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## Children of Destiny: Brian O’Nolan and the Irish Ready-Made School

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[T]he group pronouncement, sufficiently aestheticized, can, in the eyes of the mass audience, all but take the place of the promised art work.<sup>1</sup>

We are not called Ireland’s Heartless Hoaxer for nothing. In fact, we are not called Ireland’s Heartless Hoaxer at all.<sup>2</sup>

The scale of Ireland’s contribution to modernism has long been apparent. Yet it is only in recent years, with the enrichment and expansion of Irish Studies, that attention has been consistently trained on the particular geographical and historical sources of modern Ireland’s literary efflorescence, and on the paradoxes in which the country could produce works of art so apparently disproportionate to its underdeveloped, colonial status. At the same time, interest has developed in some of the apparently lesser lights of Irish writing in the interwar period. Just as modernist studies as a whole has trained its attention to hitherto marginal figures, and to new approaches to the more conventional pantheon, so Irish Studies has increasingly taken the opportunity to elucidate lesser-known texts alongside its own canon.<sup>3</sup> This essay will join that effort, with a discussion of certain comic texts from the 1930s. In one sense, much Irish writing in this period may be understood as ‘late modernist’ – as an engagement with the intimidating examples of the previous literary generation. Yet we must also see this body of work in the specific context of independent Ireland.

The texts I propose to discuss here are not works of art in a strict sense. Rather, they belong to a hybrid mode: journalism, satire, comedy, literary parody, interventions in public discourse. They were produced by a loose, shifting group of young intellectuals and writers, whose number consistently included Brian O’Nolan. O’Nolan would become better known, subsequent to this work, under other guises: as the novelist Flann O’Brien, author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), and as the newspaper columnist Myles na gCopaleen, who contributed the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column to the *Irish Times* for over two decades. The texts under discussion here bear some of the same spirit that animates those great comic productions; but they also

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1986), p.85.

<sup>2</sup> ‘An Impudent Scoundrel Unmasked!’ *Blather* I:3 (November 1934), reprinted in Flann O’Brien, *Myles Before Myles* ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988). Subsequent references to this book as *MBM* followed by page number.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Alex Davis, ‘Reactions from their burg: Irish modernist poets of the 1930s’, in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins, *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.135-155.

represent an earlier phase in O’Nolan’s work, which must be understood as somewhat distinct. The tone of the comic writings of the 1930s is ludic and light-footed, rarely descending to the splenetic bitterness that marked some of the later work of Myles na gCopaleen. They share with *Cruiskeen Lawn*, however, a close interest in contemporary debates: in particular about the politics of the Irish Free State in what was the second decade of its existence. Additionally, the early O’Nolan was one of a group of writers. His collaborators included his brother Ciarán O’Nolan, as well as Niall Sheridan, Niall Montgomery, Donagh MacDonagh. Most of the work under consideration was anonymous or pseudonymous: it is difficult to distinguish with any certainty the precise authorship of particular pieces. We must see instead a satirical cadre, developing a collective style and deliberately submerging individual identities behind textual facades.

O’Nolan, Sheridan and Montgomery started out as student pranksters. By 1931 they were writing in the alternative student publication of University College Dublin, *Comhthrom Féinne* (Fair Play). A mode of humorous writing emerged which became characteristic of the magazine, and of the group in which O’Nolan was central. After graduation, O’Nolan launched a new magazine, co-edited with his brother Ciarán and Niall Sheridan. *Blather* ran for five issues, from August 1934 to January 1935. Some of the material has subsequently been reprinted, but it has yet to receive the critical attention it merits.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of the epistolary controversies that these writers manufactured in the *Irish Times* in June and September 1940 – episodes in which the proliferation of names is central to the exercise. Towards the end of this article I shall consider this episode as a textual event, and also discuss the response to it offered by Patrick Kavanagh, in terms of the cultural politics of independent Ireland.

