Hibernian Choices: The politics of naming in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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Abstract: Names – whether his own numerous pseudonyms or the names he gave his characters – were important for Irish modernist writer Flann O'Brien. Whereas his own *noms de plume* often act as heteronyms denoting the various elusive personae that he multiplied himself into, the onomastics of his characters can be seen as responding to the contemporary language politics of the new Irish state. We will describe O'Brien as having been involved in all the strategies of the Free Irish State towards the (often artificial) growth of the Irish language: education, administration, standardisation. An afficionado of the Irish language but also a critic of the conservative traditionalism of the Celtic revivalists, O'Brien's responses to 'Irishness' are often ambiguous. While a vast majority of the names of his characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* are of Irish origin, those names often underwent a process of anglicisation. In the case of the novel's title, we will identify a process of double erasure, echoing the historical erasures of Irish identity. However, a particular scene featuring "the hero of old Ireland," Finn MacCool, will be read – against several critical opinions – as resisting such erasures by displaying both names (in a simultaneity reminiscent of that of film subtitling) in a contrasting way that valorises positively indigen ous toponymics and anthroponyms and thus celebrates the legacy of the Celtic past.

Keywords: Irish modernism, Irish language politics, anglicisation, disconnectedness of cultures, erasure, fictional names, heteronyms.

In one of the three alternative beginnings of Flann O'Brien's long neglected gem of Irish modernism *At Swim-Two-Birds,* the hero of old Ireland, the legendary hero Finn MacCool of the *Fiona* cycle suffers a narrative malfunction and sees his story-telling grinding to a halt. Overcome with either nostalgia or senility (or both?), Finn's stature seems to grow to Gargantuan proportions and his once noble figure deteriorates to disproportionate grotesquery, just as his chant dies out in unintelligible muttering that verges on the absurd:

> I am the breast of a young queen, said Finn,
> I am a thatching against rains.
> I am a dark castle against bat-flutters.
> I am a Connachtman's ear.
> I am a harpstring.
> I am a gnat. (AS2B 19)

While his stature becomes embarrassingly larger-than-life, his discourse is barely larger than mere inarticulate silence.

When one voice urges him to go on with his saga, Finn, who now seems to have also lost his eye-sight, or to be sitting in complete darkness by a smouldering fire, wonders "Who is it?" And then his companion Conan introduces the unseen intruder:

"It is Diarmuid Donn… even Diarmuid O'Divney of Ui bhFailghe of Cruachna Conalath in the West of Erin." (20) This long archaic anthroponym-*cum*-patronymic pair, followed by an equally antiquated toponym, is in Irish, Ireland's nearly forgotten Celtic language.–The odd string of vowels and consonants sounds absolutely unfamiliar to the English ear. And equally unfamiliar is the sight of its sprawling script. But for Finn MacCool, the heroic warrior who could speak no language other than Irish, this was but familiar sound and sight. And yet, despite all this, Conan feels compelled to add, by way of precision: "…it is Brown Dermot of Galway." (20) This time in plain English.

When Finn refuses to go on with his story telling, another invisible warrior tries to cajole him into resuming his tale. Again, Finn rummages in his memory for his name, which is promptly produced by the same Conan:

"It is Caolcrodha Mac Morna from Sliabh Riabhach." And again he instantly doubles the Irish anthroponym+toponym pair with its English equivalent: "It is Calecroe MacMorney from Baltinglass." (20)

This nudges the old warrior out of his amnesic silence, and soon he sets out to explain in archaic lyrical-sounding lines the nigh-impossible trials that a novice had to undergo in order to become a member of the Fionna, Finn's fabulous army of select fighters. When runs out of narrative steam and stops mid-way in his tale, another bystander prods him to go on. Finn cannot recognise him and again his name is produced by the same obsequious Conan: "It is Liagan Luaimneach O Luachair Dheaghaidh, […] the third man of the three cousins from Cnoc Sneachta." Once again he offers the English correspondent: "Lagan Lumley O'Lowther-Day from Elphin Beg" (22).

Thus this becomes a routine, played out with ceremonial formulae. The storyteller stumbles on some blocks of nostalgia or amnesia, he is begged to resume his narrative, and he only does so when the name of the invisible interlocutor is produced, always in double variant –Irish and English – producing a phatic spark that reignites the dying narrative fire. There are no less than four iterations of this scene.

All this leaves the reader with some unanswered questions: Why does Finn resume his tale only upon hearing the name of his dusk-cloaked interlocutor? Why does Conan need to provide the English translation for each name? How come Conan can speak English at a time when the British had yet to conquer Ireland?

