

# Reading Flann with Paul

## modernism and the trope of conversion\*

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In this essay I advance the idea that at the heart of Brian O’Nolan’s writing is a sustained reflection on the trope of conversion. My argument rests on three subordinate claims:

- a. First, that *conversion narratives* are thematically and formally connected to a representation of *life-in-death*, or to an uncanny experience of afterlife on earth;
- b. Secondly, that this broader focus on the afterlife, or life-in-death, is pervasive in O’Nolan’s fiction – but is also a recurrent theme in modernism, from Pirandello to Beckett, through Joyce and Woolf. In dealing with this trope, O’Nolan may thus be seen to participate in a conversation with contemporary writers;
- c. And finally, that a creative engagement with the writings of the apostle Paul constitutes O’Nolan’s main contribution to this conversation, his take on a pre-eminently modernist theme: the enquiry into the historical present (the now of modernism) in its contradictory relation to tradition.

As I will argue, the chief appeal of Paul’s rhetoric is the invention of a paradoxical relation to the law (and to citizenship), a *neither/nor-but-both-at-once* logic of self-identification with a legal subject or a legal community. O’Nolan looks to Paul, and in particular, to a Pauline rhetoric of conversion, to characterise his own ambiguous status as an experimental modernist writer, and, simultaneously, a critic of modernist *avant-garde* pretensions.<sup>1</sup>

The paradoxical structure of the conversion trope thus comes to inform O'Nolan's attitude towards modernism. But it also provides the existential coordinates of a time out of joint, the very texture of the present in which his characters exist.

A key context for my reading is the question of O'Nolan's peculiar participation in the modernist project (what we might call his anti-modernist modernism). I use the word anti-modernist in a sense that is directly indebted to Keith Hopper's discussion of *The Third Policeman* as a post-modernist anti-novel (all hyphenated). However, I wish to mobilise a different definition of modernism to the one contemplated in Hopper's book.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on ideas developed by Jean-Michel Rabaté in *The Ghosts of Modernity* I want to return to the notion of modernism as a moment characterised by an excess of historical self-consciousness – modernism as an over-extension, if you will, of the project of ideal history. Rabaté argues that a certain spectrality, a metaphoric of the ghost, characterises the modern writer's self-inscription in history. The idea harks back to an image from Chateaubriand: that of a memoirist 'who imagines himself posthumous' in an effort to contain or coordinate the unruly temporalities of his autobiography.<sup>3</sup> The autobiographical aspect is important, here, not because modernism is especially interested in the mysteries of personality, but because of the temporal relations set up by the image. The anachronism of a memoir written from beyond the grave captures the tensions inherent in a modernist theory of tradition when it gives us to think the madness of an impossible deixis – that is to say, when it puts self-presence in conflict with the now.

In this respect, the figure of the ghost expresses the anxieties at issue in the modern writer's fraught relation with the past and ultimately frames modernism itself as a ghost-like moment arising within the historical programme of modernity. The resulting picture is one of a 'haunted modernity [...] that is by definition never contemporaneous with itself',<sup>4</sup> a modernity that is seen always to inhabit a threshold space, looking to the authority of the past and the innovation of the future simultaneously. The idea of O'Nolan's anti-modernist modernism crystallises around a discourse of testament and tradition, and a peculiar conception of the event as a grotesque double of the present. If we understand the present as continuity, as the time of conscious *live* experience, we might think of the Mylesian event as a present shot through with the reality (the after-effects) of one's own death. It is not life that is lived in real time but death itself.

This narrative paradigm recurs throughout O'Nolan's body of work. It inspires a running gag in *The Irish Times* column on the testamentary

troubles of Sir Myles (the da) and is a central conceit of the Gothic short story ‘Two in One’. Most notably, it features in *The Third Policeman* (easily the most sustained treatment of living death in O’Nolan’s canon)<sup>5</sup> and in *The Dalkey Archive*, where the apostle Paul makes a brief cameo appearance as one of Augustine’s ‘encorpified’ companions and is openly acknowledged as Augustine’s very first literary influence:

I sometimes roar after him ‘You’re not on the road to Damascus now!’ Puts him in his place. All the same that Tolle Lege incident was no conjuring trick. It was a miracle. The first book I picked up was by Paul and the lines that struck my eyes were these: ‘Not in rioting or drunkenness, nor in chambering or wantonness, nor in strife or envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in the lust thereof’. (CN, 635)

The ‘tolle lege incident’ refers to the conversion of Augustine, the moment when Augustine was inspired by a disembodied voice to ‘take up and read’, specifically, to take up and read Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Indeed Paul’s authority presides over the entire afterlife of the novel. It is also implicit in the later discussion of *Pneuma*, the breath of life, or the living spirit which gives life to the body.