## Interjections and Rejoinders

*Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather* represent a notable, under-researched episode in the history of the modern Irish magazine – a history which, as Gerry Smyth reminds us, would stretch from AE’s *Irish Homestead* (1895-1923) and *Irish Statesman* (1923-1930) to *Kavanagh’s Weekly* (1952) and Sean O’Faolain’s *The Bell* (1940-1954). Smyth has shrewdly sketched some of the particularities of the periodical form, as ‘a means of engaging in up-to-the-minute exchange with colleagues and opponents’:

Whereas the major historical or literary treatise always risks being rendered *passé* by current events, the essay, the editorial, the work-in-progress and the review are present-oriented discourses, always provisional and placeable responses on the part of subjects locatable in time and space. They are *discursive* in the sense that they are recognisable interventions in ongoing debates, responses and interjections and rejoinders which imply other subjects and other points of view. Especially during the volatile years on either side of the revolution, Irish cultural and political opinion was constantly having to react to rapidly changing circumstances... the periodical press became at this time a sort of halfway house between the newspaper and the book... as a

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<sup>4</sup> There is a clear case for a complete edition of *Blather*. In the meantime, the most widely accessible version of its contents is contained in the collection *Myles Before Myles* (see note 2 above).

means for the Irish intellectual to intervene in the debate over national identity.<sup>5</sup>

*Blather* can productively be considered in this context: as a 'present-oriented' mode which responds to ongoing events, and which constructs an implied conversation with its readers and competitors. The magazine is in part a satire on the worthiness of the Irish magazine, with its indefatigable compulsion to 'intervene in the debate over national identity': but in making this satirical gesture, *Blather* becomes part of that debate. It challenges us to find a critical language that gives comedy its due, rather than merely relegating it to a zone of the unimportant. In the context of Irish writing, where much of the most important work has also been the funniest, this is an unwise move. One step towards giving the *Blather* generation its due is to attempt to historicize it.

From the early 1930s, it is already evident that their writing is a response to, and a negotiation of, a complex cultural situation. This needs to be grasped in several dimensions. Many of our general perceptions of the European 1930s are relevant: this was an interwar decade, an epoch of new levels of menace in geopolitics, the period of what Tyrus Miller calls late modernism.<sup>6</sup> But Irish writing in this period is additionally overdetermined. Brian O'Nolan's generation were the heirs to political independence, which was secured for twenty-six counties of Ireland in negotiations between nationalists and the British government in 1921. That turbulent political history imprinted itself on every generation in the Ireland of the time, but writers and artists articulated particularly complex relations to it. Between around 1880 and 1920, political nationalism had interacted in complex ways with a new surge of cultural nationalism. The various factions of this new movement – often referred to by the overarching term, the Irish Revival – sought to promote Irish culture, in many forms, at the expense of English, with the ultimate aim of laying the ground for political transformation. The political effects of cultural revival have become a point of contention. Yet whatever the literary revival's political efficacy, it left a legacy in Irish letters that was hard to forget or to transcend. In its exalted claims and its rhetoric of roots, it may be seen as parallel to, rather than direct cause of, the movement for political independence. And it was this dual legacy – of violence and dramatic change in Ireland's politics, and of experiment and high achievement in its literature – which Brian O'Nolan's generation of writers inherited, as opportunity and problem.

The Irish Free State's caution and narrowness of outlook have become notorious. Even Roy Foster, no friend of Catholic nationalism, admits that the state's 'rigorous conservatism' has become a 'cliché'.<sup>7</sup> The new state was unusually socially homogeneous.<sup>8</sup> Its cultural character consistently included self-definition against England, with the state appropriating the cultural politics and imagery of the revival. Central to this society's self-image was Catholicism. The revolution had been that of the Catholic middle class: after centuries of discrimination against their religion, it became effectively the official creed. In 1937 the Taoiseach Eamon de Valera drafted

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<sup>5</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto, 1998), pp.101-2. Smyth's is the finest study yet of the complex and important history of the modern Irish magazine.

<sup>6</sup> See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), Part One.

<sup>7</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.516.

<sup>8</sup> See Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp.107, 18.

a new Constitution which formalized the close relation between church and state. The Free State was culturally conservative. Repressive legislation was passed in several areas of cultural life, most notoriously the Censorship of Publications Act 1929. The draconian censorship that this heralded was partly aimed at protecting Ireland from the English popular press – it being understood that immoral publications could not derive from Ireland itself. But the censorship committee also banned the work of many Irish writers; indeed, to have been banned became a badge of distinction among writers.