Before trying to answer these questions we will have to halt and have a look at the man behind this novel and at the historical context of its writing.

If double names abound in Finn MacCool's tale, the novel's author has an even more complex situation regarding his own names. His family inconsistency about names might have taught him a bit about the volatility of names. While his paternal grandfather Dónall spelled his name the full Irish way, that is, *Ó Nualláin,* (Ó Nualláin 1998 : 11), his father Michael "called himself *Nolan* for some purposes throughout his life," yet "he was married

Michael *O'Nolan,* but signed the register" in a half-baked Irish way "as Miceál *O Nualáin,"* only to revert to the full Irish, fully-accented *Ó Nualláin* upon his appointment as a Customs and Excise commissioner (Cronin 2003: 3–4). These are already four spellings in just two generations! Some of these changes were the result of sheer negligence, some betray the nationalistic opportunism typical for many citizens of the new Free Irish State. Michael/ Miceál's indifference to his family name was passed on to his son Brian, as the latter's biographer, Anthony Cronin, has noted: "Names were always a somewhat provisional matter for Michael O'Nolan, as they would be later for his son Brian" (2003: 3).

The author of *AS2B* sported the public persona of Brian O'Nolan, the civil name he used as a public servant of the Irish Ministry of Finance on the *rive gauche* of the Liffey in Dublin. This civil name was in itself "unusual", as his biographer Anthony Cronin suggests, as it differed from both the anglicised version Nolan[1], and the fully accented *Ó Nualláin.* However, this was not exactly "the anglicized version of his Irish name," as Thibodeau claims (41), but rather the Hibernian variant of the English version of his name (with an O with an apostrophe, rather than the Ò with the *sine fada),* Irish sounding, yet easy on the eyes for the English.

When this highly efficient civil servant took to writing, he went for a *nom de plume,* so as to avoid uncomfortable questions at work. The choice of this name was the result of much hesitation and deliberation. Before the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds,* in his correspondence to Graham Greene, the reader of Longman's, O'Nolan was initially inclined to prefer "the more dour and less colourful 'John Hackett', perhaps because he had already used 'Flann O'Brien' as a *nom de guerre* in letters to the *Irish Times"* (Cronin 2003: 89), kept on proposing new pen-names (alongside with other titles for the book, such as "Sweeny in the Trees," "Task-Master's Eye," "Truth is an Odd Number," "Through an Angel's Eyelids," "The Next Market Day"), only to leave the choice into the hands of Longman's reader, who settled for Flann O'Brien. This chance baptism is fairly ironical for someone as obsessed with identity games as O'Nolan.

When, after the war, Flann was offered a column in *The Irish Times,* he took another penname, the quaint-sounding *Myles na gCopaleen,* an Irish-language phrase meaning "Myles of the Little Horses", or ponies. The name was inspired from Myles-na-Gopaleen, a secondary character in *The Collegians,* a novel of 1829 by Gerald Griffin, or rather from Dion Boucicault's stage adaptation, *The Colleen Bawn,* of 1860 (Room 2010: 342). The character was a likeable rogue and he managed to transfer his boisterous irreverent nature into the lines of the column *Cruiskeen Lawn* ("the brimming jar"), that went to be published, alternatively in English and Irish, for over one quarter of a century.

The descriptions of this multiple identity game ranged from the demiurgic "Brian-Flann-Myles trinity," (as evoked by Brendan Behan's quip) to the demoniac "multi-headed hydra" (Yurkovsky 1995: 14). The three names – O'Nolan, O'Brien and Gopaleen – are just the top of the iceberg. Many more are buried in O'Nolan's student journalism, or in his hackneyed work. Some might still lie undiscovered. Here's a short list: the juvenile

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[1] According to un acknowledged legend –whose verisimilitude is at least dubious – "in the past the O was taken away from the name of any family that didn't wholly support the Irish Republican cause, leaving us with Connors instead of O'Connors" (Hendrickson 2008: 604).

playwright Samuel Hall, Count Barnabas, Count O'Blather –"a kind of collective façade" (Brooker 2003:92) –, the Brother, the Irish Everyman, the omniscient George Knowall, the impersonal Central Research Bureau, or de Selby, the Laputan scientist panning abstruse and absurd theories about everything.