### Testament, figure and cliché

The same narrative formula – the model of a present shot through with the reality of one’s own death – is developed further in the vignette on Sir Myles from the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column. The piece returns to the premise of *The Third Policeman*, in which a character appears to survive, or somehow surpass, the instant of his death. But there are a few notable differences: first, the experience of death-in-life is given a more overtly humorous treatment; secondly, the narrative makes no secret of the character’s absurd existential condition: the narrator, the reader and Sir Myles himself are all perfectly aware of Sir Myles’ mock-resurrection; and finally, the humour relies on a parody of legal jargon rather than a mock-scientific frame of reference.<sup>6</sup>

‘I considered carefully’, Sir Myles said, ‘the advisability of dying intestate but rejected the idea as too dangerous [...] I would have placed upon me the onus of establishing quite novel juridical theses. For example, I would have to show that there is an alternative to testacy or intestacy,

viz., extestacy, which would be the condition I would claim to be in. I would have to show that death is not final and conclusive. This in itself would involve equally recondite definitions of life. My own “existence” would be called in question and I would have to prove — on oath, mind you! — that I was not dead, notwithstanding my recent decease and the hasty nuptials of my dear widow [...] Even my undoubted right to participate as next-of-kin in my own estate would be called in question. The income tax authorities would challenge the inclusion of funeral charges under allowable expenses and would probably insist on sticking me for death duties. It would all be far too troublesome. I would not like it at all. Gentlemen, I would rather be dead’. (*BM*, 158–59)

Here one cannot help being reminded of Beckett: of the puns on the quick and the dead in *More Pricks than Kicks* and of Victor’s anxiety in *Eleutheria*, that if he died, he might not even realise he was dead (‘I want to enjoy my death. That’s where liberty lies: to see oneself dead’<sup>7</sup>); not to mention, of course, the countless narrators who appear to be speaking from beyond the grave, as in ‘The Calmative’, or ‘First Love’.

In particular, the emphasis on legal jargon is reminiscent of *Echo’s Bones* (an early short story written as a coda to *More Pricks than Kicks*, and then discarded, only to appear in print in 2014); but more concretely, it puts O’Nolan’s work in dialogue with Pirandello’s *The Late Mattia Pascal*. There too, the paradox of surpassing one’s own death provides the narrative with its central premise. And once again afterlife is experienced as a kind of legal nuisance – or, more precisely, a bureaucratic impossibility. In the words of Don Egidio, Pascal’s one remaining friend at the end of the novel, life is impossible ‘outside of the law, and without those individual characteristics which, happy or sad as they may be, make us ourselves’.<sup>8</sup> For Pirandello this premise serves to explore a philosophical opposition between social reality and plain life. Life lived by the individual, within social bounds, is set against life in its pure state, freed of ties and social conventions; the latter promises to describe a more authentic existence, but ultimately proves impracticable. For Myles, by contrast, the stakes are moral and metaphysical. The joke of the ‘Sir Myles’ vignette has a lot to do with the suspicion that death, in modern representation, has become a trivial event – at best a legal technicality. What happens when the afterlife becomes the purview of lawyers and bureaucrats is a triumph of cliché. Being alive is scarcely distinguished from being dead.<sup>9</sup>

The lesson has a direct allegorical application for the craft of the modern writer. As several critics have pointed out, part of O’Nolan’s genius was the

recasting of English as a sort of mummified tongue. For Anthony Cronin, ‘The basic prose style of the first person narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* had sometimes read like a translation from the Irish [...]. At others its very meticulousness, a sort of painstaking clarity and flatness, had given the impression that English was being written as a dead language.’<sup>10</sup> The effect is an upturned picture of the state of Anglo-Irish power relations. But the move also resonates beyond immediate language-politics to include matters of law, of testament and tradition.

In this respect, too, the afterlife of Sir Myles (the da) reads like a comic riff on Saint Paul. Paul famously stakes the authority of his word on two moments. The first is the moment of grace on the road to Damascus, an event by which the Apostle symbolically relives the passion and resurrection of Christ, and in doing so, rewrites the old covenant on Mt Sinai. The second is a systematic critique of legalism that seeks to redefine the relation of all free men to the law to which they are subject.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, both strategies address the question of what it means to be under the law – under its protection, but also under its jurisdiction.