The authors of *Blather* belonged to the very Catholic majority who had seized power, yet had an ambiguous relation to it. UCD, which Brian O’Nolan attended from 1929 to 1932, had been founded for Catholics. An official history of the National University of Ireland, published in 1932, stressed that the institution ‘represented truly the currents of ancestral Catholic and Irish culture. Its existence asserted and fixed the principle that the future outlook and organisation of Higher Education should be in conformity with the national tradition’.<sup>9</sup> Yet the university also generated dissent and irreverence. Anthony Cronin, a younger and later member of the native Irish intelligentsia, has best summarized the position of the intellectual in the independent state:

Only the intellectuals felt uncomfortable, for it was they who were most irked by the Catholic triumphalism, the pious philistinism, the Puritan morality and the peasant or *petit bourgeois* outlook of the new state. But they were in an ambiguous position, though one which had its compensations, for in the first place they were themselves inheritors of whatever privileges were going, and in the second they found it almost impossible to break with formal Catholicism, either in belief or practice.<sup>10</sup>

The UCD generation of the 1920s and 1930s, Cronin argues, were torn between obeisance to the nationalist revolution and hostility to the actual character of the new state. He thus identifies an ambiguous position: a generation caught between nationalism and Catholicism on one hand, their repudiation on the other. One response to this dilemma was laughter. But laughter is itself ambiguous: a response, but not a solution.<sup>11</sup> This essay will not suggest that the laughter of the *Blather* generation represented a thoroughgoing and cogent political critique. Comedy can be irresponsible as well as insightful. But we can see the politics of comedy already at work in *Comhthrom Féinne* in the early 1930s.

## Torturing Leprechauns

A recurrent theme, already, was Irish identity: or more particularly, the claims of the Literary Revival to have located and fixed the meaning of Irishness. The movement’s

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Corcoran (ed), *The National University Handbook 1908-1932* (Dublin: Sign of the Three Candles, 1932), p.67. I am grateful to the Flann O’Brien scholar Dr. Carol Taafe, of Trinity College Dublin, for this reference.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), p.49.

<sup>11</sup> Tyrus Miller’s account of the 1930s is additionally pertinent here, in its emphasis on the centrality of laughter and ‘a kind of bitter comedy’ (p.25) to the experimental writings of the period: see *Late Modernism*, esp. pp.51-62. *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for instance, might be placed within the framework he suggests; however, the tone of *Blather* is somewhat different, as I hope to show here.

towering figures, W.B. Yeats and John Millington Synge, are both objects of O’Nolan’s mischief. Yeats is transfigured into the figure of Lionel Prune, who visits UCD in 1932:

He was tall and willowy, and groaned beneath a heavy burthen of jet-black hair long untouched by tonsorial shears. His eyes were vacuous and yearning and looked out on the world through a pair of plane lenses. These latter were held erect on his nose by the device known as *pince-nez* and from the edge of one of them a thick black ribbon descended flowingly to his right-hand lapel buttonhole.<sup>12</sup>

The young Romantic Prune is a belated spoof of Yeats, who was by now in his final decade. Prune produces verses, in an accelerating comedy of the improbable, on his shirt cuffs, his watch, or the back of a dinner plate. The satire of the Revival is dispersed in this instance into a burlesque of aestheticism: Prune’s verses resemble Eliot’s more than Yeats’. The joke here, not uncharacteristic of O’Nolan, is on the very idea of modern poetry. The satire of John Millington Synge, however, is more focused on a specific national context. O’Nolan would snipe at Synge all the way through to the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, but never more tellingly than in *Comhthrom Féinne*’s introduction of ‘Samuel Hall’, the author of *The Bog of Allen*: ‘It is a wholesome Irish play, racy of the soil and Samuel Hall, written in the real traditional style, and a masterpiece of characterisation and pregnant dialogue’. The play amounts to a couple of pages: enough space for the cult of the West to be laid waste. Its dialogue – ‘Shure, wisha, musha, anish now, for goodness sake, what would you be wantin’?’ – is Synge-speak ridiculously exaggerated, but still recognizable enough to sting. Most incisive, though, is the opening stage direction:

*Scene*: The Kitchen in Allen Bogg’s hovel in the middle of the Bog of Allen, miles from dry land. The house was built by Gregory B. Bogg, Allen’s grandfather. As he could not find sand to build it on, he built it on the Bog. It is a typically Irish household. The floor is flagged with green moss between the cracks. A roaring fire of the best Wigan coal is burning in the hearth. In a corner is a bed with a white sow in it.... A bag-pipes are hanging on the wall, but not, unfortunately, so high up that a tall man could not reach them. Over the mantelpiece is a rusty iron pike for use in Insurrections. A rustic and homely smell of fish-and-chips permeates the atmosphere. Over in a corner a cupboard is let into the wall, with a heavy padlock and chain, in which leprechauns are stored. Below on the floor is a primitive rack, made of bog-oak, for torturing leprechauns who will not divulge where the Crock of Gold is hidden.<sup>13</sup>

The text ridicules the fetishization of the west of the country as the real Ireland – ‘The Hidden Ireland’, as the nationalist critic Daniel Corkery had dubbed it. The Free State had carried over much of the cultural baggage of the Revival: what was essential to Ireland was its countryside, where lingered the indigenous spirituality and integrity unknown to England, or indeed to Unionist Ulster.<sup>14</sup> The bog of Allen is the next best

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<sup>12</sup> *Comhthrom Féinne* IV: 1, 23 April 1932, *MBM* 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Comhthrom Féinne* V: 3, March 1933, *MBM* 40-43.

<sup>14</sup> See John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1991), ch 14.

surface to sand, for a builder: a note on the perversity of championing bogs as the ideal home of the people. Nationalism will lay claim to anything that suits its images – moss, for instance, thanks to its being green.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the hovel is a tableau of national motifs: pig-farming in one corner, Insurrections on the wall, leprechauns in the cupboard. The brisk, deadpan tone forges the space of a flattened, cartoon Ireland. The space, nominally, of a theatre: but an unreal space, a configuration destined never to get beyond the printed page. The theatre of Synge, the lampoon protests, is about as unreal as this: the reverse of the authenticity which is claimed for it. And amidst this critique, other elements bob: Wigan coal, ‘rustic and homely’ fish and chips. The incongruities are comic in themselves, but the point they seem to make is that Ireland remains wedded to England even in its proud rhetoric of disassociation. The polemic, such as it is, might seem contradictory: does it mock at Irish exceptionalism *and* scorning the country’s continuing relations with the British? But what the passage appears to nail is the embarrassing contradiction between the two.

### Long-Distance Lying

The state of Ireland was also the prime theme carnivalized by *Blather* itself, in the two subsequent years. *Blather*, like O’Nolan’s other projects, had diverse sources. It intervened in a local market dominated by *Dublin Opinion*, a rival often guyed in the pages of *Blather*. Its tone appears to draw on a contemporary English comic publication, *Razzle* – albeit with a distinctively Irish content replacing that of the London magazine, and with political satire far outweighing *Razzle*’s barrage of sexual innuendo. As what Anne Clissmann dubs an ‘anti-magazine’<sup>16</sup>, *Blather* sets itself against the conventions of magazine publishing, not by a chaos of unreadability but through deadly accurate parody. A short-lived parasite on the back of the existing media, *Blather* does not so much set its face against convention as perform gurning impressions of it. Cliché and norm are mined, and left exploded and exposed.

To make such claims for *Blather* is to pre-empt the magazine’s own rhetoric, which can be relied on to speak for itself:

*Blather* is here.

As we advance to make our bow, you will look in vain for signs of servility or for any evidence of a slavish desire to please. We are an arrogant and a depraved body of men. We are as proud as bantams and as vain as peacocks.

***Blather* doesn’t care.** [...]

*Blather* has no principles, no honour, no shame. Our objects are the fostering of graft and corruption in public life, the furthering of cant and hypocrisy, the encouragement of humbug and hysteria, the glorification of greed and gombeenism.<sup>17</sup>

This is from the first editorial, which toys with different registers and aims at a variety of effects. The most basic contradiction in the magazine’s rhetoric, as John Wyse Jackson notes, is between arrogance and abnegation: ‘*Blather* emphasizes its own vast

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<sup>15</sup> This detail may find an echo in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, first pub. 1939), where the character Trellis will only read books with green covers (p. 99).