As I have argued elsewhere (Oțoiu 2011), these pennames are more than pseudonyms. Some of these – namely Myles naGopaleen the 'Da', Flann O'Brien, The Blather or the Brother – fall in the same category as the names of fictional authors adopted by the polymorphic Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. They have grown an ostensible extratextual reality to the point that authors of encyclopaedias mistook the hierarchy of (ir) reality and took the masks for the fleshed face. Rather than alter egos, we might describe them punningly as alter-native identities, each native of a dissimilar Other, originating in a different port of call. Pessoa, himself a theoretical spirit, suggested for these the term *heteronym*.

Heteronyms differ from "the literary tradition of pseudonyms, alter egos, or character-narrators" in that they claim to possess "a form of real existence." The ultimate implication of "populating his interior world with other writers of his own invention, the heteronyms" is that "the works themselves, be they truthful or beautiful, are completely independent of the intention or personality of any 'real' authors, who are at odds with their own expression" (Jackson 2010: 6).

Far from being a mere gratuitous game, this "processo di mascheramento" (process of masking), as Vintaloro calls it (2008: v), is a reaction to the specific context of the Irish Free State. Politics, demographics, social context, ethnic makeup and official cultural and educational policies have played a significant part in O'Nolan's proliferation of alternative fictional egos. These can be described as responses to the Irish social-political context.

At Swim-Two-Birds was published in 1939, having been written over several years. As to its *temps de l'histoire,* fictional time, the historical mentions are few and far between; 1909 and 1924 are mentioned in the book, with the closest point of reference being 1926, mentioned by the book-maker from Vyvern Cottage as being the moment when "I started posting information from [this] address" (14).

Faute de mieux, 1926 might be used to tether the narrative to some temporal point. Incidentally, 1926 happens to be a significant year in the history of modern Ireland. This is 4 years after the proclamation of the Irish Free State, a period plagued with the Civil War and violent political divisions about the relation to its former metropolis. 1926 represents a historical low in Irish demographics: that year's census revealed that only 540,000 of the country's 2.8 million inhabitants were Irish speakers. This is a mere one fifth of the total population – compare this to the 54% of 1812, 50% in 1956 and 42% in 2006. 1926 is also the year when a national radio broadcasting in the Irish language 2RN (Eireann) was established.

Language politics were central to the definition and assertion of the new country's identity. Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, the author of a study on "Irish-speaking society and the state", pointed out the paradox of the Irish language at the beginning of the century:

> Irish is a minority language in Ireland yet does not have any formal kind of minority status, the state interpreting it instead as the real native language of all Irish citizens, as if it had been

forgotten and is waiting to be liberated through the will of the people and action of their government. Three hundred years ago very few people in the country could speak any English at all, but the rapid language shift that occurred during recent centuries left only about 18 per cent of the population able to speak Irish at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, although Irish is the only 'native' language spoken in Ireland, by the time the Irish Free State gained its independence from the United Kingdom, the majority of the 'native' people no longer spoke it. (546)

In other words, the state tried to artificially intervene in the downfall of the Irish language and "to reverse the language shift" (Ó hIfearnáin 2010: 556). Unlike other similar interventions (such as in many former colonies in Africa) the new national language –while being that of a formerly "oppressed" group – had not turned, in the postcolonial situation, into the language of the more numerous group. Furthermore, unlike in Israel (where the previous generation was either dead or far-away), the previous generation in Ireland was the one that had learned that Irish "doesn't pay" while English does, and now that conviction had to be reverted and annulled.

Even as the 1922 Constitution proclaimed Irish as "the National Language" with English as "an official language," the State's secret aim was not "to establish popular bilingualism but instead [to have the] Irish replace English gradually as the language of Instruction." (Ó hIfearnáin 2010: 551).

State interventionism in the sociolinguistic situation manifested itself along four lines that fell under the power of the government, as highlighted by Ó Riagáin (1997): education, public administration, language standardization, and the Gaeltacht.

Brian O'Nolan happened to be enmeshed in almost every area of these language politics. Born in 1911 in Tyrone county, he spent his childhood in the remote Donegal, one of the "sacred" provinces of 'Irishry' or "Gaeltacht'; this Northern rural region of poor farmers and fishermen had become then the incubator of an interesting experiment, as it was there that the state had established 4 preparatory schools for teacher training that benefited from the linguistic immersion oferred by this compact Irish-speaking zone. As for the Nolan children, "we never spoke anything but Irish amongst ourselves", as brother Ciarán noted in his biography of Brian (1998: 23). Yet, despite some allegations, the Nolans did speak English in a variety of public situations.

