the soil ... written in the real traditional style'. Set in 'a typically Irish household' (the kitchen of Allen Bogg's hovel in the middle of the Bog of Allen, miles from any form of dry land that can be profitably worked and into which the cabin steadily sinks as the action progresses), the sketch included many of the Abbey ingredients which O'Nolan found so

distasteful in their reliance on a conventional iconography which in his view reinforced a wholly artificial metropolitan view of rural life:

> The floor is flagged with green moss between the cracks. A roaring fire of the best Wigan coal is burning in the hearth. In a corner is a bed with a white sow in it. All the bed-clothes, including the blankets, are made of Irish poplin. A bag-pipes are hanging on the wall, but not, unfortunately, so high that a tall man could not reach them. Over the mantelpiece is a rusty iron pike for use in insurrections. ... Crickets can be distinctly seen by members of the audience in the stalls, their mouths open, singing with the characteristic Nyaa. Maggie, Bogg's wife, is sitting spinning. She is dressed completely in green. as the Wearin' o' the Green is a strict rule in the house. There is a view over the half-door of the bog, stretching in a brown monotone to the horizon and back again. This view is immediately obstructed by a cow which puts its head in over the half-door.[15]

The Boggs live in poverty because they cannot farm the land. As Allen complains to his wife:

> 'Tis a hard life, surely. As soon as you plough a furrow it fills with water, an' you have to go bailin' it out, an' as soon as you bail out the water, the sides of the furrow fall back agin, an' be the time that's done your plough is half disappeared into the bog, an' be the time you've dug your plough out, you're up to your knees in the bog yourself.[16]

Although the idea of attempting to plough bogland is intended as a joke, it nevertheless contains in embryonic form one of the main criticisms that O'Nolan was to make about the idealization of rural existence in The Poor Mouth - that it aestheticized social deprivation and economic hardship. In a long article on the subject in 'Cruiskeen Lawn' in 1954, O'Nolan attacked the Literary Revival writers who were associated with the Abbey (Yeats, Synge, George Moore, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn) for having 'persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided that they were other people'.[17] ('The people are starving, but wonderfully attractive and charming', Synge wrote once of the western islands[18]). In his view, they aestheticized rural poverty not only through their dependence on 'a frightening apparatus' of conventional stage properties intended to signify the simplicity, charm and essential mystique of western life, and highly conventionalized plot structures and set pieces ('stories about wee

Annie going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals, old men in chimney nooks after fifty years in America, will-making, match-making ... '[19]), but also through the highly artificial language that was intended to represent the artlessness of peasant speech (O'Nolan has a wonderful image of Lady Gregory 'quietly knitting her Kiltartan'[20]). 'The Bog of Allen' mocks what became known as Abbey English (the English language in Gaelic form) by juxtaposing the poverty and repetitiveness of the Boggs' material existence with the rich texture and varied rhythms of the language which they use, after the manner of the peasant plays of the Revival. However, O'Nolan goes on to foreground the evidently literary nature of this type of language by having Allen and Maggie converse using only the Gaelic interjections that added the colourful and authentic flourish to this particular form of Hiberno-English. While watching from the door of their hovel 'the rich purple of the Celtic Twilight' as it falls over the bog, Allen and Maggie struggle to find the appropriate words to express their feelings, and end up almost competing with one another in their search for the one perfect Gaelic term (anglicized, of course) which might prove adequate to the experience:

Allen: It's worth it, livin' an' slavin' here, just to see that.

Maggie (in a hushed voice): The Celtic Twilight, Allen!

Allen (entranced): Aye. It's grand.

Maggie (becoming practical for a moment): Arrah, wisha now, for goodness sake!

Allen (meditatively): Aye. (long pause) Surely.

Maggie: Musha.

Allen: Surely.

Maggie: Wisha.

Allen: Begorrah.

Maggie (her soul flooded with poetry): Anish, now, musha.

Allen: Surely. (long pause) Aye ... Musha.

Maggie: Begorrah.

Allen: Surely. Aye, indeed, Musha.

Maggie: Ochone!

Allen: Begorrah!

Maggie: Bedadda!

Allen: Deriva!

Maggie: Surely. Wisha. Hhisht! (Suddenly six cows put their heads over the half-door. House sinks six feet into the Bog.)

Maggie (angrily): FOR GOODNESS SAKE!![21]

Rather than finding a means of expressing themselves fully, Allen and Maggie end up imprisoned inside a highly artificial language which is exposed as limited in range (they constantly return to the same few words) and as stage-Irish as anything that was to be found in the British stereotypes which the Abbey was supposed to contest. As O'Nolan sarcastically commented elsewhere about Irish writers' fixation with the figure of the peasant and so-called peasant speech:

> These people turn angrily on the British and roar: 'How dare you insult us with your stage Irishman, a monkey-faced leering scoundrel in ragged knee-breeches and a tail coat, always drunk and threatening anybody in sight with his shillelagh? We can put together a far better stage Irishman ourselves, thank you. The Irish Stage Irishman is the best in the world.[22]

O'Nolan pursued his argument with the Abbey playwrights, and Synge in particular, in the pages of 'Cruiskeen Lawn', accusing the writers of the Literary Revival of reproducing the whole pantheon of English stereotypes of the Irish as 'fearfully seltic and fiery, lovable, strong, lazy, boozy, impulsive, hospitable, decent, and so on', and thereby fuelling 'the ignorant valuations of outsiders in things Irish':

> In this Anglo-Irish literature of ours (which for the most part is neither Anglo, Irish, nor literature) ... nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable with Synge. That comic ghoul with his wakes and mugs of porter should be destroyed finally and forever ... This trouble probably began with Lever and Lover. But I always think that in Synge we have the virus isolated and recognisable. Here is the stuff that anybody who knows the Ireland referred to simply will not have. It is not that Synge made people less worthy or nastier, or even better than they are, but he brought forward with the utmost solemnity amusing clowns talking a sub-language of their own and bade us take them very seriously ... When the counterfeit bauble began to be admired outside Ireland by reason of its oddity and 'charm', it soon became part of the literary credo here that Synge was a poet and a wild celtic god, a bit of a genius, indeed.[23]

The strong sentiments expressed here display a depth of resentment and

hostility towards Synge which is in excess of the sins he is accused of committing. In the article from 1954 referred to above, he goes further still in describing Synge as 'a moneyed dilettante coming straight from Paris to study the peasants of Aran not knowing a syllable of their language, then coming back to pour forth a deluge of homemade jargon all over the Abbey stage'. He went on to accuse him of affecting the pose of 'an accomplished savant and artist examining primitive communities and penetrating to their hearts through the crucible of poesy' when he was in fact no more than 'an ignorant affected interloper in a uniquely decent, stable and civilized community'.[24] Synge certainly wasn't the only recent figure to write about rural communities as an 'outsider' - most of the literature produced in Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century is marked by a preoccupation with rural life, even though the writers themselves lived and worked in towns and cities. Indeed, it wasn't until the appearance of O Crohan's autobiographical account of life on Great Blasket, The Island Man, that the west was realistically documented by an indigenous inhabitant, and not since William Carleton had an imaginative writer emerged from the peasantry itself to record the history and stories of his own people. As Fintan O'Toole has argued:

> The Irish literary revival at the turn of the century was not a rural phenomenon. It was created in a metropolitan context for a metropolitan audience. Yet it helped to create and sustain an image of rural Ireland as an ideal which fed into the emergent political culture of Irish nationalism. ... The notion of the peasant and of the country which the peasant embodied was not a reflection of Irish reality but an artificial literary creation, largely made in Dublin, for Dubliners. It was a political image of the countryside which helped to create a sense of social cohesion in a country which was trying to define itself over and against England.[25]

But why O'Nolan singled out Synge in particular as more offensive than other metropolitan writers is unclear. He was certainly astute enough to recognize that the peasant bias in modern literature extended well beyond the Literary Revival (Frank O'Connor and (interestingly) Sean O'Faolain were also repeatedly condemned for propagating idealized and conventionl images of rural life). However, what is particularly interesting about his relation to Synge is not so much his motives which remain unfathomable, but his persistent implied suggestion that there exists a real and authentic Ireland which he and others like him

have experienced and which they can point to in order to invalidate the claims of writers like Synge that theirs is a true representation of 'real' Ireland. In suggesting that Synge's peasants are made of 'the stuff that anybody who knows the Ireland referred to simply will not have', O'Nolan implies that he is somebody who knows the Ireland 'referred to', and that he also knows it to be 'a uniquely decent, stable and civilized community', contrary to the reductive and cliched accounts which were popularized on the Abbey stage.

