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Full Stuff, False Stuff, Fool's Stuff from Dublin: Myles of Falstaffian Blather

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In 1940 Dublin had its palace, where a king held court. The king was Robert Marie Smyllie, then editor of *The Irish Times* who frequently left the corridors of journalistic power to reign in the snug of the nearby "Palace Bar". The "Palace Bar" assumed then in Dublin the role that "Davy Byrne's" had played in Dublin's intellectual life at the time of Joyce's student days. In the pub gathered a host of journalists, poets, novelists, playwrights, sculptors, actors and other artists, and Smyllie, because of his bulk, of his stentorian voice, because of the ostentation of his clothes and certain idiosyncrasies he indulged in, was a conspicuous figure in the turbulent tribe of his cronies.

Although *The Irish Times* was still considered by many a left-over of the British colonial presence in Ireland, like "Trinity College", the paper also had a liberal reputation, precisely on account of its Protestant sympathies, which made it critical of the conservative positions of Catholic post-independence Ireland. The liberalness of its views was congenial to the intelligentsia of the late thirties, even among the former students of "University College" - UCD - the Catholic replica of "Trinity". In return, Smyllie, in search of talents in his editorial profession, and himself open-minded and cultivated - he was a member of the United Arts Club of Dublin - was not averse to giving a chance to young UCD graduates to whom he opened columns in his paper. One of those, Brian O'Nolan, was thus one autumn evening of 1940 summoned by R.M. Smyllie to the "Palace Bar" and engaged to write a column for *The Irish Times*.

Brian O'Nolan who was employed as a civil servant at the Department of Local Government, had, a year before, published his first novel, which had been well received by critics, and praised for its Joycean qualities. The book, published under the pseudonym of Flann O'Brien, was *At Swim-Two-Birds*, whose reputation has now been established among the readers of metafiction. However, it was not the novelist or the literary theorist and practitioner that Smyllie saw in O'Nolan: if in the "Palace Bar" the Prince of *The Irish Times* had found his Eastcheap tavern, in O'Nolan he could now expect to have found his jester. Not only had the comic eccentric mode been O'Nolan's choice in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which, being experimental and inventive, necessarily broke with traditional expectations, but the young O'Nolan was also the anonymous author of a series of hilarious nonsensical letters to *The Irish Times*, which had been initiated two years earlier and had become a permanent feature in the pages of the paper.

Brian O'Nolan had an associate in this letter-writing in the person of Niall Sheridan, one of his former UCD friends, now employed as a sportive journalist in *The Irish Times*.. In their student days in the early thirties, they had both been part of a "merry crowd", a boisterous group Niall Sheridan was to call "a literary mafia"(1), whose purpose according to another one of them, Niall Montgomery, was "pure destruction". (2) Although their weapons were merely verbal, they played havoc with the sittings of the "Literary and Historical Society", where they were known as "the mob". Indeed the irresistible scene in *At Swim-Two-Birds* which evokes one of those debates (3) does not appear much exaggerated when compared with the accounts printed in the Annals of the "Literary and Historical Society" at the time of its centenary (4): standing outside the hall, the mob addressed witty or obscene comments to the participants inside, making themselves obnoxious, but generating a sprightly entertaining atmosphere. The exuberance of the young people, their taste for puns, their delirious imagination, their

love for impractical situations, also found an outlet in the students' magazine, *Comhthrom Feinne*, to which O'Nolan regularly contributed, signing under different names before eventually conceiving an enduring persona, that of "Brother Barnabas", a composite, ubiquitous personality, capable of extricating himself from a variety of difficult situations. When O'Nolan left College, he discovered that the correspondence pages of the Dublin newspapers could be an easy way to publish his prose.