The Nolan children were members of the first generation to receive primary education in both Irish and English. Ciarán also noted their patriotic pursuits, such as participation in the Gaelic league or protests against British symbols on the Irish soil.

Brian's good command of the Irish language helped him get a coveted job in the Civil Service. As Antony Cronin remarked, O'Nolan was at the centre of this third pillar of language politics: the requirement that public servants be fluent in Irish (2003: 74); indeed this requirement came into force in 1925, and "was later reinforced between 1927 and 1931 when the civil service entrance examination included elements in written and spoken Irish." (Ó hIfearnáin 547). O'Nolan's good Irish helped him at getting various promotions, which all required an examination in Irish. Brian also noted the resistance to the Irish language of many of the senior staff, many of British origin. This was part and parcel of the "strangely schizophrenic culture that has lasted until today – officially Irish, but English in practice" (Tanner 2004: 93).

As a public officer and then as a journalist, O'Nolan also witnessed the attempts at 'scientifically' dissecting the Irish language (which he derided in the grotesque scene of the British linguist in *An Beal Bocht / The Poor Mouth* who was duped into believing that the disguised pig grunting under the tables was actually an Irishman speaking a pristine Celtic dialect). The standardizing of the Irish into an increasingly artificial concoction is the target of much satire in *Cruiskeen Lawn.*

One of the earliest elements of promotion of a new national identity was the cultural movement known as "the Celtic Revival", that – alongside with Sinn Fein, Irish Ireland, the Irish Literary Theatre (later the Abbey Theatre), the Gaelic League, the Gaelic Athletics Association, and the Cooperative movement (Emer Nolan 157) – tapped into the long-neglected traditions of the Irish and established them as blueprints for a new Irish consciousness. Lady Augusta Gregory, J.M. Synge, and William Butler Yeats promoted a form of messianic romanticism, steeped in Irish mythology and folklore. While this misty nationalism had its edge against British conservatism and imperialist practices, it also had a flipside: it turned back to modernity and innovation. Preaching the return to pre-modern rural values ended up by alienating those who sought a radical change, whether in the social order, or in the arts. Ireland looked parochial and patriarchal – while Europe was cosmopolitan and liberated.

This is why of Ireland's three greatest modernist novelists, two ended up by fleeing the country. James Joyce denounced "the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (1966: 55) – i.e. Dublin – and became a perpetual exile in Paris/Trieste/Rome/Zürich to bask in the cosmopolitan society of artists and produce an art that aimed at universality. After a promising start as a prose-writer in English, Samuel Becket shifted not only citizenship but also language, to become France's premier maker of *le theâtre de l'absurde.* Significantly enough, none of the two could speak Irish, nor did they want to learn it.

Brian O'Nolan – who was fluent in Irish, and had written a master's thesis on "nature in Irish poetry" – stayed. He stayed to play ambidextrously both the English and the Irish language chord. It should be noted however that his interest and admiration for the Irish tradition was never uncritical. "Though Myles loved the [Irish] language," noted Keith Hopper, "he abhorred the purist protectionists, and this particular satire vein is amongst the most corrosive in the Mylesian canon" (1995: 35).

Throughout his life, O'Nolan remained constantly ambivalent about Irish language and tradition. On the one hand he loved the genuine manifestations of tradition, but he was ready to recognize (as he does in *The Poor Mouth)* that these do not alleviate the poverty and misery of the people that practice it. On the other hand, he was quick to notice the abuse of 'Irishness' to an excess; he was repulsed at the conservatism of much nationalist rhetoric, he sensed the fall into kitsch of popular festivals, and he realised that the stress on idealised Irishry often deflected one's attention from the stringent needs of the people.

This hesitation is probably best encapsulated in the narrator's slippage from the heroic register into the grotesque in the portrayal of Finn MacCool. The "hero of ancient Ireland", protagonist of a whole cycle of epic legends, starts as a living effigy of bravery and patriotism; he then slowly inflates to grotesque proportions of a caricature of nationalism and acts in a barbarously comical way; only to be finally deflated to a senile old man by the fireplace, cut away from the new realities of modern times, sunken in historical slumber and utterly anachronistic. We are first enthused by him, then we laugh, and ultimately we pity him.

Against this ambivalent agenda, Flann O'Brien's use of Irish names often seems to play the card of nostalgia.