No doubt the claim that rural life is decent and civilized was a counter to the primitivizing impulse of much Revival literature, though in the end it is no more than can be said of many communities, rural or urban, Irish or otherwise. However to claim that rural Ireland was stable, either prior to independence when the land wars worked for a radical redistribution of the land in the favour of those who depended for their livelihood upon it, or after independence when (as I described above) the protracted economic crisis caused mass migration from the land into the towns and cities, is to perpetuate the myth that the country is a place untouched by change (or at least suffering from a developmental time-lag in relation to the city). This is the point at which O'Nolan begins to reveal his own idealized image of rural life as a place sealed off from the debilitating effects of modernity, thereby reproducing precisely the romantic view of peasant communities which he is attacking. His comment about Carleton's Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry illustrates this tendency further:

> His was an age of terrible despond, poverty, illiteracy and violence, and his portraits of the peasantry were sincere; people actually spoke as they said he did. He was a very good writer by any standard. Others such as Lover, Somerville and Ross, may be said to be perverted Carletons, showing the natives and their ways in a canon of amiable cawboguery.[26]

There is little doubt that the inhabitants of rural Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century were desperately poor, illiterate, and the objects of various forms of violence and exploitation. To that extent O'Nolan again implicitly contests romanticized portraits of the peasantry by drawing attention to the social and material conditions under which they lived. However, in claiming that the peasantry actually spoke in the manner represented by Carleton (something which O'Nolan could not possibly verify, even

if one was to ignore the obvious problem of orthographic convention in the representation of speech), O'Nolan is indulging in his own myth of an authentic peasant voice which 'anyone who knows the Ireland referred to' would immediately recognize as the real thing.

In chapter 2, I argued that one of the reasons why O'Nolan was opposed to the particular form the language revival was taking was that it had become linked in revivalist rhetoric with an idea of the peasant and peasant culture which led to 'a wholly fictitious 'Gaelic Ireland''.[27] 'The people of the West are not generally speaking quaint clowns', he argued,[28] insisting that Irishness did not depend upon 'chang[ing] oneself, clothes, brogue and all into the simulacrum of a western farm labourer'.[29] Nevertheless, O'Nolan himself retains an idea about what constitutes an Irish peasant and a peasant community which, if not fictitious in the sense of being cliched and aestheticized, still draws upon stock images of innate nobility in the face of natural adversity.

> Even this peasant standard is fictitious, as real peasants have a dignity quite lacking in the imitation peasant. ... Try to imagine, however, the monstrous perversion of townies pretending to be peasants. That then is the root of the trouble. Our young people perceive about Gaelicism a loutish and mealy-mouthed quality - something quite unknown in the Gaeltacht itself.[30]

This is idealization of the west of a different sort, producing a homogenous idea of 'real peasants' from a metropolitan point of view in the same manner as the monstrous townies who populated the language movement. Consider the following as a piece of pseudo-sociology, which isn't really any different in tone or viewpoint from Synge's observations on life in the Aran Islands, which O'Nolan considered to be pseudo-anthropology:

> It is, I assume, a commonplace of sociology that the lowest form of human life is to be found among agricultural classes depressed below the level of subsistence - as the Gaeltacht folk were up to comparatively recent times. It is very natural that a person born into such an environment should seek to raise himself above it and ultimately actually make his way to some town.[31]

The sense of detachment conveyed in the language O'Nolan uses here emphasises his geographical and social distance from a people whom he claims to know intimately and for whom he can speak against the

fictionalizing and idealizing portraits of revival writers and ideologues.

In registering the fact that this rural way of life is one which is rapidly dying, O'Nolan clearly departs from the orthodox formula which envisaged the western peasantry as both enduring the effects of modernization and the mainspring of cultural regeneration in the new state. Nevertheless, in suggesting that this rural space and these traditions are authentic and essential, he seems to share the same ground as those metropolitan celebrants of the Irish peasantry he attacks. As I will show in the following sections, O'Nolan's satirical engagement with representations of the Irish peasantry in The Poor Mouth and in particular his response to O Crohan's The Islandman, the text which provides the 'source' and form of the novel's parody is also clearly structured around an informing set of oppositions between centre and periphery, city dweller and rural community, modern and primitive which also underpin the language of revival. If this is to underline the contradictions which inform O'Nolan's response it is also to problematise the dominant critical view of The Poor Mouth as a scathing critique of the idealisation of western life within the discourses of cultural nationalistm. Again, O'Nolan's engagement with cultural nationalism emerges as far more ambivalent than is usually suggested.

- II -

Written in 1940-41 in the months following Longman's rejection of The Third Policeman, The Poor Mouth (An Beal Bocht) was O'Nolan's third novel and the last he wrote until The Hard Life nearly twenty years later. Although it is his only novel in Irish, it is not unique in his oeuvre for being written in that language. His career as a writer began with a series of short stories written in Irish for the Evening Press, and throughout the 1930s and early 1940s he regularly reviewed recent Irish writing and scholarship in the Irish Times. 'Cruiskeen Lawn' initially appeared in Irish and continued to be published alternately with English for the next couple of years. Even after he gave up writing in the language on a regular basis in the mid-forties, he occasionally returned to it, in 1952 translating into Irish

Brinsley Macnamara's play Mairead Gillan.[32] Especially in the thirties and forties, then, O'Nolan had a fairly prolific output in the language and can be properly regarded as a bilingual writer at this time. Accordingly, The Poor Mouth should not be regarded as the exception in his work in this period (as it is by most of his commentators) but as wholly continuous with his literary concerns and practices up until the mid 1940s.

While The Poor Mouth clearly needs to be read in relation to O'Nolan's other work in and about the Irish language, there is nevertheless the danger of isolating these writings from his work as a whole. Whereas critics have tended to treat a novel like The Third Policeman as an expression of a European postmodernist sensibility, marginalizing the extent to which it is rooted in local cultural debates and the ways in which there is an interplay between the local and the general around the issue of identity, the opposite has happened in the case of The Poor Mouth. Approached as a novel only concerned with the rhetoric and practices of Irish cultural nationalism, critics have failed to recognise the extent to which the novel is located in a number of different contexts. So whilst it clearly engages with revivalist ideology and the cultural primacy of the Irish language and the Gaeltacht, it also explores these issues through those 'wider' concerns central to most of O'Nolan's writing of this period, and to his other two novels in particular: the power of language to create realities, the constitutive character of discourse, and the strain of a contradictory impulse between the recognition of identity as something discursively produced and unstable, and the desire to ground identity in something more fixed, immutable and rooted in culturally essential factors such as language, landscape and history.

The continuity between The Poor Mouth and the two earlier novels can be most obviously located in its reiteration of the same basic themes and narrative strategies. Like At Swim and The Third Policeman, the novel charts the progress of a young, apparently orphaned male narrator, Bonaparte O'Coonassa, in a world which is hostile and baffling to him. Unable to ground his identity in genealogy and familial tradition (which is displaced onto an 'uncle' figure in the absence or death of the father), he embarks on a quest which is

supposed to result in maturity and the resolution of contradictions which prevent the attainment of selfhood, but which only ends in stasis and non-resolution with Bonaparte's incarceration. Once again, O'Nolan employs a circular narrative, whereby the protagonist seems doomed to repeat the same basic pattern over again, and presents a hopelessly naive first-person narrator, thereby creating a sustained level of irony between what happens to him and his misinterpretation or lack of understanding events and the world around him. Finally, the novel is very 'literary', relying on the use of parody, stylization and other forms of intertextuality for the enunciation of one of its main concerns - the way in which the realities of self and world are constituted through language.

In stressing these obvious continuities between the three novels, I am not suggesting that the fact that The Poor Mouth was written in Irish rather than English is not significant. As I shall argue later, the reiteration of concerns and strategies across three such different novels (and in such a short period of time) indicates that O'Nolan is attempting to find different ways of working through and resolving the problems around cultural identity which the novels explore, and that his turn to a different language and another fictional genre with The Poor Mouth indicates a failure to resolve those problems satisfactorily in his previous two novels, and hence in the English language. Rather, I am suggesting that any reading of the novel should be sensitive to the manner in which its 'local' content gives out onto general considerations about identity-formation, and to the extent to which it constitutes one amongst a number of culturally specific instances of the more general problem which is the central concern of O'Nolan's earlier work.

There are very good reasons why it is easy to lose sight of the dialectical relationship between the particular and the general in this novel. In The Third Policeman, O'Nolan seems to be solely concerned with scientific and metaphysical abstractions about time and being which appear to have no grounding in or bearing on the specific cultural context in which O'Nolan wrote and which he explicitly addressed, for example, in At Swim. However, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the novel's cultural context could be rendered visible through the way in which it implicitly contested the idea that

the Irish national being was embodied in a rural way of life. The Poor Mouth returns to this same idea, but unlike The Third Policeman its object of critique is represented explicitly rather than obliquely - the novel openly satirizes the veneration of the peasantry as the locus of an essential Irish reality by systematically parodying and rendering absurd literary idealizations of the western peasant and his centrality in contemporary political rhetoric. In fact, so blatant and systematic is O'Nolan's satire in this novel that its entire meaning appears to reside solely in the critical relationship it establishes with its target. That is, the parody is so pervasive that it becomes difficult to see how the text is meaningful beyond the specific cultural nationalist representations of rural life which it attacks. Unlike the Third Policeman, the novel doesn't appear to have much to say about the constitutive properties of discourse per se, or about the unstable and contingent nature of the self. The dialectical relationship between particular and general is lost once again, this time beneath a web of clearly articulated, culturallly specific parodic references.

I shall return to the problem of the self in this novel, and its affinities with At Swim and The Third Policeman on this issue. Firstly, however, I want to explore further the novel's explicit relation to the discourses of cultural nationalism, for this relationship isn't as straightforward as it might appear, and is certainly far more complex and problematic than O'Nolan's commentators have recognized. In order to bring out these complexities, the text must be located in the broader context of contemporary cultural responses to the figure of the western Irish peasant and O'Nolan's ambivalent response to the fashion for peasant autobiographies, most notably the vogue for reminiscences of life on the western islands.