At the close of 1938 a shower of letters assaulted the offices of *The Irish Times* after the paper's bad review of a play by Frank O'Connor, *Time's Pocket*.. The first exchanges were serious; one of the letters was written by the Irish writer Sean O'Faolain to defend his friend; another by O'Nolan, who took the reviewer's defence in a scathing letter which, in its turn, was answered by O'Connor and O'Faolain. But soon, O'Nolan and Sheridan wrote other letters, with different signatures - Ray, Oscar Love, Flann O'Brien, a War Widow, Francis O'Connor (who did not want to be confused with Frank O'Connor), names borrowed from a local almanach. The letters soon abandoned the subject of drama and literature, and turned to more mundane topics such as Christian doctrine, the decline of the Protestant population, boyscouts, and the elimination of banana-skins from Dublin's pavements. A whole fictional world was established by the various identities in the letter column: cross-references were introduced, lunatic exchanges were devised between the diverse correspondents, and even romances conceived. The whimsical letters could be recognized from the authentic ones by the abundance of puns, the futility of the topics; the logic was often insane, reason was out, but the tone employed to deal with trivial matters was consistently pedantic and doctrinal. Letters from serious correspondents occasionally joined the joust: because the two accomplices disguised themselves under the masks of real names, the actual owners of the names sometimes reacted in furious letters to the paper, which inevitably led to further confusion when they were in turn accused of imposture. The abundance of the correspondence eventually fed four to five full columns of *The Irish Times*, whereas it had never exceeded and even rarely covered a full column before the mad correspondence had begun. R. M. Smyllie enjoyed the fun, the vitality, the versatility of authors who were able to impersonate conflicting personalities and debate from several points of view at once, but he also feared libel suits, to which he could not afford exposing his paper. Aware he had come across a talent of a kind he was reluctant to lose, he tried to channel O'Nolan's verve within the limits of a regular column. And thus began "Cruiskeen Lawn", and a twenty-five years' relationship between O'Nolan and *The Irish Times*, which even the author's death on April Fool's Day 1966 was not to interrupt, since extracts from "Cruiskeen Lawn" have to this day been episodically reprinted by the paper.

"Cruiskeen Lawn" is the anglicized spelling of the Irish "Cruiscin Lan" - "The full little jug": it is the title of a ballad which has been sung for centuries in Ireland and Scotland and had entered a popular play by Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*. This Victorian play had among its dramatis personae the character of Myles na Coppaleen - or Myles of the Ponies - a barbarous, lazy tramp and rogue, a poacher and liar, scoffing at authority and respectability. It was this mask, that of an irresponsible Falstaffian rebel, that O'Nolan put on for his column. The column, which adopted a tone of frank, brutal irreverence, was to prove immediately very popular: from three columns a week as had been initially agreed, the contract passed to a daily rhythm after 1942, and even during the wartime when the paper shortage reduced the size of the paper, "Cruiskeen Lawn" was never suppressed or shortened. Ignoring the tragedy that shook Europe, Myles paraded his buffooneries on inconsequential subjects or in cynical countertruths, playing the role of the perennial fool and providing an antidote to the gravity of the events reported in neighbouring articles.

The same persona of Myles was used as a narrative voice to deal with the variety of subjects that filled the "little jug" - music, letters, politics, entertainment, cooking, society, sport... The same column could be divided into sections and deal with

unconnected topics, or the same subject could be pursued over several columns covering several days. Indeed the success of one particular column could influence the author to reintroduce its subject, and sequences were thus constituted, establishing an atmosphere of familiarity, sustained by the recurrence of certain characters, the most popular of whom were "the Brother", an eccentric braggart, a replica of Myles, or again the hilarious pair Keats and Chapman whose friendship ignored the gap of two centuries between them to make them share adventures centered around a pun revealed in the concluding sentence of each episode: Keats was once presented investigating inside the throat of one of Chapman's pigeons ("on first looking into Chapman's homer"...), or shown about to consume the last "roes" of Summer... Another recurring feature in the column was the "Myles na gCopaleen Research Bureau" which conceived complicated systems to simplify such current domestic chores as storing the snows of yesteryear or manufacturing jam out of electricity.

The extravagance and impracticability of Myles' imagination, and the nonsensical atmosphere of the column can be seen as an element of consistency between all the articles. But O'Nolan also managed to maintain a permanent tempo, a unique vitality due to the indiscreet, intrusive, constant presence of Myles, whose multiple capacities enabled him to give himself the preeminent role in the most diverse situations.

Although Myles occasionally referred to personal events of O'Nolan's life, talking about his trips, his publications as a novelist, his ailments, he always succeeded in detaching the reader from the identity of a plausible author, building up a fictional persona from a mass of improbabilities. "Cruiskeen Lawn" often published biographies of Myles na gCopaleen, whose purpose was to impart substance to the character, giving him a lineage, a social status, presenting him within the well defined spacial limits of his domain in Santry; however, the successive "biographies" contained so many contradictions and extravagant details that no reader was expected to believe in the reality of the character. His birthplace was uncertain, one day mentioned as Montevideo, another time Paris, another Paddington Station. The inconsistencies of the presentation imparted Myles with an obvious mystery, to which also contributed the particular relationships he had with time: claiming "heterogeneity of spatio-temporal continuity" (5), he announced one day he was born in the sixteenth century, another the nineteenth, or affirmed he had lived in Europe for the last seven or eight centuries. The usual constraints of time did not affect him: "never young never old", he celebrated his thirty-third birthday after his eighty-eighth, he died but could "undie" to have another funeral for those who had not been able to attend the first. Because of his possibility to do and undo himself, to assume different shapes, Myles became, in the course of the years, a sort of shaman, able to metamorphose himself like primitive heroes or deities, an elusive, impalpable, protean figure, whose fluidity and versatility was emphasised by the multiplicity of the missions he accumulated from column to column. Myles once described himself as "that ontological polymorph who is at once immaculate brahmin, austere neo-platonist, motor-salesman, mystic, horse-doctor, hackney-journalist and ideological catalyst" (6).