First of all, the title of the book. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a vestigial title. It is the result of a double erasure. In the original version of the book, there were several mentions to *Snàmh dà én,* a toponym (or more precisely a hydronym) pointing to a place on the Shannon river, near Limerick, where the proselytising Saint Patrick waded the Shannon into Connacht. It is there, at the Church of Snàmh-dà-én that, according to the legend of *Buile Suibhne,* King Suibhne – turned Sweeny in O'Brien's novel – arrived and experienced a profound spiritual change, "becom[ing] a changed man" (Wäppling 1984:54). The fact that Snàmh-dà-én points to both a (potentially symbolic) crossing of borderline and a spiritual transfiguration might explain why O'Brien wanted this name – even if only in English translation – in title of this novel, where metalepses (crossings of narrative level frontiers) and transformations abound. However, in the rush of the publication of the novel in 1939, all in-text mentions to *Snàmh dà én* but one were axed by the editor. The single mention left has lost the symbolism the place had in *Buile Suibhne*. It is no longer a place of spiritual transformation, but just a nondescript village with a church:

> After another time [Sweeny] set forth in the air again till he reached the church at Snámh-dá-én (or Swim-Two-Birds) by the side of the Shannon, arriving there on a Friday, to speak precisely; here the clerics were engaged at the observation of their nones, flax was being beaten and here and there a woman was giving birth to a child; and Sweeny did not stop until he had recited the full length of a further lay. (AS2B 95)

If not the name itself, then its symbolism was erased, along with every other oblique mention to that place, leaving in its place just the English translation of the Irish toponym, odd-standing in the title of the novel. But this points to the other erasure, the historical obliteration of the once thriving Irish language by the English language. Prominent as it is in the very title of the novel, the *Swim-Two-Birds* placename cliffhangs over the absence of its own *signifié* like an awkward monument of this double erasure. Obviously the anglicised version does not sound right; it just does not sound English. Terence Brown sees here a parody of "the weird 'translationese' through which Gaelic saga literature had been mediated since the nineteenth century and the Irish Literary Revival," and "a clumsy version of the Irish *Snàmh dà én,* as if to remind us that English is not native to the Irish ecosystem" (2006: 216). Another critic also remarked that O'Brien undercut the pompous assumptions of the English language as a language of high culture, and that "he wrote in English as if it were a foreign idiom, a dead language," (Cronin 2003: 106) twisting it into *calque linguistique* mimicking Irish constructions.

One of the surprises this novel reserves for the reader is the sheer number of perfectly English-sounding anthroponyms that turn out, on closer inspection, to be of Irish (or Scottish or Welsh origin for that matter) and to have been anglicised at some point of their history[2].

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[2]   At the end of the nineteenth century, a commentor deplored the fact that "the Irish have shown no resentment at having most of their surnames distorted out of resemblance to the original sound and, further, they have permitted themselves to be deprived of the ancient names, sonorous and full of meaning, that their ancestors proudly bore" (Galwey 1886: 674).

The Irish origin of the legendary protagonists (analysed exhaustively by Eva Wäppling in her book *Four Legendary Irish Characters in "At Swim-Two-Birds"*) is obvious from their very sound. However none are rendered in the original form, but in anglicised versions, that imply phonetic and lexical adaptations to the English onomastic conventions.

Thus, the first name of the Pooka devil MacPhillemey, *Fergus,* is the result of a double reduction of the Gaelic *Ó Fearghuis* or *Ó Fearghasa*, namely 'descendant of *Fearghus',* a personal name meaning 'vigurous man,' that (a) lost the original patronymic 'Ó' and (b) had its spelling anglicised. It should also be noted that the capitalized Pooka (as in "a devil of the *Pooka* class") is itself an anglicised form of the Irish *púca,* "a kind of devil in Irish folklore that is not always bad" (Wäppling 1984 : 85) and its name "means literally 'the evil one'" (Hall qtd in Wäppling 1984 : 85).

Sweeney – the king reduced to madness by the sin of destroying the first Christian monastery on Irish soil – is a reduced form of McSweeney, an anglicized form of the Gaelic *Mac Suibhne* ('son of Suibhne'), a byname meaning *'pleasant',* which implies some subtextual irony at a monarch of less-than-pleasant and rather violent temper. 'Pleasant' might also point to Sweeny – whose ballad *Buile Suibhne* (circulating in Ireland between 1200 and 1500) was translated into English by Flann O'Brien himself – as remaining the only legendary character whose plight still inspires the author's unfaltering sympathy.