*

While some episodes in the text (such as the **feis** in chapter 4) are quite unambiguous in their satirical thrust, indicting the urban **Gaeilgeoiri** for their adherence to an idealized image of the Gaeltacht and their insensitivity to real social and economic conditions there, other aspects of the text shift the object of attack away from urban

fantasies of Gaeltacht life on to representations of the Gaeltacht by people who actually live there. In casting the novel in the form of the island reminiscence, and systematically parodying the narrative conventions and stock motifs of the genre, O'Nolan seems to suggest that these first-hand, 'documentary' accounts of life on the western seaboard are as fictional as the romanticized versions which were the staple of cultural nationalist rhetoric. Thus, his target is twofold. Although the satire appears to be unidirectional, aimed simply at cultural nationalist representations of the nobility of rural life and its embodiment of an enduring Irish reality, the actual form of the narrative indicates that the satire is bidirectional, aimed also at the kind of narratives which implicitly contested official ideology by virtue of the authenticity of the experience recorded there.

While most commentators have recognised The Poor Mouth to be a parody of The Islandman, drawing upon the generic conventions and stock motifs of this first reminiscence of life on the Blaskets, many are nevertheless reluctant to see the novel as an explicit satire of O Crohan's book and tend to read this parody as simply a structural device for the 'true' object of the text's attack, the idealisation of western life and cultural traditions by urban Gaeilgeoiri. Sue Asbee, for example comments that 'the comedy in The Poor Mouth is not directed at O Crohan's work, which O'Brien clearly regards with a feeling not far short of reverence ... it was clearly not O'Brien's intention to denigrate The Islandman'.[33] Cathal G. O Hainle makes a similar case for the novel's relationship with its 'source':

> In form, An Beal Bocht parodies An tOileanach; in language and content it parodies not only O Criomhthain's work but also that of O Grianna and probably other Gaeltacht writers as well. Contemporary readers were incensed and offended by this sneer, as they saw it, at the whole Gaelic language movement and at literature in Gaelic. They had, to a large extent, missed the point. O Nuallain's satire was aimed primarily, not at the Gaeltacht writers nor at the language movement as such, but at the blinkered and narrow outlook of the 'Gaels' of the time, who, having learned Gaelic, idealised all things Gaelic - particularly the language and what they saw as the Gaeltacht way of life - and who uncritically acclaimed the writing as high literature simply because it was in Gaelic and described Gaeltacht life. O Nuallain was at pains later to dispel the notion that the aim of An Beal Bocht was to poke fun at An tOileanach[34]

Yet whilst The Poor Mouth clearly produces a blistering attack upon the pretensions of the metropolitan language movement and 'official' rhetoric concerning the western peasantry, I want to argue that the novel's relationship to The Islandman and the way of life represented within it is much more complex than the implied 'loving' parody suggested in many critical accounts. For these critical accounts tend to deny the novel's critical relationship with the text which provides its themes and structure in a way which operates to elide the question of O'Nolan's own relationship to the western peasantry and his authorial position as one speaking from the metropolitan 'centre' to a metropolitan audience. As O'Nolan's comments about the reception of the novel indicate, his perspective with regard to the way of life and literary forms which are parodied in The Poor Mouth is wholly that of an 'outsider', a metropolitan intellectual:

> I am rather pleased at the reception given to my book, 'An Beal Bocht'. It is gratifying to know that an important work of literature receives in this country the recognition that it is due. Scholars, students, men-about-town, clerics, T.D.s, ladies of fashion and even the better-class corner-boys have vied with one another in grabbing the copies as they pour from the giant presses.[35]

Although O'Nolan's ironic self-aggrandisement perhaps points to the limited readership that the novel could anticipate, the fact that this comment is written in English, appears in a metropolitan newspaper (The Irish Times), and claims that a variety of urban professionals were eagerly awaiting its publication, underlines the extent to which the cultural terrain within which The Poor Mouth was received and circulated did not extend far beyond the parameters of the metropolitan space and an urban readership both of which are ostensibly the object of the novel's satire. If this indexes O'Nolan's cultural and social separation from the rural communities with which the novel is concerned, it also implicates the text within the structures and cultural assumptions which it critiques. While critics have celebrated the novel for its debunking of metropolitan myths about the west, they have tended to ignore the fact that in doing so, the novel is in many senses attacking its own cultural constituency, whilst articulating precisely that unequal power relationship between cultural centre and periphery, representer and represented which is so fiercely critiqued in the episode about the

Feis in Chapter 4 of the novel in which the city-dwelling president of the Feis discourses in Gaelic about Gaelic at such length that 'many Gaels collapsed from hunger and from the strain of listening while one fellow died most Gaelically in the midst of the assembly'.[36]

O'Nolan did indeed frequently return to the subject of The Islandman in 'Cruiskeen Lawn' where he certainly displayed some ambivalence in his attitude towards the book, on the one hand describing The Poor Mouth's relationship with it as 'a companion volume of parody and jeer',[37] while on the other hand praising The Islandman as 'the best book in Irish written in our time'.[38] In general, however, his response to this text is extraordinary, and it is easy to see why critics are reluctant to read The Poor Mouth as an explicit critique of it. For O'Nolan seems to harbour a wholly romanticised and sentimental acceptance of O'Crohan's vision of island life which (I shall argue below) is somewhat at odds with The Poor Mouth's terms of engagement with this 'vision'. 'One of the finest books I have read in any language is 'An tOileanach'', he wrote in 1955, 'every page is a lesson how to write, it is all moving and magnificent'.[39] In 1942, he had desribed the book in even more superlative terms:

> An tOileanach is literature. There is no book (of ours or of any other tribe) in English comparable to it. And it is not the 'speech of the people' or the 'nice idioms' that confers the nobility of literature on it. The genuine authoritative human stuff is there, it is artistic, it moves the reader to tears or laughter as the author chooses.[40]

Leaving aside the rather cloying sentiments about the nobility of literature, this comment is particularly interesting because it isolates O Crohan's artistry as a quality to be admired, his wilful manipulation of the reader's sympathies in a way denied to him by those who insist that the book retains its charm by virtue of the narrator's naive simplicity (a simplicity or lack of artifice that supposedly mirrors the communities about which O Crohan writes). Elsewhere, however, O'Nolan reproduces the romanticized view of life on the western seaboard when he describes The Islandman as:

> among the most important life-stories of this century, mainly for its account of custom, isolation, the savagery of island life, the gallantry of the islanders but, above all, for the astonishing precision and beauty of the Irish itself, immense in its profusion of vocabulary and idiom

and having a style that is quite out of another age.[41]

O'Nolan is clearly seduced here by the idea of a primitive yet noble community of islanders, sealed off from the debasing incursions of economic and cultural modernity by a hostile natural environment, archaic cultural traditions and a language 'quite out of another age'. His description of O Crohan's achievement implicitly evokes a yearning for a social order which is on the point of disappearance (which is, as we will see, how O Crohan himself described that order), an idea which O'Nolan expresses in more explicit terms in his description of the book as 'the symbol of a Gaelic order gone under for good ... an extremely noble salute from them about to go away'[42]. Such elegiac sentiments echo his comments about the innate nobility of the communities misrepresented by Synge and, as with them, seem to share a structure of feeling with those idealising discourses of a Irish cultural identity about which O'Nolan was persistently critical, especially in The Poor Mouth.

Throughout 1941, O'Nolan translated short fragments of An tOileanach which he included in 'Cruiskeen Lawn', providing no explanation for these other than the brief heading 'Literally from the Irish'. As this heading indicates, his translations were very literal, maintaining the syntactical and grammatical forms of the original Irish in much the same way that Synge did in his representation of so-called peasant speech. 'No appraisal in English could do justice to 'An tOileanach' for the magic of its Irish', he wrote in later years,[43] but at this time he felt confident enough to try. The result is fascinating, for his attempt to reproduce the rhythms and structures of the Irish language in English (in the manner that he perhaps envisaged when he wrote to O'Casey of the transforming power of Irish over English) ends up with precisely the kind of Stage-Irish-English for which O'Nolan had condemned Synge for producing in his plays. A comparison of these fragments with the corresponding passages from Flower's translation is illustrative for it reveals O'Nolan's self-consciousness about the difficulties involved in attempting to forge a form of Irish-English that is both modern and adaptable yet capable of registering the historical differences of the varieties of Irish in use. In spite of the minor sensation caused by Flower's translation of The Islandman in 1934, there was some criticism of the

inappropriate Anglicized register into which he slips at times, which caused one reviewer to complain that 'anybody reading the book might well be lured into accepting that Tomas O Criomhthain was an English speaker, was in fact an inhabitant of an island off the west coast of England'.[44] In his own translations O'Nolan, who considered Flower's translation to be 'miserably botched',[45] attempts to retain a thoroughly Gaelicized form of English throughout, ensuring that O Crohan's own voice speaks through the alien language:

> I was a day in Dingle and Paddy James, my sister's man, in company with me and us in the direction of each other in the running of the day. A man he was that would not have a glass of whiskey long between the hands, or a pint of black porter either, without shooting them backwards; but he got no sweet taste ever on the one he would buy himself, and great would be the pleasure with him that another man should nudge him in the back to ask him to have one with him.[46]