Ostensibly Paul’s aim is to promote a doctrine of inclusiveness and universalism, but the polemical thrust of his writings is directed towards a supersession of both Jewish law and Roman citizenship. In this regard, the *Epistle to the Romans* wants to be two things at once: a reaffirmation of the past and a new beginning; conjunction *and* disjunction.<sup>12</sup> Paul’s rhetoric relies throughout on a series of conceptual oppositions and chiastic reversals: the old is of course pitted against the new, the letter of the law against the spirit, loyalty to the dead against loyalty to the living. Thus, for example, in *Romans* 7:

For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law [having died to the law], that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not *in* the oldness of the letter. [...] For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.<sup>13</sup>

In these reversals we observe a strange logic of simultaneous affirmation and disavowal, of having one’s cake and eating it too. The Self is turned inside out. I am reborn to a present free from the burdens of the past. By the grace of God I am given a new start. But my new life is only justified to the extent

that it repeats and redeems my old one; and the authority of my testimony depends on what I have suffered in the throes of death. The importance of this move in establishing Paul's literary authority cannot be overstated. Paul can speak against the Jews because he is one of them in the flesh. And he can speak for them because his covenant repeats and updates the marriage contract God signed with Moses.<sup>14</sup> But he also speaks for Christ because, like Christ, he died and came back among the living.

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So *am* I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I *am* more; in labors more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, in deaths oft. [...] Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep.<sup>15</sup>

The epic adventure of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians goes on to list numerous near-death (and actual death) experiences, followed by a vision of the third heaven. How can an apostle speak on behalf of Christ without going through the harrowing process of death and resurrection? Paul returns to this question time and time again – it is what justifies his entire mission. But we fail to understand that mission altogether if we treat the question as a mere figure of speech, or a thought experiment.

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth), such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth), how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.<sup>16</sup>

In the 'Sir Myles' vignette, Paul's militant rhetoric against the dead letter of the Old Testament is rewritten as a mock-legal problem: a reflection on the minutiae of testamentary law. The parody may well be an end in itself; but viewed in light of several other scenes of death-in-life featured in O'Nolan's work, it lends itself to a broader commentary on the author's poetics. Myles seems to be using Paul to engage an eminently modernist idea: that the task of the writer is to infuse life into a dead medium, to pour spirit into the dead letter of tradition.<sup>17</sup>

However, his fiction participates in this programme as it participates in the Gaelic Revival: by playing up the pretentiousness of its rhetoric. More precisely, it targets the century's bad-faith secularism and the falseness of its universalist politics. In place of the modern writer as a purveyor of the living word, as a Pentecostal figure or as a champion of Spirit, we come upon the allegory of writing as an insoluble testamentary problem. Once again, there is a sense of having only dead words to play with, of being able to speak with authority only from beyond the grave.

### Two in one – or, the tell-tale foreskin

The parody of Pauline rhetoric is given a macabre twist in the short story 'Two in One'. Here, life and death are folded into each other, as are, quite literally, flesh and spirit, when the narrator, having killed his employer, provides an alibi for himself by wearing the skin of his victim. The plot follows a perfect symmetry. In the flesh, Murphy is mistaken for Kelly; but in spirit, Kelly is found guilty of Murphy's crime, and sentenced to death in his place.

Encoded in this pot-boiler premise is thus another anti-modernist, modernist metaphor: the figure of the storyteller as a homicidal taxidermist. It is important to take note of the overlap between taxidermy and Murphy's literary craft. The opening paragraph already hints at a connection. The very first words draw attention to the act of storytelling and to the field of literary activity:

The story I have to tell is a strange one, perhaps unbelievable; I will try to set it down as simply as I can. I do not expect to be disturbed in my literary labours, for I am writing this in the condemned cell. (*SF*, 84)

Murphy then talks at length about the skill and patience required of the taxidermist, and later names low job-satisfaction as his major grievance against his employer.

Kelly carried on a taxidermy business and I was his assistant [...] He knew I had a real interest in the work, and a desire to broaden my experience. For that reason, he threw me all the commonplace routine jobs that came in. If some old lady sent her favourite terrier to be done, that was me; foxes and cats and Shetland ponies and white rabbits – they were all strictly my department. I could do a perfect job on such animals

in my sleep, and got to hate them. But if a crocodile came in, or a Great Borneo spider, or (as once happened) a giraffe – Kelly kept them all for himself. In the meantime he would treat my own painstaking work with sourness and sneers and complaints. (*SF*, 84–85)

The frustrations of an under-appreciated artist thus provide the motive for Murphy's violent act. The murder doubles as the subject of a good story and as the pretext for the most challenging, most rewarding job a taxidermist can hope to take on. In short, it is an opportunity for the narrator to ply his trade and to take pride in his art.