Finn MacCool is the English transcription of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, meaning literally "the Fair One, son of Cool" (Wäppling 1984: 30), where Cumhaill is a byname meaning 'champion'. He was "the leader of a band of warriors, the Fiana" and was the protagonist of several ballads, known as the Fenian cycle (30–31). As to his historical origins, Gerald Murphy shows that the chroniclers of the eleventh century believed "that Fionn mac Cumhaill was captain of King Cormac's professional soldiery in the early third century of the Christian era," but nowadays most historians are convinced that "Fionn belonged to the realm of mythology rather than that of history" (qtd in Wäppling 1984 :35). Fionn circulated in distinct ways in two different media, each responsible for a different facet in O'Brien's apparent oscillation between heroic and comic: the oral tradition, that portrayed him as a "comic sometimes rather burlesque old man" and the manuscript tradition, whose rhetorical language constructed a "more heroic and prophetic Finn" (Wäppling 1984 : 32). Thus the Irish origins of this character are undisputable, not only etymologically but also historically.

Equally predictable is the Irish origin of the names of the people associated with Irish nationalism. The friends of the student's uncle, Corcoran, Hickey and Fograty, that make up a circle of nationalists, bear such names: Mr Corcoran's name is an anglicised form of Gaelic *Ó Corcra* 'descendant of Corcra', a personal name derived from *corcair* 'purple'. Fogarty is reduced Anglicized form of Gaelic *Ó Fógartaigh* 'son of Fógartach', derived from *fógartha* 'banished', 'outlawed'. Hickey is the Anglicized form of Gaelic *Ó hÍceadh* 'descendant of *Ícidhe'*, a byname meaning 'doctor' or 'healer'. Connors is a reduced form of O'Connor with the additiion of the English patronymic –s, while O'Connor is again an Anglicized form of Gaelic *Ó Conchobhair* 'descendant of Conchobhar', a personal name originally meaning 'hound of desire'.

Characters of popular extraction share anthroponymics of similar origin. Sergeant Craddock – the hero of an anecdote about the exploits of the 'jumping Irishman', which

reads like a parody of the Irish League's obsession with national sports – draws his name from the Welsh *Caradog*, and is quite fittingly reminiscent of Caractacus, the leader of a revolt against the Romans.

Jem Casey, the popular "Poet of the Pick and Bard of Booterstown," draws his name from the Gaelic *Ó Cathasaigh* 'descendant of Cathasach', a byname meaning 'vigilant' or 'noisy', a fit reminder of the plebeian poet's brazen doggerel.

Other examples of anglicised Gaelicisms: Kerrigan – a diminutive of *ciar*, 'black', 'dark'. Maddigan – from *Madadhan*, 'little dog'. Grogan – *Ó Grúgáin,* from grúg 'anger'. Donaghy (just like Duncan)– *Ó Donnchadha,* from old Scottish *Donnchad*, 'brown warrior'. Clohessy – *O Clochasaigh*, derived from *cloch*, 'stone'.

Apparently remote from these Irish-sounding names, many more names prove in the end to have undergone historically the same linguistic process.

Kevin, the author of the Psalter, is *O Caoimhin*, from *caomh*, 'beloved.' *Byrne* derives from *O Broin*, descendent of *Bran*, 'raven.

Fictional writer Dermott Trellis owes his last name *Trellis* to the latticed network suggestive of intertwined threads and therefore of the novel's prevailing intertextuality. While this surname is of Latin origin, his first name is yet another instance of anglicised Gaelicism: *Dermott* comes from *Mac Diarmada*, 'son of Diarmad', possibly meaning 'free from envy', which is ironic considering this writer's endless spites at the characters he created, that culminate with his sexually abusing one of his own female characters.

Orlick, Dermot's son by his female character Sheila, is an exception to the rule, as his name is of German and possibly Slavic origin and points to the horologe, the clock, that punctuates the timing of his metaleptic revenge on his father.

The list might continue with many examples. They all share the same pattern: a Gaelic ancestor (Irish or Scottish) derived from an animal or physical trait, was anglicised at some point of recent history. In other words, many of the names that we encounter in *At Swim-Two-Birds* are actually the result of a process of erasure and rewriting by the British. We know that this was the result of both cultural pressure (the prestige of the English language as a carrier of high culture) and political and administrative pressure (specific laws that forced the natives to anglicise their names).

Such pressures incidentally encountered resistance in the Gaeltacht. Irish individuals withstood them the way Transylvanian Romanian natives resisted the pressure of magyarizing their names under Austro-Hungarian rule by adopting names for which there was no Hungarian correspondent. In *The Poor Mouth,* the *Ó Cúnasa* family (O'Coonassa) adopted historical non-English first names baptising their offspring Bonapart or Mhichelangalo (Michelangelo).