Flower's translation runs as follows, and is in stark contrast to O'Nolan's in terms of the latter's syntactical and grammatical idiosyncracies (though it certainly isn't as unmistakably English as the reviewer cited above suggested):

> I was in Dingle one day with Pats Heamish, my sister's husband, and we kept together all day long. He was the sort of man that couldn't keep a glass of whisky or a pint of porter long between his hands without pouring them down him, and he never enjoyed the taste of anything he paid for with his own money, but liked it well when another man jogged him in the back to have one with him.[47]

As the second example illustrates, however, O'Nolan's efforts descend into parody. His literal rendering of prepositions and the possessive, as well as his faintly ludicrous attempt to register the local pronunciation of 'America', makes the translation approximate the kind of artificial Abbey English which he loathed with such intensity:

> A time after that my brother Paddy moved towards me from being over there in Ameriky. There is great surprise on me he is coming from being over there the second time, because the two sons who were at him were strong hefty ones at that time; and my opinion was that they were on the pig's back to be over there at all. On seeing my brother on his arrival, there was no get-up on him - as would appear to any person who threw an opinion with him - save that it was in the woods that he had spent his years yonder. There was no cloth on him, there was not a dun-coloured penny in his pocket, and it was two sisters to him yonder who had sent him across at their own expense.[48]

(Flower's version of this passage runs as follows:

> A while after this my brother Pats came over from America to me. I was amazed at his coming over this second time, for his two sons were grown up by this; and I fancied they were on the pig's back since they were on the other side. When I saw my brother after his return, anybody would have conjectured from his ways that it was in the woods he had spent his time in America. He was hardly clothed; he had an ill appearance; there wasn't a red farthing in his pocket; and two of his friends in America paid for his passage across with their own money.)[49]

What is so interesting about these translations is how difficult it is to determine whether or not they are intended to be ironic, and if so the precise object of their irony (Flower or O Crohan, language enthusiasts, a metropolitan readership or the western peasants). Or, on the other hand, is this a sincere attempt to render in English what O'Nolan considers to be the essential character of the language? If it is the latter - which I feel may well be the case given O'Nolan's sentimental response to O Crohan - this is clearly another moment which reveals an implicit faith in the existence of an authentic Gaelic peasant culture. Yet either way, these translations highlight O'Nolan's cultural dislocation from the way of life he writes about. The very uncertainty about his intentions and the ease with which they offer themselves as potential parodies underlines the ambivalence of his relationship to the cultural formations with which they are in dialogue - the product of a metropolitan observer who is both critical of cultural nationalism and yet who retains a residual investment in the idea of an authentic Irishness. It is precisely these contradictions and ambivalences that emerge from O'Nolan's position that need to be addressed in order to produce an adequate account of The Poor Mouth's politics.

What I want to underline then in the reading which follows is the extent to which those critical accounts of O'Nolan's satiric 'project' in The Poor Mouth which unproblematically go along with his praise of The Islandman in order to locate the satire as wholly directed towards the Gaeilgeoiri fail to register the proximity between the terms of O'Nolan's response to O'Crohan's work and those of the revival, a proximity which emerges in his critical appraisal of The Islandman and his social and 'geographical' perspective in relation to this text. Yet, as I will show, it is also significant

that, despite O'Nolan's critical celebration of this 'noble salute', it is extremely difficult to read such a response in his handling of his literary source material in the novel.

To trace the disjunction between O'Nolan's critical response and literary practice in relation to The Islandman is to trace his own problematic relationship to the conflicting imperatives of the traditional and the modern in the formation of a national literature. This conflict around how to forge a modern, national literature out of the traditional themes, forms and conventions represents one of the fundamental tensions in writings of the Literary Revival and emerges particularly in works written in the Irish language itself, where the relationship between language and literary form is held to be more essential and authentic than the 'artificial' conjoining of Gaelic literary conventions and the English language. In O'Nolan we see this problem emerge in a specifically acute form to the extent that as a native Irish-speaker he, nonetheless, inhabited a cultural and social space which shared little common ground or experience with the rural communities and cultural traditions apparently so intrinsically bound up with the language itself, and, consequently, at the symbolic 'centre' of the nation. And it is interesting to note that, despite O'Nolan's claims about his in-depth knowledge of the language, reviewers and critics of The Poor Mouth have frequently drawn attention to the poor quality of the novel's Irish, as if to underline a kind of non-organic relationship to the language and forms so 'authentically' expressed in the Islandman.[50] This is not to suggest that there is a natural bond between the language and rural life, but to expose the way in which O'Nolan's cultural position illustrates the strain that occurs when the Gaelic literary tradition impacts upon a metropolitan consciousness generally perceived both as a site of cultural debasement, inauthenticity and threat to an essential 'Irishness'. This sense of dislocation - in the sense that O'Nolan's engagement with the language and forms of its source text, The Islandman, can only ever signal his displacement from these traditions, in that the sense of Irishness represented by that tradition is one which apparently emanates only from the rural periphery - crucially informs O'Nolan's own authorial position with regard to The Poor Mouth, and manifests itself most clearly in the

novel's parody of its literary source.

- III -

O'Nolan's book parallels O Crohan's in a wide variety of ways, ranging from general things such as the day-to-day events which preoccupy the protagonists and which can be seen to belong to the genre as a whole (birth, domestic life, marriage, and work) to more specific allusions to the earlier text itself, such as the sub-divisions within the chapter headings, the editor's introduction, the map of the islands, and the verbal echoes of O Crohan's descriptions of island life, especially those occurring in the earlier chapters concerning his childhood. 'Nobody expected me at all when I came their way', wrote O Crohan, referring to the fact that his parents didn't envisage having another child later in life.[51] Bonaparte is also unexpected, but in this instance because neither of his parents realize that his mother is pregnant until he actually arrives:

> My father never expected me because he was a quiet fellow and did not understand very accurately the ways of life. My little bald skull so astounded him that he almost departed from this life the moment I entered it ... The people said that my mother was not expecting me either and it is a fact that the whisper went around that I was not born of my mother at all but of another woman. (p.13)

This is typical of the gentler form of parody which O'Nolan employs in the text, reducing to the point of absurdity a casual comment made by O Crohan, but nevertheless making an oblique satirical point - which in this instance is directed towards the alleged simplicity of the ways of rural folk. As if to emphasise the point, Bonaparte in his turn, is totally taken aback by the unexpected appearance of 'a new piglet in the end of the house' which, on closer inspection, turns out to have 'a small bald head, a face as large as a duck-egg and legs like [his] own'. (p.86)

O'Nolan uses this technique again in the description of Bonaparte's house, following up an apparently trivial point in O Crohan's text and exaggerating it wildly for implicit satirical effect. O Crohan had described the house he lived in as a child as inhabited by both his family and the animals which they depended on for their living, 'two cows ... the hens and their eggs, an ass and

the rest of us'[52]. In Bonaparte's house, by comparison, there are so many animals that there is barely enough room for the family to sleep at night:

> Our house was undivided, wisps of rushes above us on the roof and rushes also as bedding in the end of the house. At sundown rushes were spread over the whole floor and the household lay to rest on them. Yonder a bed with pigs upon it; here a bed with people; a bed there with an aged slim cow stretched out asleep on her flank and a gale of breath issuing from her capable of raising a tempest in the centre of the house; hens and chickens asleep in the shelter of her belly; another bed near the fire with me on it. (p. 18)

And only a generation earlier things had been even worse for the Old-Grey-Fellow whose family slept with their 'two cows, a cart-horse, a race-horse, sheep, pigs and other lesser animals'. (ibid.)

While O Crohan's memory refers to some time in the 1850s and 1860s when the keeping of livestock in the home was still widely practised (it was being steadily abandoned in the first decades of the twentieth century as improved living conditions resulted in a change in the design of rural housing [53]), O'Nolan has this age-old rural tradition still in place in the present-day Gaeltacht, but in such a grotesquely exaggerated form that Corkadoragha becomes a pocket of unrelieved backwardness and under-development. As such he implicitly critiques a widely held perception of the communities of the western seaboard as hermetically sealed from the passage of time and hence impervious to the influence of modern ways and ideas. When the school-inspector, horrified at the sight of humans sharing a bed with the animals, suggests that they build a small hut in the yard to alleviate the problem, the Old-Grey-Fellow is full of wonder at such a simple idea:

> I never thought of the like nor of any other plan that would be handy to improve the state we were in - all of us stuck together in the end of the house. The next day I gathered the neighbours and explained to them the gentleman's advice. They praised that advice and within a week we had put up a fine hut adjacent to my house. But alas! things are not what they seem to be! When I, my grandmother and two of my brothers had spent two nights in the hut, we were so cold and drenched wet that it is a wonder that we did not die straight away and we couldn't get any relief until we went back to the house and were comfortable again among the cattle. (p.20)

Hence, the metropolitan conception of the artlessness and simplicity

of the western peasant, living in a world which has been by-passed by the sophistications and innovations of modernity, is pushed to the point of absurdity and so exposed as, at worse, a fiction, and, at best, a misrepresentation based on ignorance. As Bonaparte says, in an ironic allusion to an urban misunderstanding of the value of livestock in an impoverished rural community, 'people were in bad circumstances when I was young and he who had stock and cattle possessed little room at night in his own house' (p.18).