Paul Fagan has unpacked the connection between taxidermy and writing by looking at the confessional strategies encoded in the story's narrative situation. From within his 'condemned cell' (*SF*, 84) Murphy appears to implicate the reader into a work of self-fashioning and self-justification. The confession is 'ostensibly directed towards the goal of formulating the text's "I" as a coherent, communicable [...] whole',<sup>18</sup> but, subsumed in the artist-murderer's craft, it is transformed into an act of dissimulation and self-effacement. In this sense, as Fagan observes, 'Two in One' reads as 'an autobiography of how Murphy's self comes not to be, or, perhaps, how it unbecomes'.<sup>19</sup>

Jennika Baines continues the exploration of the narrator's confessional stance by pointing to the central conceit of the story as a variation on those impossible, infinitely regressive structures to which O'Nolan resorts so often in the earlier novels: MacCruiskeen's chests of drawers, de Selby's series of mirrors reflecting all the way back into the past, the story within a story construction of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In this case:

The narrator of 'Two in One' sits quite literally within another character: 'that night I was able to look into a glass and see Kelly looking back at me, perfect in every detail except for the teeth and eyes, which had to be my own but which I knew other people would never notice' (*SF*, 86). From within this narrator, too, comes the voice of every other character as all dialogue is provided through the narrator's voice rather than within direct quotes. [...] In this way every character comes from within this murderous character, who sits within another character, who sits within a cell and waits for death.<sup>20</sup>

Fagan and Baines both frame the central conceit of 'Two in One' (Murphy's decision to wear the skin of his murder victim) as the literalisation of an



idiom – and in both cases this ploy is shown to organise the game of doubles in the narrative. In Fagan’s reading, the theme of getting under someone’s skin points to an unsettling of the confessional scene, involving reader and narrator in a transformative power-exchange, a kind of reluctant complicity; for Baines, the sense of a character sitting ‘literally within another character’ establishes the murderer’s position as the (dubious, unreliable) foundation of the entire narrative construction, a perspective that inhabits and controls all perspectives.

Joining this conversation, but adjusting the focus slightly, I want to claim that Paul’s rhetoric on the letter and the spirit of the law informs not only the central conceit of ‘Two in One’ but also its figural strategies. Thus, while Murphy’s confessional narrative positions itself precisely on the borderline between the literal and the figural, the writings of Paul provide a theoretical backdrop to the story’s staging of its own use of literalised conceits for narrative composition.

Paul’s intuition in *Romans* strikes a modern, almost Kafkaesque note. We are only subjects insofar as we submit to the authority of the law; indeed the law is the agency that *makes* us subjects, and in doing so it is able at once to condemn us *and* to save us. Without knowledge of the law we have no relation to sin; we are innocent by definition. At the same time, it is only by coming under its protection that we are capable of being redeemed. Paul resorts to the rhetoric of the living spirit and the dead letter precisely in order to resolve this contradiction. The move is accompanied by a distrust of literalism and a flat condemnation of all things of the flesh – and right at the centre of the argument are some well-rehearsed opinions on circumcision.

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.<sup>21</sup>

Paul’s hostility is directed at those who would see circumcision as a condition of salvation, or who would equate ritual with righteousness. By and large, the argument breaks down into three main objections: first, that they are far too literal in their interpretation of the law; secondly, that they ignore the primacy of spiritual reality over physical evidence; and finally, in a characteristically aggressive jibe, that in their eagerness to show off their piety, or to gauge the piety of their peers, they betray their exhibitionist and voyeuristic tendencies (‘As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they

constrain you to be circumcised; [or they] desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh'<sup>22</sup>). On all three counts, the issue is with circumcision understood as a physical marking, as a *material* sign of belonging to a community. It is best to quote from different *Epistles* to highlight the recurrence of strategic phrases: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.'<sup>23</sup> And again:

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him. Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond *nor* free: but Christ *is* all, and in all.<sup>24</sup>

Two figures, in particular, come into sharp relief here: Paul's insistence on a 'neither/nor' logic as the condition of the appearance of someone new; and the sartorial metaphor of *putting off* the old man and *putting on* a new one.