Let us now return to the scene evoked at the beginning of this article.

Cathal Ó Hainle has convincingly shown that the whole scene was modelled on *The Feast in Conán's House* "in which Fionn's host, Conán Cinnsléibhe requires Fionn to narrate anecdotes of his own and the Fionna's adventures" (1997: 25). However O'Brien introduces several changes; instead of one interlocutor (Conán), he has four (Diarmaid Ó Duibhne, Caolchrodha mac Mórna, Liagán Luaimneach and Gearr mac Aonchearda Béarra), all members of the Fionna; instead of narrating just episodes from the Fiannaíocht

(the Fenian cycle), Finn is also asked to recount exploits from the Ulster cycle and the Battle of Mag Rath cycle.

Finn MacCool, the warrior in old age, turned into a Mr. Storybook, reduced to passive powerlessness, appears like a pity caricature of the legendary hero. And, later in the book, he is actually treated with condescendence by the party of baptism-goers, as his trailing of the storytelling slows down the pace of their journey. His stumbling on hearing those faceless voices might have a deeper meaning. The voices are not just faceless, but defaced. This appears to be another instance of erasure. They have no face because of the darkness that descends on either the camp or his own mind, or – why not – on the whole of old Ireland.

As we have seen, the wise Conan gives each of the voices not one but *two* names: an unusually long Irish name, followed by a comparatively much shorter English one. Each name is complete with a patronymic and a toponym of origin. Why does he do that? After all, neither Conan nor Finn MacCool had any interaction with the British, and the *temps du récit* seems to be placed before the English colonising of Ireland. Yet this is not so sure: this decrepit version of the once fit Finn MacCool might belong to a much later period.

Cathal Ó Hainle points to this doubling of each Irish name with its "typically *barbaric* anglicised version" as creating a deliberately "ludicrous mess, a travesty of aspects of Fiannaiocht literature" (27) with the purpose of "illustrating how ludicrous was the whole process of anglicising Irish personal names and placenames" (28). Ó Hainle goes on to show that, despite his good command of the Irish language, O'Brien commits deliberate translation errors resulting in burlesque distortions of the legendary characters[3]. The effect is that of a bathetic anachronism, as "the old Fenian heroes are wrenched from their native Irish background and reduced to the level of the common mass of inhabitants of modern English-speaking Ireland" (1997:28).

Erika Mihálycsa also notes that this "Hercules-figure of Celtic legend portrayed as a decrepit, aged, rambling character" (2003: 176) fails to recognize the names of his estranged companions and that, ironically for an epitome of Irishness, "he understands their names in English rendering only." Mihálycsa goes on to suggest that this absurd situation "play[s] upon the very notion of Irish (oral) literary tradition made accessible in/through English translation" (176–7). This explanation implies that, of the two names given, the second one – the translated, thus the inauthentic one – prevails over the first, the authentic original. While this might be true for the degraded world that Finn is part of, we should not ignore that the reader is in a different position and perceives both names on the page almost at the same time. Whilst in Finn's decrepit mind cultural amnesia has erased all but the more recent history, the reader still has access to both the original and the written-over texts simultaneously.

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[3]   "In the literature, however, Liagán is almost always referred to alliteratingly as 'Liagán luaimneach ó Luachain Dheaghadh' (swift Liagan from Luachair Dheaghaidh), but O'Brien, making two quite clearly deliberate errors, takes the adjective *luimneach* for a (sur)name and anglicises it as "Lumley', and takes the preposition *ó* and the place-name *Luahair Dheaghaidh* for another surname and anglicises the lot as 'O'Lowther's-Day" (Ó Hainle 1997: 28).

Given this simultaneity, I see the doubling of the Irish names as the literary equivalent of subtitling in films[4]. The original names are given in the book, just like the original sound is preserved in a film. On top of that original sound, we are given a sanitized English version. That there is something wrong with this English subtitle we realize by comparing it with the original (and the novel's text does just that: juxtapose the two side by side graphically on the page): Cruachna Conalath becomes Galway, Cruach Conite is Phillipstown, Sliabh Riabhach is Baltinglass. Something seems to be missing from the anglicised version: not just the ethnic flavour and lyrical quality, but also the system of representation. Even to the non-Irish-speaker it is obvious that the Irish toponymics are descriptive compounds that point to a sensuous reality, while their English versions are merely functional. There is both history and topical localism in the former, and none in the latter.