<sup>16</sup> Anne Clissmann, *Flann O’Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), p.57.

<sup>17</sup> ‘*Blather* Is Here’, *Blather* I:1, August 1934, *MBM* 96-7.

importance at the same time as it announces that it just a poor amateur affair, not worth the paper it besmirches'.<sup>18</sup> What the two tones share is hyperbole. Whether flexing imaginary muscles or dismissing itself, the magazine must go to extremes. It is in this cultivation of extremity that *Blather* aims to estrange the public world upon which it is thrust: only by constant exaggeration can that world be outstripped and absurdized.

*Blather* regularly undercuts itself. It correctly predicts its own demise in a bar chart which shows its projected sales monthly figures shrinking to invisibility:

Those of our readers who are lucky enough to be working in laboratories can try the diagram under the microscope. If there is no result, they can try playing the page on the gramophone, using, if at all possible, a fibre needle. If there is no result, they can try putting it under the Hoover. If there is still no result, they have one last resort – blue litmus paper. If there is no chemical reaction, they can run along and buy sweeties, as people who spend their time on fool games like that deserve a few sweeties for their pains. What do *you* say?<sup>19</sup>

Flann O'Brien would return to the mind-bending qualities of invisible things in *The Third Policeman*. What we can note here is what is done with the self-deprecating starting point. It is extended into a kind of list, which inanely repeats ('If there is no result') through a series of physical incongruities ('try playing the page on the gramophone'), before being thrown up in the air ('run along and buy sweeties') and dismissed ('fool games', the magazine now says of its own recommendations). Finally *Blather* turns to the reader: 'What do *you* say?' is a characteristic gesture, disarmingly direct, spoof-solemn as it ambiguously genuflects to, or patronizes, the consumer. The paper regularly claims to have intimate knowledge of its reader:

'Not only that', you will write to us and say, 'but my grand piano is gone as well'.

But we know you.

You never had a grand piano.<sup>20</sup>

The magazine's tone slides from mode to mode with mercurial ease, parodying sundry targets then collapsing in on itself. The reader is addressed with wide-eyed mock politeness ('The credit is yours as well as ours. Are you glad?'<sup>21</sup>) in the midst of bogus special offers and fake competitions. These are trails that lead nowhere: *Blather* sets up the forms and functions of a modern magazine, but has no intention of seeing them through. The magazine genre is a surface on which to perform travesty and wit: behind it there is only the band of mockers. In this sense *Blather* functions like a mask, a two-dimensional disguise.

Comedy in *Blather* goes all the way down. We can rarely say, with this publication, that laughter is merely a tool in the service of some more solemn goal: for anything as solemn as all that will itself be laughed at soon enough. But the satire of *Blather* nonetheless exists in relation to the real world, the serious society against which its lunatic humour stands out. Irish party politics repeatedly provide its targets. The first editorial states that the magazine's aim is to 'injure and wreck the existing

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<sup>18</sup> John Wyse Jackson, 'Introduction', *MBM* 96.

<sup>19</sup> 'Our Tottering Circulation', *Blather*, I:2, October 1934, *MBM* 124.

<sup>20</sup> 'An Impudent Scoundrel Unmasked', *Blather* I:3, November 1934, *MBM* 122.