Yet in the examples cited above, the parody could just as easily be read as producing a satiric critique of The Islandman as of metropolitan ideas about the innate simplicity and backwardness of Irish rural communities. After all, there is a much more explicit and rigorous critique of the urban language movement in the description of the **feis**, for example, than that which is suggested by the rather oblique analysis of metropolitan attitudes in the description of Bonaparte's home. This episode could be read, by contrast, as a satirical thrust at O Crohan's own tendency to dwell on poverty and hardship, perhaps even with half an eye to the appeal of the primitive and the exotic for a metropolitan audience. The title of the book would certainly suggest this. As Patrick Power points out in his preface to the novel, 'putting on the poor mouth' means making a pretence of being poor or in bad circumstances in order to gain advantage for oneself from creditors or prospective creditors'.[54] Perhaps the subtle artfulness which characterizes the activities of the Old-Grey-Fellow is a quality that is also central to O Crohan's writing in O'Nolan's view, carefully organizing his material so as to conform to his readers' preconceptions about life on the western islands in spite of the apparent spontaneity and artlessness of his narrative. Douglas Hyde was certainly captivated by The Islandman 'on account of its naivete, its simplicity',[55] but O'Nolan seems to have had a much clearer grasp of the way in which the credulity of some language enthusiasts could be manipulated and their illusions about the real Gaelic Ireland fostered by an 'authentic peasant voice'. Bonaparte's constant reiteration of the poverty and extreme conditions of life in Corkadoragha transforms a legitimate claim about hardship into the whinge of self pity - 'the least lovely of our indigenous vices', wrote O'Nolan in Comhthrom Feinne in 1935[56] - and implicates O

Crohan's book in such self-indulgence. As Breandan O Conaire points out, The Poor Mouth is punningly subtitled 'An Milleanach', echoing 'oileanach' and meaning something like 'the whinelandman' - an unmistakable thrust at O Crohan's text.[57]

However, the danger with reading The Poor Mouth simply as a parody is that its meaning can be too easily reduced to a function of its relationship with the text that it is based upon, thus obliging one to read the text as an attack either upon The Islandman, or upon the metropolitan fetishization of the way of life recorded in this text. Clearly, the novel potentially offers itself for either reading and yet at the same time thwarts any attempt to locate decisively the object of the parody. This is arguably the central problem of any parodic discourse, for while it calls into question the truth claims of a text or a point of view the position from which the writer produces this negative critique it is not always clear, nor is any positive alternative to the object of the parody necessarily offered. Yet in terms of thinking through the relationship between The Poor Mouth and the Islandman, this ambivalence must be read in relation to O'Nolan's text's more general concern with those issues of textuality and the discursive constitution of the subject which recur throughout his fiction.

The Poor Mouth opens with the imminent death of its narrator, writing 'because the next life is approaching me swiftly' and 'because our types will never be there again nor any other life in Ireland comparable to ours who exist no longer' (p.11). This deathly preface to the conventional revelation of birth and genealogy, marks an immediate recognition that this text is written around the disappearance of the way of life to be recorded and echoes O Crohan's stated reason for writing his memoir at the end of The Islandman:

> I have written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all, and I have done my best to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again. ...
>
> One day there will be none left in the Blasket of all I have mentioned in this book - and none to remember them. I am thankful to God, who has given me the chance to preserve from forgetfulness those days that I have seen with my own eyes and have borne their burden, and that when I am gone men will know what life was like in my time

and the neighbours that lived with me.[58]

That Bonaparte introduces his narrative in a similar fashion, regarding his own document as a testament to posterity, clearly evokes the elegiac tone of O Crohan's closing statement whilst it immediately suggests that a modern Irish identity cannot emerge from the remains of the heritage to which The Islandman is a testimony.:

> I am noting down the matters which are in this document because the next life is approaching me swiftly - far from us be the evil thing and may the bad spirit not regard me as a brother! - and also because our likes will never be there again. It is right and fitting that some testimony of the diversions and adventures of our times should be provided for those who succeed us because our types will never be there again nor any other life in Ireland comparable to ours who exist no longer. (p.11)

However, while O Crohan only once comments that 'the like of us will never be again', O'Nolan's narrator repeats the phrase **ad nauseam** throughout the text, and concludes his memoir with the umpteenth lament that his like 'will never be there again'. The effect of this repetition is to undermine the elegiac quality of the original, reducing O Crohan's genuine sense that life on the Blaskets was coming to an end to something sterile and cliched - a stock phrase signifying not so much a real historical event that needs to be recorded as a rhetorical flourish or literary convention.

That the text insistently foregrounds the generic conventions of this kind of reminiscence emerges emphatically in the anxiety of the narrator to ground his 'life story' in some meaningful point of origin. The opening of the novel obsessively returns to the time and place of the narrator's birth ('the day I was born'; 'I was born in the middle of the night'; 'I was born in the west of Ireland'; 'at the time I was born' (pp.11-14)), as if to emphasise, through their very repetition, the failure of these phrases to anchor a way of life which already 'exists no longer', the stuff of stories rather than actuality. For this impulse can only serve to expose the necessarily fictive nature of any such return to the moment of birth and early childhood and consequently lays bare the fact that this notion of identity is always constructed retrospectively, as all narratives are:

> I cannot truly remember either the day I was born or the first six months I spent here in the world. Doubtless, however, I was alive at that time although I have no memory of it, because I should not exist now if I were not

there then. (p.11)

This suggestion that selfhood is always inscribed 'after the fact' and that there can be no unmediated recovery of the past is further conveyed in the discrepancy between the mature consciousness and sophisticated language which the narrator bestows upon himself as a ten month old child. Recording his memory of being sat beside the 'Old-Grey-Fellow' in front of a blazing fire, the young Bonaparte's speech evidently belongs to the older Bonaparte who is narrating this event:

> I was not able to walk at that time and had no means of escape from the heat on my own. The Old-Grey-Fellow cocked an eye at me and announced:
>
> - 'Tis hot, son!
>
> - There's an awful lot of heat in that fire truly, I replied, but look, sir, you called me son for the first time ... (p.15)

In foregrounding the self as a construct, constituted in the act of narrating rather than existing beyond it, O'Nolan's text thus immediately registers the impossibility of an identity unmediated by language and the narrative forms within which it is encoded. The implication that there is no escape from language and narrative is again persistently emphasised throughout the novel in the references to the 'good books' which, rather than recording and describing the peasant way of life are shown both to determine and constitute it :

> - 'Tis clear, wee little son, said the Old-Fellow, that you haven't read the good books. 'Tis now the evening and according to literary fate, there's a storm down on the sea-shore, the fishermen are in difficulties on the water, the people are gathered on the strand, the women are crying and one poor mother is screaming: Who'll save my Mickey?' (p.67)

The stories and cultural practices of a community which O Crohan records in The Islandman, thus become in The Poor Mouth signs of a cultural and historical paralysis, imprisoning the community within a web of repetitive and ultimately sterile fictions. Rather than serving to make sense of collective experiences and struggles, the tales which constitute this community's self-identity are shown to collapse all forms of difference into a generic sameness. As Bonaparte's education about the people of the Rosses indicates:

> all were barefoot and without means. Some were always in difficulty, others carousing in Scotland. In each cabin

> there was: (i) one man at least, called the 'gambler', a rakish individual, who spent much of his life carousing in Scotland, playing cards and billiards, smoking tobacco and drinking spirits in taverns; (ii) a worn, old man who spent the time in the chimney-corner bed and who arose at the time of night-visiting to shove his two hooves into the ashers, clear his throat, redden his pipe and tell stories about the bad times; (iii) a comely lassie called Nuala or Babby or Mabel or Rosie for whom men came at the dead of every night with a five-noggin bottle and one of them seeking to espouse her. (p.65)

As this suggests, these representations of the peasant community serve to collapse 'character' as a mark of individual difference into type, reducing identity to a mere formula which is thus endlessly reproducible. Indeed this composite reduction of the Rosses community emerges repeatedly throughout the text, an empty signifier of a community clearly divested of all vitality and significance. This repetition suggests that this community is not actively engaged in producing its own legitimating narratives, but is solely the object of forms of representation it has no power to contest.[59] In producing this frozen image of the peasants, the novel points towards a deathly stillness underlying this vision of a vital community, echoing the portent of death articulated in the opening lines and affirmed in the closure which literally imprisons the narrator until the end of his days. The text's representations of the peasant community thus clearly position the stock depictions of rural life within idealising nationalist and revivalist discourses as tales without a referent in the real world, figures of a way of life which can only exist in representation, as the pervasively parodic tenor of the novel suggests.