"I am much unlike other men", he boasted shamelessly. "I personally would enharbour a vast amount of dismay if I should be confused with anybody else". Enamoured with himself, he considered himself entitled to be called "the greatest Irishman of all times"; the extension of his culture inebriated him: he could quote long lists of artists who had secretly begged for his help or advice; his art surpassed Beethoven's; his voice suggested McCormack's; he had taught Bernard Shaw how to write; Einstein also had benefited from his tuition. He called himself "the Irish Disraeli", "the Gaelic Demosthenes", "the Wordsworth of Ireland", and bestowed upon himself the title of "President of the Republic of Letters". Because of his many talents he was forever in demand. This "Myles Gloriosus" travelled all over the world to dispense political advice to heads of state and politicians, and this seemed to him sufficient justification to apply for

the Presidency of Ireland or to proclaim himself King of Ireland on the sacred hill of Tara, immediately exerting his royal power to dissolve the Dail Eireann, the Irish Parliament.

This indecent display of vanity, the delusion of grandeur typical of farcical characters, was supported by a generally didactic, scholarly tone. Myles's style was aphoristic, professorial, starched in a thick carapace of pedantic, erudite, obscure references or euphuistic circuitous statements:

There is this, however, about crime - it has for the scientific observer its quantum of illumination over that dark bourne so long my especial focus of study, the insatiable vessel of my immense pity and holy patience - the world of men .(7)

Myles linguistically asserted his aloofness, his difference, a fastidious dislike of the vulgar. He often presented himself in opposition to the ignorant public, impersonated in "Cruiskeen Lawn" by the chorus of "The Plain People of Ireland", a user of clichés or of maimed, badly-assimilated language, whom Myles repeatedly imitated, ridiculed or insulted, abandoning his refined circumlocutions for the directness of venomous assaults: "You parrot-clawed, thrush-beaked, pigeon-chested clown..." (8) "Red snouts... you smug, self-righteous swine... the ignorant self-opinionated sod-minded suet-brained ham-faced mealy-mouthed streptococcus-ridden gang of natural gobdaws". (9)

All the improbabilities and excesses of the braggart, his lack of reserve, the outrageousness of his self-idolatry, his successive lies and contradictions, gave Myles the marks of an irresponsible buffoon, likely to pronounce the most eccentric untenable statements. The lack of involvement of "Cruiskeen Lawn" in serious matters liberated Myles from the burden of responsibility and respectability. Myles did not belong to the reasonable world of his readers. His apparent unawareness of his excesses, his shamelessness, imparted him with the immaturity and innocence of the fool: Myles could thus benefit from the forgiving benevolence of the reader and, as the Elizabethan jester had been allowed to express himself freely, was allowed to say what would never have been tolerated of a supposedly sane narrator. The fool does not understand the conventions of society: O'Nolan exploited with scathing malice the ironic possibilities that his innocent persona allowed him, his refusal to sentimentalize reality or recognize taboos and found in the protective mask of the fool much scope for liberated social commentary. Myles boldly attacked, in as many directions as his multifarious interests carried him. His candid look selected in the world what could reduce man and ridicule his pretensions to elevate himself out of his materiality. The human body was degraded, and was often presented as a mere mass of repelling writhing flesh.

The image of humanity that permeates the page is negative and disturbing. Whatever limpidity there is in a look, or smoothness in a complexion disappears in a microscopic scanning which prevents any sentimental idealisation: the eyes of "a hundred ladies in conversation", when submitted to the scrutiny of the "Myles Research Bureau", reveal

- 45% Mild mydriasis, probably caused by the consumption of slimming drugs.
- 21% Ptosis of the lids due to defect in the oculomotor nerve, anisocoria, ophthalmia, one or more small chalazions.
- 18% pronounced hyperthyroidism.
- 14% Evidence of retinal hemorrhages, papillary oedema, exophthalmos.
- 1% Mikulicz's disease.
- 1% Paralysis of the orbicularis oculi (10)

Myles' humour is of the blunt, brute type defined by E. Rovit as "College Humour" - "of elephantine subtlety, deliberately grotesque and meant to be shocking..." (11) With the obvious intention of disturbing the prudishness of his reader, he teases him in the

sacrosanct domain of his favourite heroes, whom he reduces to the level of ordinary humanity, refusing to see the attributes of their rank and status and recognizing only their corporal metabolic reality.