<sup>21</sup> 'Four Weeks Old Today!', *Blather* I:2, October 1934, *MBM* 122.



political parties’, by means of ‘distortion, misrepresentation and long-distance lying’. Indeed, ‘Much in the way of corruption has already been done. We have de Valera and the entire Fianna Fail Cabinet in our pocket; we have O’Duffy in a sack’ – the list goes on.<sup>22</sup> The tone strikes directly at the role of vested interests in Irish politics, to which Myles na gCopaleen would repeatedly return. But more broadly, what *Blather* offers is a political fantasy: a looking-glass land in which the pieties of politics are reconfigured to absurd effect. This is nowhere more vivid than in the crude photo-montages in which the head of Eamon de Valera is superimposed on the body of a long-jumper or a baby, while his name is attached to a figure wearing a kettle on its head.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, a portrait photograph of the prime minister is mislabelled ‘Mr Silas P. Hotchkiss. President of the Clanbrassil Street Brass Fender Founders and Tinsmiths’ Protection Association, Inc’. The seeming knockabout is the more pointed for taking as its subject the man who would extend his piety to the nation in the Constitution of 1937, and whose refusal to negotiate the Treaty of 1921 had been excused on the grounds that – as President of the putative Republic – he was not a politician but a symbol.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the calculated silliness of *Blather* appears in greater relief – and may have *been* a greater relief – the more solemn its subject matter. *Blather* – like *Cruiskeen Lawn* later on – manages to dream up an alternative Ireland, a ludic place which is the distorted mirror of the Free State and its post-colonial constraints.

### Parity with Jerrettspass!

Along the way it also belittles the assertions of the actual Ireland, as in its quixotic campaign on behalf of a small town on the Meath coast:

The present agitation for proper Atlantic ports at Galway, Killybegs and elsewhere, has in no small measure displeased *Blather*. Why? The reason is very simple. The pre-eminent claims of Bettystown have been passed over, and it is the sheerest folly on the part of those concerned to imagine that *Blather* is going to stand for it.

Ever since the good people of Bettystown bade The O’Blather a hearty *céad míle fáilte* when he went there to recuperate after his illness in 1924, *Blather* has had its eye on Bettystown. Only for five minutes was the *Blather* eye taken off Bettystown in those ten long years, and that was for two minutes in 1932, when the eye was moved up eight miles to watch the first train crossing the reconstructed viaduct over the Boyne and Drogheda. Nothing happened; the structure held, and the eye was immediately refixed on Bettystown.<sup>25</sup>

The key phrase here is ‘to have one’s eye on’, and the greatest comic strength of the passage lies in its insistence on, and intensification of, the phrase. The sport that

<sup>22</sup> ‘*Blather* Is Here’, *MBM* 97.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Our Sports Club’, *Blather* I:3, November 1934, *MBM* 128; ‘£30 In Pin-Money For Readers’, *Blather* I:5, January 1935, *MBM* 140-141. Another of *Blather*’s satires of de Valera can be found in the article ‘Two-Chamber Assembly or Six-Chamber Gun? Our Bid For Power: Fianna Fail Cabinet Join Blather Staff’, *Blather* I:2 (October 1934), not yet reprinted elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> See J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), p.49.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Whither Bettystown? Progress Or Decay: Our Stern Attitude’, *Blather* I:2, October 1934, *MBM* 106.

*Blather* has with it gets an extra potency from the geopolitical weight of the subject. For the claim that *Blather* has its eye on Bettystown is in part a sly reference to the old nationalist claim that the rest of the world has its eye on Ireland. In this respect the passage can productively be read in relation to a section of the ‘Cyclops’ episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (a book which, as I shall emphasize later, was of fundamental importance to O’Nolan and company), which begins with Lenehan’s assertion to the nationalist citizen that ‘Europe has its eyes on you’.<sup>26</sup> This casual rhetoric is easy flattery: the citizen is allowed to bask in the metonymic association with an Ireland that is supposedly the coming man of Europe, the focus of fascination for Paris and Amsterdam. After Joyce has interjected an extravagant parody of Irish forestry, we hear the citizen’s response:

- And our eyes are on Europe, says the citizen. We had our trade with the Spanish and the French and with the Flemings before those mongrels were pupped, Spanish ale in Galway, the winebark on the winedark waterway.
- And will again, says Joe.
- And with the help of the holy mother of God we will again, says the citizen, clapping his thigh. Our harbours that are empty will be full again, Queenstown, Kinsale, Galway, Blacksod Bay, Ventry in the kingdom of Kerry, Killybegs, the third largest harbour in the wide world with a fleet of masts of the Galway Lynches and the Cavan O’Reillys and the O’Kennedys of Dublin when the earl of Desmond could make a treaty with the emperor Charles the Fifth himself. And will again, says he, when the first Irish battleship is seen breasting the waves with our own flag to the fore, none of your Henry Tudor’s harps, no, the oldest flag afloat, the flag of the province of Desmond and Thomond, three crowns on a white field, the three sons of Milesius.<sup>27</sup>