Significantly, the only figure in the text to fracture these imprisoning narratives is the Old-Grey-Fellow who, at moments at least, is endowed with a self-reflexivity and a degree of detachment from the stories and 'good books' he recognises frame his existence. This 'insight' into the plight of the peasant way of life in terms of their entrapment within powerful representations which emanate from the towns and cities is signalled by his manipulation of these representations to his own advantage. This emerges when he takes the narrator hunting on a trek to the Rosses ostensibly to gather food. This expedition is framed in the text in terms of the savagery and

primitive existence the peasants are forced to endure, a trip, 'to keep our souls within our bodies instead of permitting them to fly out into the firmament like the little melodious birds' (p.62). However, it soon transpires that by hunting for food, the Old-Fellow actually means robbing the houses of the rural poor who are otherwise occupied, as he remarks sagely to the narrator, in their 'literary fate' at the seashore (quoted above):

> With regard to hunting, the Old-Grey-Fellow had commenced this before I noticed that the appearance of the countryside suggested that it was huntable or that the Old-Fellow was on the trail. He leaped suddenly over the fence. I followed him. Before us in a little field stood a strong stone-built house. In the twinkling of an eye the Old-Fellow had opened a window and had disappeared out of sight into the building. (p.66)

The Old-Fellow's thieving clearly operates in the text to disrupt conventional expectations of the nobility of the rural poor. Yet,in linking a material exploitation with a discursive exploitation (by taking advantage of the locals while they are away engaging in the daily rituals that are laid down in the 'good books' as an essential part of peasant life), it also serves to reproduce precisely the kind of unequal power relations that are sustained by the representations of standard peasant behaviour that emanate from the urban centres. As this suggests, the Old-Fellow has an ambivalent function in the text, taking advantage both of the patronising and idealising responses of town-dwellers to rural life, and exploiting his own community in a manner which lays bare the exploitative and crippling nature of metropolitan representations of the western peasantry. It is interesting, in these terms, that having organised the **feis** to his own economic advantage, the Old-Fellow comes away with a gold watch. The possession of a timepiece again signals his ability to begin to break out of the paralysing narrative structures imposed upon those around him. Yet if clock time functions as the mark of change, progression and modernity, change and progression in this context is pessimistically linked to the Old-Fellow's criminality (it is implied that he stole the watch from the chairman of the **feis**). Once more we see O'Nolan charting the impact of the modern upon the traditional in a way which figures this conjunction as yielding only degeneracy and decline.

Yet unlike At Swim and The Third Policeman, this novel seems unable to offer any alternative to the immobilizing oppositions between the traditional and the modern, the ideal and the real, the vital and the debased which recur throughout O'Nolan's writings. This is clearly related to the way in which the text's parody, further complicated by this dominant preoccupation with the discursive constitution of actuality, problematises any attempt to locate the object of the text's satire, and persistently refuses any stable position from which to escape the webs and nets of this informing opposition. On one level, the novel ironises the desire of a sophisticated metropolitan audience to fix the western peasantry into a range of readily assimilable tableaux, extricated from the processes of historical change, their poverty and hardship aestheticised (as we also saw in The Third Policeman). Indeed, the portrait of Sitric O'Sanassa the beggar is particularly effective in this respect, being 'a tall spear of a man who was so thin with hunger that one's eye might fail to notice him if he were standing laterally towards one' and was unsteady on his feet 'because of the inebriation caused to him by the morning air' (p.90):

> The gentlemen from Dublin who came in motors to inspect the paupers praised him for his Gaelic poverty and stated that they never saw anyone who appeared so truly Gaelic. One of the gentlemen broke a little bottle of water which Sitric had, because, said he, it spoiled the effect. There was no one in Ireland comparable to O'Sanassa in the excellence of his poverty; the amount of famine which was delineated in his person. ... He had excavated a hole with his two hands in the middle of the countryside and over its mouth he had placed old sacks and branches of trees as well as any useful object that might provide shelter against the water which came down on the countryside every night. Strangers passing by thought that he was a badger in the earth when they perceived the heavy breathing which came from the recesses of the hole as well as the wild appearance of the habitation in general. (pp.88-9)

As Bonaparte observes with evident irony, Sitric 'possessed the very best poverty, hunger and distress also' (p.88). The treatment of Sitric brutally satirises the ignorance of 'the gentlemen from Dublin' and the violence underlying these metropolitan celebrations of 'Gaelic poverty'. However, whilst these attitudes are blatantly ridiculed, revealing a sharp recognition of the fraudulence and fictiveness of prevailing conceptions of the peasantry, the novel also insinuates

that the accounts of rural life and the notion of Irishness conveyed in O Crohan's text are also constructs, as fictive as those representations of 'authentic' Ireland produced at the metropolitan centre which the novel perhaps more explicitly attacks.

What I want to draw attention to, then, is the absence in this text of any 'centre' or grounding principles which one might bring to bear on the circular, imprisoning narrative strategies which are synonymous in the novel with both the idealisms of cultural nationalism and the debased violence of the modern. This absence, or aporia around which the stories and fictions which narrate the peasant community hopelessly circulate, thwarts any attempt to forge a position beyond the boundaries of these discourses, or to offer an alternative, 'third space' to counter their immobilizing effect. This central problem is articulated most obviously in the representation of Corkadoragh itself. O'Nolan's insistence upon the pure fictionality of this location is heavily inscribed into the text itself from the very beginning in 'The Editor's' qualifying preface which states 'it is not to be understood that any reference is intended to the Gaeltacht areas in general; Corkadoragha is a distinctive place and the people who live there are without compare'(p.7). However, despite this attempt to assert Corkadoragha's discontinuity with the real, it is nevertheless contiguous with a geographical and historical 'real' as O'Nolan goes on to locate it somewhere 'in the West of Ireland' (p.13) at a point where real geographical space has been collapsed in on itself in order to create a kind of composite Gaeltacht with its own peculiar spatial perspective. The district in which Bonaparte lives encompasses the whole of the western Gaeltacht, vaguely adjacent to its northernmost and southernmost extremities in Donegal and Kerry respectively, each of which can be seen with the naked eye from Bonaparte's house:

> Looking out from the right-hand window, there below was the bare countryside of the Rosses and Gweedore; Bloody Foreland yonder and Tory Island far away out, swimming like a great ship where the sky dips into the sea. Looking out of the door, you could see the West of County Galway with a good portion of the rocks of Connemara, Aranmore in the ocean out from you with the small bright houses of Kilronan, clear and visible, if your eyesight was good and the Summer had come. From the window on the left you could see the Great Blasket, bare and forbidding as a horrible other-worldly eel, lying languidly on the wave-tops; over yonder was Dingle with its houses close together. It has

> always been said that there is no view from any house in Ireland comparable to this and it must be admitted that this statement is true. I have never heard it said that there was any house as well situated as this on the face of the earth. (p.21)

Such are the unusual dimensions of Corkadoragha that the Old-Grey-Fellow can be in Dingle (Kerry) one day, The Rosses (Sligo) the next, and in Galway the day after that, travelling impossible distances by foot on his various business ventures (p.34) (Letterkenny in the north one night, the Great Blasket in the south by morning (p.50)). Even Bonaparte's school is located such that children travel in daily from as far away as Donegal and Kerry, while 'another group floated in from Aran' (p.29) and swam back again that evening 'without a bite of food or a sup of milk since morning' (31).

The imaginary space of Corkadoragha may be read on one level as disrupting the metropolitan gaze on the Gaeltacht by collapsing discrete geographical dimensions into each other. For through this textual creation of a centred Gaeltacht, the novel clearly implies that any attempt to unite the geographically diverse spaces which constitute the Gaeltacht can only occur on the level of the imaginary, as if to emphasise that the location of the Gaeltacht at the symbolic heart of the nation can only ever be symbolic. As such, Corkadoragha operates as the main vehicle of the novel's critique of cultural nationalism's attempt to make the western Gaeltacht the central value of the modern Irish nation. For Corkadoragha is not only a composite form of the Gaeltacht, but it is also a distillation of all the characteristics and qualities that are supposed to inhere in the way of life experienced by western communities and for which the Gaeltacht is celebrated by the Gaeligores in the novel - simplicity, poverty, physical hardship, and Gaelic traditions. The Old-Grey-Fellow provides a typical picture of western life when he laments:

> I don't think there'll ever be good conditions for the Gaels while having small houses in the corner of the glen, going about in the dirty ashes, constantly fishing in the constant storm, telling stories at night about the hardships and hard times of the Gaels in sweet words of Gaelic is natural to them. (p.35)

While the Old-Grey-Fellow expresses a stoical resignation in the face of the conditions that the true Gaels are destined to endure, Bonaparte constantly plays on 'the ill luck and evil that had befallen

the Gaels (and would always abide with them)', always aware that 'new hardships and new calamities are in store for the Gaels and a new overthrow is destined for the little green country which is the native land.' (pp.46-7) The irony is that his country, or at least the part that he inhabits, is not green at all but perenially grey under the dark clouds of an incessant deluge. Rather than subsisting in a noble and primitive condition that arises from his proximity to nature and to the land, Bonaparte's life is afflicted constantly by 'hardship, famine, nocturnal rain' (p.100), all of which descend upon Corkadoragha in biblical proportions:

> It seemed to us that the rainfall was becoming more offensive with each succeeding year and an occasional pauper was drowned on the very mainland from the volume of water and celestial emesis which poured down upon us; a non-swimmer was none too secure in bed in these times. Great rivers flowed by the doorway and, if it be true that the potatoes were all swept from our fields, it is also a fact that fish were also available by the wayside as a nocturnal exchange. Those who reached their beds safely on dry land, by the morning found themselves submerged. At night people often perceived canoes from the Blaskets going by and the boatmen considered it a poor night's fishing which did not yield to them a pig or a piglet from Corkadoragha. (p.99-100)

In visiting the Rosses, Bonaparte is confronted for the very first time by the prospect of 'a countryside which was not drenched by the flowing of the rain' (p.65), an experience which he later finds 'eerie and unnatural', almost as if 'the appearance of the world was somehow changed' (p.71). Indeed, the weather is so unrelentingly precipitous that the Old-Grey-Fellow's sighting of the first ray of sunshine ever to come to Corkadoragha is understood to be a portent of the apocalypse, 'an unworldly shining a hundred times more venomous than the fire' and a sign that the natural order has been turned upside down, leaving 'a crow screeching in the field with a pig's voice, a blackbird bellowing and a bull whistling' (p.47).