Myles is animated by the same spirit of profane desecration as the Elizabethan jester. He shamelessly attacks what the Irish cherish most, the sources of their national pride, such as the celebrated Lake of Killarney, which he reduces to a man-made fabrication of concrete and plumbing, or the national language whose deficiencies he enjoys exposing, or Ireland's national heroes, past and present. He flouts the law, the institutions, the puritanism of the "rabblement". He represents provocative freedom against the carcan of conventions; his "non-serviam" baffles the expectancies and the conformism of a rigid society:

This seems reasonable enough until we bring (to bear) upon it our whole fatuous battery of professional paranoia, perversion and catachresis, rushing out with our present vaudeville clown-like routine of quotation, misinterpretation and drivelling comment. (12)

Myles shows the flaws of the supposedly sane world, but the mask of uninhibited nonsense he puts on, the mad constructions of his dreams, his inconsistencies, protect him from the tensions of the reasonable world. His noisy presence, his volubility, his baroque exuberance, his indomitable agility to get into and get out of difficulties, his fluidity, his thirst for life, his wild, whimsical imagination, impart the column with a pagan, barbarous energy and vitality. Never at a loss, relying on himself only, ignoring danger, the character of Myles, made of diverse, conflicting qualities, ever escaping, changing and renewed, baffling definition, is essentially alive. Myles represents, in the grotesqueries of his clowning, in his comic insurrection, in his barbarous humour, the survival of a principle of vitality in the solemn, stagnant context of post-independence Ireland. He addresses himself to what Yeats called "the emotion of multitude", that which Shakespeare appealed to in the subplots of his plays, in the romping of his Falstaff: the Lord of Misrule takes the reader along in his Feast of Unreason and performs the regenerating rites which can liberate him from his torpor as well as from the pain of existence. "Cruiskeen Lawn" places the reader in a world of play where Myles, not expecting to be believed in his nonsensical ranting, becomes the master of a game of make-believe in an atmosphere of entertainment encouraged by the inclusion of riddles, jokes, games and puzzles which the reader is invited to solve. Thus "Cruiskeen Lawn" provides the link between the modern reader of *The Irish Times* and a primitive tradition where verbal manipulation was a dynamic oral process, an improvisation performed in public. Introducing the persona of the narratee in his page, Myles recreates the illusion of a dialogue between the poet of early Ireland and his audience, adopting the fluid, self-corrective, digressive meanderings of natural conversation, "the free rollicking style" J. M. Synge recognized as a permanent feature in the Irish character. (13)

Myles's changing roles correspond to the constantly renewed impersonations of the music-hall comedian, ranging from the ceremonial presentations of a "Master of Revels" to the farcesque antics of a circus-clown. He continually nourishes a laughing mood, creating surprise effects, suggesting building houses downwards, or affirming that 75% of the pictures in the National Gallery are fakes, reproaching Sterne, or Coleridge with having borrowed ideas from him, misleading his reader in the false indications of his titles, calculating in grammes the weight of his column, inventing grotesque situations, misunderstanding language and creating incongruous associations from the literal interpretation of current phrases - "What article, which one would not expect to find in him, would a catastrophic occurrence not take out of him? A feather"... (14) "What abundant essential, firm and durable thing did I take from under his feet? The ground" (15) Myles dismantles clichés, proverbs and jargon, transgressing the limits of good

sense or reason, ignoring all moderation in the flamboyance of gigantic baroque constructions.

The reader is maintained in a Dionysiac atmosphere by the voluptuous loquacity of the narrative voice, "inebriated with its own verbosity" (16), where redundant accumulations suggest a logomachic delight:

That sort of writing is taut, meaningful, hard, sinewy, compact, newsy, factual, muscular, meaty, smart, modern, brittle, chromium, bright, flexible, omnispectric. (17)

He juxtaposes long series of adjectives, provides the reader with variants and synonyms. Language is an elastic substance; words are beads with which he plays, manipulating them, turning them around, marshalling them, grouping them in alphabetical homophonic series, permuting and combining the vowels, creating new pairs and puns, and generally partaking of the ancient primitive tradition in which the word was endowed with magical powers which could change the face of the world.