There is no Joycean parody of this: the joke is that is beyond parody, for it already belongs to the legendary rhetorical world which Joyce usually juxtaposes with the discourse of the present. The passage can help us get a sense of what is at stake in *Blather*’s piece on Bettystown. In a sense, *Blather*’s contribution to Irish nautical policy is the parody missing from *Ulysses*: the response to the citizen that Joyce refrained from writing.

The citizen’s claims are about national power and sovereignty. They predict, as a future which is even now latent in the present, an Ireland with the puissance and wherewithal to sail under its own colours, to trade on its own terms with Europe. The response of *Blather* to his magnificent speech might be – and where is Bettystown in all this? In O’Nolan’s version, The O’Blather – fabled proprietor of the magazine – offers a speech of his own in praise of the place, including the promise to ‘build and adorn Bettystown until it becomes the fairest and the brightest gem in the diadem of Eire’. ‘Nor’, adds *Blather*,

are the claims of the town in anywise extravagant. Ten years ago their demands were modest: ‘Parity with Jerrettspass!’ was the simple rallying-cry of the good townspeople. It was only after a hard and bitter fight that this was conceded.... Today Bettystown, marching with the times and eager to seize the

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<sup>26</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, corrected text ed. Hans Walter Gabler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.268.

<sup>27</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.269.

opportunities opened up by the progress of modern life, asks in a voice that is dispassionate, free alike from the thick bluff of the bully and the fawning pleading of the cringer, that it be provided an Atlantic deep-water harbour.

The construction of this harbour was at all times desirable. With the advent of war-rumours in the Far East, however, it becomes an imperative necessity, notwithstanding anything the greybeards of Skerries or Laytown may croak to the contrary. It follows that a betrayal of Bettystown by the present Administration would make the establishment of the *Blather* Dictatorship a contingency in our national life which could not in reason be further postponed.<sup>28</sup>

The exalted claims for the naval potential of Bettystown rebound on to those places whose nautical claims really were being exalted. They sound just as strategically vital as Bettystown: and this at a time when the military use of ports was still a sensitive issue between British and Irish governments. It was not until 1938 that de Valera, in negotiation with Neville Chamberlain, regained six ports which had been pledged to provide Britain with support in time of war. Neutrality, de Valera told his supporters, was not a real possibility until Ireland had regained possession of these.<sup>29</sup> Yet when World War Two broke out, Joseph Lee bluntly notes, 'For practical purposes, Ireland had neither an air force nor a navy'.<sup>30</sup> *Blather* suggests that Ireland's proud strides towards securing its sovereignty are equivalent to the vital task of developing Bettystown harbour. At points like this, its textual carnival is also a political rebuke.

### Made, not Written

To think of the group's work this way allows us to invoke another, less local context for *Blather*. I began by invoking that canon of Irish modernism – the masterpieces of Yeats and Joyce, for instance – which is ambiguously placed inside and outside the European literature of its time. *Ulysses* may be among the greatest novels to come out of Paris; but as commentators have recently re-emphasized, it is obsessed with a history, geography and politics rooted in Dublin.<sup>31</sup> We might equally try to view *Blather* through a continental optic as well as an Irish one – but here, rather than the overarching 'modernism', the most suggestive frame is that of the *avant-garde*. Since the publication of Renato Poggioli's classic study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962), the relation between these two terms has been much debated.<sup>32</sup> But for all the ambiguity around the concept, points of connection are evident in *Blather*'s status as a playful and experimental magazine, a collective production of a transient and occasional product, rather than an individual and individually-authored work of art. In its cackling antagonism with the public world and its incorrigibly overheated assertions, the *Blather* project can be read as an ambiguous, belated echo of those European avant-garde groups – Futurism, Dada and Surrealism – in which the

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<sup>28</sup> 'Whither Bettystown?', op.cit, *MBM* 107.