This depiction of a rain-drenched, unyielding countryside obviously serves to undermine the idyllic vision of the west that was so central to nationalist rhetoric by making the environment something less than a land fit for heroes and noble peasants. In fact, heroic and noble are precisely what Bonaparte is not. Contrary to the conventional notion of the western peasant as the embodiment of all

the supposedly Gaelic virtues - industrious, intellectual, abstemious, pious, morally virtuous, and content with a lifestyle of artless frugality - Bonaparte is indolent, ignorant of even the most basic facts of life, drinks himself unconscious, never even considers religious matters, steals from his neighbours, and is preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth even though he has no idea how to spend the gold he steals from Maeldoon (pp.112-3).

The 'fictional' space of Corkadoragha thus serves to focus the text's important insights into the operations of nationalist ideology in this period. The cultural exploitation of the west for the purposes of securing the nation's identity in a rural economy, the Gaelic language and the Catholic religion is ruthlessly exposed in the novel as a form of economic exploitation also. The inhabitants of Corkadorogha are invested with value by the Gaeligores only to the extent that they exemplify the purity of the metropolitan ideal of the primitive western peasant. Sitric's bottle of water is dashed from his hands because it spoils the effect of authenticity, and the Old-Grey-Fellow is accosted by a language enthusiast who is concerned that the former's speech doesn't conform to the guidelines for proper peasant speech laid down by Peter O'Leary and other authorities on the language (p.49).

However, crucially, the space of Corkadoragha also encapsulates the problem of perspective which I would argue persists throughout the novel. In some senses, in relationship to the real geographical spaces of Ireland, the physical dimensions embodied by Corkadoragha are reminiscent of a cubist painting, offering a series of mutually contradictory perspectives on the object which distort it beyond all recognition and defamiliarize its constituent parts. As such, Corkadoragha implicitly expresses the problem of how to relate oneself to those discourses of national identity which seek to locate themselves in the imaginary heartland of the Gaeltacht. That this 'absent centre' of Irish national belonging is 'seen' from a range of physical points of view all at once, underscores an indeterminacy which resonates throughout the novel both in the representations of the peasant communities discussed above and the disorienting temporalities of the text which, in a similar fashion to the collapsing of space and place, render it difficult to establish

Corkadoragha's relation to Irish history. Ireland appears in the novel to be both a colony under English administration and an independent state, existing simultaneously in the mid-nineteenth century and in the 1930s, a temporal indeterminacy which is singularly pessimistic in its conflation of colonial and post-independence Ireland.

In this sense, the indeterminacy and temporal and spatial disturbances embodied by Corkadoragha can be read as the ultimate expression of O'Nolan's strained relationship with dominant formations of cultural nationalism. For if Corkadoragha crystallises the terms of his rejection of cultural nationalism through its refusal to provide a stable cultural location within which to ground and authenticate national identity, its strange perspectives also encode O'Nolan's own problems of dislocation. What emerges most clearly through the novel's parody is O'Nolan's inability to locate himself in relation to the discourses he draws upon and critiques. For if he uses O Crohan's text to critique the urban Gaeligores, he clearly cannot identify himself with O Crohan, nor does his text escape his satire. O'Nolan thus remains ensnared within the nets of those discourses about the western peasantry from which the novel attempts to distance itself. No matter how much he may invest in the idea of the authentic peasant voice in other contexts (as we saw with his comments about O Crohan's text above), The Poor Mouth lays bare the fact that he is unable to articulate his critique of cultural nationalist discourse from such a 'position of authenticity' such as that which he suggests is represented by O Crohan. As such, he remains both dislocated from and trapped within the discursive formations which emanate from the metropolitan centre, unable to forge an alternative position or perspective beyond the representations which he encounters by which the immobilizing opposition between the ideal (yet necessarily fictive) and the real (and necessarily debased) may be transcended.

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As I have suggested in this section, contrary to the claims of critics of the novel, it is extremely difficult to read The Poor Mouth as exempting The Islandman from the kind of critique that it levels at the attitudes and rhetoric of the urban language movement. As I have

been suggesting, in spite of O'Nolan's comments in 'Cruiskeen Lawn' and elsewhere which unwittingly idealize the kind of communities described by O Crohan, it is not possible to claim about The Poor Mouth that it shows a clear-cut and unambiguously positive response to the vision of rural life presented in The Islandman because the parody of that book draws attention to the kind of rhetorical procedures employed by O Crohan in portraying for a metropolitan audience the perennial hardships endured by western communities. In fact, it is difficult to see in the text a positive vision of any kind, a central guiding value around which all of his material is organized and made meaningful. There are a number of reasons for this, the first being that O'Nolan seems to have been indiscriminate in incorporating a whole panoply of cultural forms and institutions in the broad satirical sweep of the novel. As one anonymous reviewer wrote in December 1941, while 'in certain aspects of language and style it directly parodies O Criomhthain's fine book, An tOileanach', The Poor Mouth:

> range[s] over the whole field of Gaelicism - literary, cultural, evangelistic, economic, social, and even connubial ... The main onslaughts are directed against the peasant bias in modern Gaelic literature; the new northern school of ultra-colloquialists; the old-time die-hard Gaelic Leaguers, complete with self-styled nicknames; the cult of folklore, which is so often carried to absurd lengths; the insistence of poverty, gloom and ultimate oblivion in biographies form the Gaeltacht; and, generally, the ignorance, cant, humbug and absurdity that is associated with a certain type of Gael. The entire book is essentially a literary satire. The author does not go for the Irish speakers, but, rather, for the ridiculous portrayals of themselves in their own books.[60]

Breandan O Conaire has suggested that O'Nolan wrote this review himself, as he had told his publisher he might in the event of the book not provoking a big enough controversy with the language movement.[61] Whether he did so or not, it still gives an accurate indication of the sheer range of the novel's satirical intent, which includes not just the ultra-orthodox advocates of Gaelicization and their idealization of peasant culture, but also (contra the novel's critics) books like O Crohan's which reproduce a metroplitan structure of feeling about the west by 'putting on the poor mouth'.

I have set out to read the ambivalent parody of The Poor Mouth

as central to the problem of dislocation I have traced throughout O'Nolan's work, of the disjunction between rural life as object of representation and the symbolic locale of a national literature, and the metropolitan centre as the site of this literary production, of the discrepancy between experiences of cultural modernity and a nostalgia for the simplicity of a rural past. This is also to locate The Poor Mouth as a key expression of O'Nolan's strained relationship to discourses of cultural nationalism. For whilst the parody clearly engages him in a contestation of the way in which these discourses have drawn upon representations of the western peasant as the true locus of an authentic and enduring Irish national identity, it still depends upon and reproduces precisely those literary structures it is compelled to critique. In this text, unlike At Swim and The Third Policeman which tentatively gesture towards the possibility of moving beyond the restrictive parameters of cultural nationalism and the cultural decline of the present, O'Nolan remains unable to move beyond those ideological structures and a literary form that seemingly imprison his writing into a purely negative critique, failing ultimately to offer any alternative vision of a national literature and identity more adequate to the communication of a modern Irish experience.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, pp.182-3.
2. ibid., p.192.
3. ibid., p.183.
4. ibid., p.188.
5. The Dublin Magazine, vol.11, no.2, (1936), pp.60-1.
6. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays, p.97.
7. cit. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.202.
8. cit. ibid., pp.199-200.
9. cit. ibid., p.201.
10. Sean O'Faolain, 'Fifty Years of Irish Writing', pp.100-1.
11. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, pp.83-4.
12. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, p.71.
13. The diversity of represetations of the Irish peasant is discussed in Ed Hirsch, 'the Imaginary Irish Peasant'.
14. John Wilson Foster, Fictions of the Literary Revival, p.303.
15. **MBM**, p.41.
16. ibid., pp.41-2.
17. Cruiskeen Lawn, 4 October 1954, **HOD**, p.102.
18. cit. Fintan O'Toole, 'The Country versus the City in Irish Writing', p.112.
19. **HOD**, p.103.
20. ibid., p.103.
21. **MBM**, pp.42-3.
22. Cruiskeen Lawn, 4 October 1954, **HOD**, p.103.
23. **BOM**, pp.234-5.
24. **HOD**, p.102.

25. Fintan O'Toole, 'The Country versus the City in Irish Writing', pp.111-2.

26. HOD, p.102.

27. Cruiskeen Lawn, 30 October 1946; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, pp.266-7.

28. Cruiskeen Lawn, 24 January 1951; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.267.

29. Cruiskeen Lawn, 20 January 1944.

30. ibid.

31. ibid.

32. For a full bibliography of O'Nolan's writings in Irish see Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, pp.240-7.