The pertinence of the latter to a reading of 'Two in One' is obvious enough. We may add *putting on the new man* to the string of literalised idioms that includes *inhabiting a character*, and, from the title of Fagan's essay, *getting under one's skin*. But the broader implications of the Pauline intertext also bear on O'Nolan's treatment of the *Doppelgänger* theme – specifically, the scene in which Murphy morphs into his victim, and the final twist which provides the ironic moral upshot of the story. After the applied skin becomes unstable it fuses with Murphy's own until the two, dead spirit ('dead spit') and live flesh, become inseparable: 'Kelly's skin got to live again, to breathe, to perspire [...] My Kelliness, so to speak, was permanent' (*SF*, 87).

Baines has touched on the topic of the law in 'Two in One', noting that at the start of the narrative 'the murderer is already imprisoned by a swift and reasonably efficient judicial system. The police have the right man, they just have him for the wrong reasons.'<sup>25</sup> That last qualification is not negligible. The point of the story, of course, is that in a sense they have the right man *and* the wrong man at the same time. One way to read the ending, following Baines' lead, is as an affirmation of the infallibility of the law. By hook or by crook, a murderer will get his comeuppance and justice will be served. But then again, the same twist can also be interpreted as a demonstration of the arbitrary ways of justice. Truth is produced not by a process of unmasking, not by revealing the inner man, but by allowing a false appearance to *become* reality ('when the legend becomes fact print the legend').

In sum, ‘Two in One’ takes its place alongside other Mylesian texts, other allegories of writing in which life and death (or life and afterlife) are strangely folded into each other. But it ups the ante by reworking the premise into a modernist allegory of the act of figuration. I want to stress that the reversal of spiritual values entailed in these texts does not automatically signal a materialist turn in O’Nolan’s thought. I believe, rather, that the main thrust of the allegory is diagnostic. O’Nolan’s writing testifies to a strange moment in the history of Spirit, to a sense of living a time-out-joint. In well-worn modernist terms, what is demanded of the writer at such a time is an ambitious remapping of the relation of the present with tradition.

As I suggested earlier, the originality of O’Nolan’s response to this diagnosis consists first in playing up the materialist rhetoric; then in subjecting it to a moral, satirical critique. At stake is the invention of a new way of being in the world and a new way of being in history, by which one at once belongs to and sets oneself apart from the authority of the past, from moral consensus, from the parochialisms that determine membership in one’s community.

By this allegorical reading, O’Nolan’s fiction opens up in two directions at once:

- a. *existential*, calling for a complete reorganisation of the order of reality: to be sure, the blinding light on the road to Damascus is not commensurate with experience. It is a violent event, occurring outside any margin of expectation – hence the comparison with dying and being born again. It is reductive to think of such an event as a change in the circumstances of a person. What comes undone is a person’s entire system of values; and
- b. *political*, enacting a ‘*neither/nor-but-both-at-once*’ gesture of resistance to the law: in Paul’s case a refusal of both the Imperial order of Rome and the authority of the Mosaic covenant – but in that refusal is also an appropriation of the concepts of citizenship and election for the purpose of a new relation to history; in O’Nolan, a diagnosis of modernity as a time out of joint, a mad juncture in the history of Spirit, coupled with an anti-modernist critique of that same diagnosis.



## I4

# The Dalkey Archive

## a Menippean satire against authority

DIETER FUCHS

*‘Il faut cultiver notre jardin’.*<sup>1</sup>

This essay analyses *The Dalkey Archive* as a text written in the tradition of Menippean satire. Although Mikhail Bakhtin,<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye<sup>3</sup> and many others wrote about this tradition in great detail in the past century,<sup>4</sup> Menippean satire has remained a relatively little known literary phenomenon in the scholarly world. As Frye noted in 1975, before he wrote about Menippean satire in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) ‘there was not one in a thousand university English Teachers [...] who knew what Menippean satire was: now there must be two or three’.<sup>5</sup>

As Menippean satire is widely unknown, I will take a closer look at this genre by way of introduction and situate my approach *vis-à-vis* the most important studies in the field of Flann O’Brien as a Menippean satirist: M. Keith Booker’s *Flann O’Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (1996) and José Lanters’ *Unauthorized Versions* (2000).<sup>6</sup> Whereas Booker’s main focus lies on the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogic imagination and the carnivalesque subversion of authority as essential aspects of the Menippean worldview, Lanters’ Menippean reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* applies the vantage point of modern Ireland from 1919–52. In contrast to Booker’s archetypal and Lanters’ more topical Menippean reading, my approach is informed by the history of literature and philosophy: it focuses on O’Nolan’s intertextual dialogue with the Menippean corpus of the past and on the fact that the Menippean tradition is, epistemologically speaking, deeply imbued with the philosophy of Socrates.