Myles' prose often ignores the control of logic and reason. The digressions, the abandonment to linguistic eccentricities, the incoherent associations, suggest the drugging of the brain in a sort of verbal ecstasy. Myles' exultation in his linguistic freedom, associated with his excessive, uncontrolled nature, sometimes leads him to an incoherent blather, to eructations and borborygms: "Ywsk rye amdklwo2&&j hu)u'&87! What do you think of that?" (18) The letters and numbers thus printed on the page do not carry any message, are mere shapes devoid of significance; language as a vehicle of human exchange has been destroyed, the fool has abandoned himself to a solipsistic fit of delirium; he has alienated himself from the reader who, refusing to follow him further in such a destructive, irresponsible debauchery, distances himself from the buffoon.

Myles, who spends part of his time exerting himself to condemn the slackness and the incommunicability of his contemporaries, can also offer himself as an example of the follies he exposes. He wants to show the reader an unadorned, naked image of the world and of humanity, but proves to be ridiculous example of the very same vices and excesses he exposes in others. Indeed The "Plain People of Ireland" do not always express a blind admiration for their entertainer, and Myles himself, in the multiplicity of his faces, is capable of self-debasement. The one who elevates himself to the aristocratic poses of "the Sage of Santry", looking down upon miserable "Hugh Manity", can also, in the many shapes he assumes, lose all respectability and appear without any transition as a petty thief of old tyres, a puny tramp, "a poorly clad elderly man", or a lazy drunkard, and present himself in grotesque degradations - dissected in a laboratory or liquefied in a bottle.

This self-deprecation could be seen as the author's safeguard against the risk of excessive admiration for the persona of grotesque rebel he had invented, just as Shakespeare felt the need to maul the image of his Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. But Myles, the Carnival buffoon who creates the Carnival mood in a festive atmosphere of desecration, was also doomed to offer himself up episodically to the sacrificial rites that punctuate all Carnivals, torturing himself, reducing himself, as the Carnival god ends his reign of folly in abuse and destruction, so that the crowds, once refreshed and regenerated by the contemplation of their god's feet of clay, and by the invigorating therapy of laughter, may resume their daily chores and face the world again.

Embodying the spirit of Carnival, Myles plunges the reader into a world of wild entertainment and folly, but he warns him of the danger of complete irresponsibility, and restores his dignity by giving him the means of elevating himself above his Carnival god, to judge and condemn him. For the regenerative rites to be complete, the Carnival god must be partly humoured and eventually despised. O'Nolan exploited to the full all the

assets of the standpoint he had chosen - that of a fool. Filling his jug with the oxymoron of sane folly he created an art of paradox and ambiguity. The persona of Myles was a means to adopt the ironist's point of view, lifting the veil of sentimentalism and prudishness that blinded his countrymen; Myles' madness was also, as an example of human folly, a therapy against too much self-satisfaction and spiritual indolence. And simultaneously, the grotesque laughter Myles engendered was meant to purge the reader of the spiritual disarray aroused by his revelations, while providing in the versatile exuberance of the clown an attractive counterpoint to the lethargy that paralysed Ireland.

NOTES

- (1) Niall Sheridan, "Brian, Flann and Myles", *Myles, Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, (T. O'Keefe, ed.), Brian and O'Keefe, London, 1973, p. 35.
- (2) Niall Montgomery, *The Irish Times*, April 2, 1966.
- (3) Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Penguin, pp. 48-9.
- (4) James Meenan, *Centenary History of the literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin, 1855-1955*, The Kerryman Tralee, 1955.
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) "Cruiskeen Lawn", *The Irish Times*, December 31, 1943.
- (7) "Cruiskeen Lawn", October 25, 1945.
- (8) "Cruiskeen Lawn", January 23, 1942.
- (9) "Cruiskeen Lawn", October 29, 1943.
- (10) "Cruiskeen Lawn", September 14, 1942.
- (11) E. Rovit, "College Humor and the Modern Audience", in *Comic Relief-Humor in Contemporary American literature*, Sarah B. Cohen, ed. p. 245.
- (12) "Cruiskeen Lawn", December 7, 1942.
- (13) J.M. Synge, *Collected Prose*, p. 376.
- (14) "Cruiskeen Lawn", September 16, 1942.
- (15) "Cruiskeen Lawn", October 5, 1942.
- (16) Flann O'Brien, *Faustus Kelly*, Act.1, *Stories and Plays*, Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London, 1973, p. 142.
- (17) "Cruiskeen Lawn", December 15, 1941.
- (18) "Cruiskeen Lawn", January 19, 1942.