33. Sue Asbee, Flann O'Brien, pp.71-2.

34. Cathal G. O Hainle, '"The inalienable right of trifles": Tradition and Modernity in Gaelic Writing Since the Revival', p.70.

35. Cruiskeen Lawn, 12 December 1941; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.109.

36. Myles na Gopaleen, The Poor Mouth. All further references to the novel will appear in parentheses in the main body of the text.

37. Cruiskeen Lawn, 9 December 1965; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.121.

38. Cruiskeen Lawn, 24 May 1951; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.120.

39. Cruiskeen Lawn, 17 January 1955; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.120.

40. Cruiskeen Lawn, 24 February 1942; cit. and trans Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.136.

41. Cruiskeen Lawn, 26 November 1962; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.121.

42. Cruiskeen Lawn, 3 January 1957; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.122.

43. Cruiskeen Lawn, 9 December 1965; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.121.

44. cit. Sue Asbee, Flann O'Brien, p.73.

45. Cruiskeen Lawn, 9 December 1965; cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.121.

46. Cruiskeen Lawn, 8 September 1941; BOM, pp.275-6.

47. Tomas O Crohan, The Islandman, p.68.

48. Cruiskeen Lawn, 8 September 1941; BOM, p.276.

49. Tomas O Crohan, The Islandman, p.171.

50. See in particular the contemporary reviews of the novel listed in Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.329-30.

51. Tomas O Crohan, The Islandman, p.1.

52. ibid., p.2.

53. Terence Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, p.88.

54. The Poor Mouth, p.5.

55. cit. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.136.

56. cit. Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.138.

57. cit. Breandan O Conaire, 'Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht and Other Irish Matters', p.136.

58. Tomas O Crohan, The Islandman, p.244.

59. Interestingly, in the making of his documentary film The Man of Aran, self-consciously staged everyday 'authentic' peasant practices that had died out in the previous century. See the first-hand account of the making of this film in Pat Mullen, Man of Aran.

60. Irish Times, 13 December 1941; see Breandan O Conaire, Myles na Gaeilge, p.331.

61. Brian O'Nolan to Padraig O Canainn, 28 November 1941; cit. Anthony Cronin, No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien, p.141.

Conclusion

After the publication of An Beal Bocht in 1941, O'Nolan didn't write another novel for twenty years. Following the huge critical acclaim accorded to At Swim-Two-Birds when it was republished in 1960, he rapidly produced two novels which were greeted with much excitement by readers and critics expecting a further phantasmagorial juxtaposition of the fantastic and the quotidian, of Irish myth and modern indolence, that they had been treated to in At Swim. In some respects The Hard Life (published in 1961) and The Dalkey Archive (published in 1964) were rather disappointing, and have come to seem more so since the posthumous publication of The Third Policeman and the English translation of An Beal Bocht cemented O'Nolan's reputation as an extraordinarily imaginative and formally innovative novelist. By comparison with the achievements of these three novels, The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive seem to strain to recapture that blend of the magical and the mundane which characterizes the novels he wrote in the late thirties and early forties, and (as Seamus Deane has remarked) 'are flawed by the intermittent failure of that delicate balance between logic and fantasy which makes his early fiction so remarkable.'[1]

To some extent, both are reworkings of his earlier work. The Hard Life recalls The Poor Mouth in its portrayal of unrelieved poverty and squalor (this time in the urban context of Edwardian Dublin rather than the rural setting of the Gaeltacht at the turn of the century), and the naievty of its young narrator, Finbarr, who is (like his predecessor Bonaparte) more the object of external forces beyond his control than a fully self-determining historical agent in full possession of his identity. While the similarity between the two novels takes the form of these and other textual analogies (Collopy, for instance, is the urban counterpart to The Old-Grey-Fellow, combining innocence with cunning), The Dalkey Archive is a much closer rewriting of the material that was abandoned after Longmans' rejection of The Third Policeman. Although there are clearly significant differences between the two texts (this is the only one of O'Nolan's five completed novels, for example, in which he uses a third-person narrator), there is also much repetition between the two. The mad

savant De Selby reappears, this time as a central character rather than a peripheral and puzzling figure relegated to the text's footnotes, and Sergeant Pluck surfaces again, this time as Sergeant Fottrell complete with his obsessions about bicycles and the dangerous transference of molecules. And there is a journey to the underworld of sorts, when Mick accompanies De Selby to his underwater cave to interview Saint Augustine in order to clear up one or two small theological controversies. Only with Slattery's Sago Saga, which remained uncompleted at his death and was published as a fragment in Stories and Plays in 1973, did O'Nolan begin working on wholly new material, turning his gaze away from Dublin and its suburbs to produce a satire on Irish-American relations.

While it is easy to view these later novels as inferior reworkings of the earlier texts, it is not so easy to explain why O'Nolan's imaginative and technical powers should have waned so much in the intervening period. Most of his commentators have put it down to the huge reputation that Joyce began to acquire in criticism after the war, and regard O'Nolan's failure to sustain the creativity that he showed in the earlier period as the result of a disabling anxiety of influence before the unsurpassable achievements of his predecessor. However, I want to suggest that O'Nolan's abandonment of the novel during this period is not so much a sign of his failure to come to terms with the dominance of Joyce in Irish literature, as a symptom of the difficulties he encountered in his attempt to negotiate the aesthetic and cultural problems which this thesis has explored.

In spite of their ostensible differences (written in different genres and even languages) what is interesting about the three novels I have looked at is that they are all preoccupied with questions of identity formation and explore these questions in terms of O'Nolan's particularly fraught relationship with two dominant ideas in Irish cultural life in this period, the idealist discourse of orthodox cultural nationalism and the empirically based critiques of contemporary Irish culture represented by 'modernist' - and 'modernizing' intellectuals and writers. This is figured in his work in the conflict between tradition and modernity, social obligation and free creative imagination, the lure of the ideal and a cynical resignation in the face of the deflated aspirations and impoverished

cultural circumstances of the contemporary. As this dissertation has shown, O'Nolan reached an impasse in his attempts to reconcile the contradictory aspirations to which he was subject by virtue of his peculiar cultural position - a metropolitan intellectual immersed in the values of Gaelic culture yet clearly alienated from the Gaeltacht communities which occupied such a central symbolic space in the imagination of cultural nationalism. In the work that I have looked at, this tension emerges in the contradiction between his residual investment in notions of authenticity and essentialism around Irish culture and identity impacting upon a modernist sensibility which persistently disrupts and problematises such an aspiration.

The increasingly strained relationship this produces in his fictional work, between a radical form and conservative cultural vision of contemporary culture, plays itself out in the novels' persistent yearning for a means of escape from the imprisoning predicaments to which their narrators are subject. Yet the move from Sweeney in the trees in flight from the callings of domestic and tribal responsibility, to the narrator of the The Third Policeman standing on the scaffold and seeking a means of eluding the literal and metaphorical entrapments of the Sergeant, to Bonaparte incarcerated simply for having climbed a mountain in search of an inspirational predecessor who has left the trials of life in Corkadoragha behind, signals an increasing pessimism around the possibility of forging a position beyond the oppositions outlined above that resonate throughout the novels as crucial symbols of O'Nolan's disenchantment with the cultural ethos prevailing in post-independence Ireland.

The difficulties in negotiating these contradictions are present in all three of these novels in terms of their form, specifically in relation to their circular endings. Whereas in At Swim the sudden reconciliation between the narrator and his uncle appears to signal the former's surrender to the banal and repetitive bourgeois lifestyle of the characters in his novel, the discrepancy in the text between the brittleness of the narrator's representation of himself and the evident humour he displays in his representation of the characters in his novel, implies that he has broken out of the world and the values about which he writes, narrating his 'biography' from a position

beyond the limiting perspectives offered by a debased modern culture. The narrator of The Third Policeman adopts a similarly brittle tone, repeatedly drawing attention the discrepancy between what he fails to understand in the 'present' and what is revealed to him later in a manner that underlines his excessive naivete. His entrapment, however, appears to be far more terminal that endured by his counterpart in At Swim, for he is condemned to a life of endlessly repeating the same journey with no hope of ever reaching his goal. Nevertheless, the very fact that the narrator can tell his story, suggests that the circularity of the narrative has been punctuated and that his apparently repetitive journey has come to an end, implying the possibility of locating for oneself a space from which to speak to a culture without being implicated in it.

The Poor Mouth suggests something altogether different, however. For while it invokes the circular narrative structure again when Bonaparte meets his father coming out of jail after twenty-nine years as he begins his own twenty-nine year sentence, the text doesn't then go on to offer the possibility of liberation. Bonaparte narrates his story from a narrative present that is contained within the text rather than located beyond it (as with At Swim and The Third Policeman), sitting in a prison and contemplating not just the death of a community and its culture but the death of the self too. In this novel an attempt at flight (in a literal and metaphorical sense) becomes a form of imprisonment. It is precisely this impasse which, I would argue, underscores O'Nolan's abandonment of the novel form and the shift of his attention to his newspaper column in order to forge for himself a position from which he could address contemporary Irish culture as a satirist in an attempt to resolve the conflicting demands of social obligation and the creative imagination on a different terrain.

Note to Conclusion

1. Seamus Deane, A Short History of Irish Literature, p.194

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