One characteristic of these legendary names is that they include the indication of origin or residence in toponimics like Cruachna Conalath or Sliabh Riabhach. Such insistence on the geographical determination of a person might resonate with the old Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas*, that is, 'poems of place' or 'geographical poems'. Ridiculed by Wordsworth (who ironically went down in history as being himself a practitioner of such 'topographical poetry'), these surveyor's poems not only mapped the landmarks of a place down to the minutest details but they they also "describe[d] its spiritual and historical significance" (King 2000: 116). Attaching a placename to a person's name is a way of not just precising that person's origin, but also to anchor that person to the specific history, memory and culture of that place[5]. For, as Pat Sheeran has shown, "land and place are made of language as much as, if not more than, they are made of earth and buildings." (qtd in. Duffy 2004: 692). That is, placenames are not inert labels, but are an intrinsic part of the very thing they designate. They come to be regarded as "perfectly natural to [that] setting[6]." Needless to say this applies to placenemes in the original language, which are an indissoluble part of the *topos* itself in a way a translated placename will never be. Translating original placenames into another language is tantamount to erasing a large part of the cultural luggage they carry.

For readers coming from an English-speaking or anglicised Hibernian tradition, the mere mention of these forgotten originals is a nod to all this cultural luggage. For those unfamiliar with the Irish space, such names further defamiliarize their *signified,* by adding a dimension of exoticism. And, because of this 'exoticism' factor, these toponymics

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[4]   When speaking about film subtitling I have in mind just the coexistence of two streams of information delivered simultaneously and I deliberately ignore the film-specific discussion of their channel (or medium) of delivery. According to Gottlieb (2004), subtitling is a *diasemiotic* type of translation, as opposed to dubbing which is *isosemiotic*. Diasemiotic translation uses a different channel than the original (in the case of subtitling, the verbal original is translated into written text). All these considerations fall outside the scope of the present discussion.

[5]   To this Ó Hainle adds the historical argument according to which placenames were important to the Fenian cycle as a result of "the nomadic life style of the hunter-warriors of the Fionna" (1997: 27)

[6]   Compared with *Ui bhFailghe, Cruachna Conalath* and the others, that are "perfectly natural," writes Ó Hainle, "forms like Galway, Baltinglass, Elphin and particularly Philipstown *do violence* to that [historical and cultural] background." (1997:27–8, my emphasis)

also *aggrandize* and *hyperbolise* Irish realities, the same way the historical process of mythologising Finn into a larger-than-life character had aggrandised his stature to gigantic proportions.

Duffy speaks of the "*narrative* quality of Irish toponymy" as being "one of the distinctive characteristics of the Irish landscape-as-text." Irish placenames encapsulate a "narrative imagination of place in original stories and myths," which was subsequently lost in "standardised modern anglicised renditions of the Gaelic names." (2004: 694) While much of this narrative lore has become inaccessible to present generations, its vestigial traces are still here; "the euphony of the local place-name and its local pronunciation" still resides in the local consciousness "as a shadow of the old disconnected language." (695) And, it is this very *disconnectedness* of successive cultures (Irish versus British) that the juxtaposition of the two alternative (but not equivalent) placenames points to.

But again, I tend to see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty; rather than deplore the drama of disconetedness, I choose to see the way the author involves us, the readers. And I look at Conan's dual message as being directed not just at his estranged mentor Finn, but also at the reader. Unlike Finn, in whose prevailingly oral culture newer messages cover and smother the older ones, the reader has the advantage of being able to *read* both texts.

Thus, the dialogue between Finn and Conan can be seen as one of the rare instances when the original erasure is if not reverted then at least subverted. By refusing to completely obliterate the erased term, by allowing it to shimmer through the skin of the text like ghostly letters on a palimpsest set under the x-ray machine, by exhibiting both layers at once – traumatic erasure and pragmatic replacement – and by juxtaposing the lyrical expressivity of the old term with the clinical functionality of the new, Flann O'Brien does more than just help the reader grasp the old text. He takes a stance in the language battle of his time and suggest the moral and aesthetic superiority of the Irish over the English language. "Subtitling" ethnic literature might be useful, but it leads to an aesthetic disaster. More than just a mere explanation of exotic names, O'Brien's *doublage* acts as a trigger to responsible anamnesis. It revives history not as museum exhibit, but as a living creature. Thus, it is not an obituary, but a celebration.

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