<sup>29</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p.104.

<sup>30</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, p.236.

<sup>31</sup> See Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in 'Ulysses'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> For a lucid brief history, see Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), ch 4.

individual artist was also a member of the collaborative team, and in which the magazine and manifesto outweighed the single-authored opus.

Lest this comparison be thought simply fanciful, we should take note of Niall Sheridan's memoir of the period, in which he describes the group's plan to write a novel collectively. O'Nolan, he recalls, proclaimed in the mid-1930s that 'the principles of the Industrial Revolution must be applied to literature. The time had come when books should be made, not written – and a "made" book had a better chance of becoming a best-seller'. Sheridan, O'Nolan, MacDonagh and Denis Devlin thus planned work on 'the Great Irish Novel', to be entitled *Children of Destiny*. The four, O'Nolan proposed, would write the book in different sections, 'then stick the pieces together in committee'. As much as possible of the book would be borrowed and rehashed from elsewhere. As such, 'Children of Destiny would be the precursor of a new literary movement, the first masterpiece of the Ready-Made or Reach-Me-Down School'.<sup>33</sup>

That novel would never quite be manufactured, though Flann O'Brien's debut novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) would take on some of its qualities. But another evident outlet for such energies was *Blather* itself, which indeed made use of 'ready-made' visual materials, collaged into new forms. It is difficult as yet to be certain of what Sheridan understood by the ready-made school – how extensive the parallel with European avant-garde movements was supposed to be, and what its real implications were amid the prevailing comic tone. But we can see O'Nolan and Sheridan, in the Dublin of the mid-1930s, toying with echoes of continental ideas, playfully using them to redescribe their own approach to textual production. One perceives both genuine resemblance, and ironic distance, when one considers the Ready-Made School as a belated Dublin burlesque of Dada, and *Blather* as its eccentric, sputtering vehicle.

Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* offers us four defining moods of the avant-garde spirit: activism, antagonism, nihilism, and agonism. In different degrees, all these are visible in *Blather* – but we may focus on the first two, less extreme categories. Activism, Poggioli writes, is 'the sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm'. He is thinking notably of Italian Futurism's machine aesthetics, but in another sense a 'sportive enthusiasm' characterizes the jesting *Blather* school as well. Antagonism, meanwhile, denotes the tendency in modern movements to oppose elements in the existing culture and media: 'the movement formed in part or in whole to agitate *against* something or someone'.<sup>34</sup> *Blather's* version of this is the generalized programme of insult and offence, the incessant jibes at rivals and national institutions. Perhaps the most frequent target of all was Eamon de Valera himself, whose image as well as his name were – as we have already observed – repeatedly taken in vain. The prose fragment 'Cavalcade' attacks down another avenue:

Mr Eamonn de Valera arrived.

Mr Eamonn de Valera arrived, accompanied by his son, Vivion.

Mr Eamonn de Valera arrived, accompanied by Mr Vivion de Valera.

Messrs Eamonn and Vivion de Valera arrived.

Messrs Vivion and Eamonn de Valera arrived.

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<sup>33</sup> Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', in Rudiger Imhof (ed), *Alive Alive O! Flann O'Brien's 'At Swim-Two-Birds'* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp.72-81 (72-74).

<sup>34</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968; first pub. 1962), p.25; for more extensive discussion, pp.27-40.

Mr Vivion de Valera arrived, accompanied by Mr Eamonn de Valera.  
Mr Vivion de Valera arrived, accompanied by his father, Eamonn.<sup>35</sup>

From the first issue in August 1934, this is among of *Blather*'s weirdest estrangement effects. At one level we witness a sheer fascination with verbal possibility – with the manipulation of language with, indeed, 'sportive enthusiasm'. The fragment toys, *a la* Stein, with repetition and difference, rhythm and change, sounds reiterated in slowly shifting order. More specifically, it clearly refers us to the language of the press or the society report: what is gayed, in a sense, is the delicacy with which the media have developed a whole battery of phrases for describing the same formal event. The rhetoric of the press is hollowed out by this performance – almost a grammatical exercise – in recurrence and variation. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the silliness of the passage – the trivializing effect that its pettiness and pedantry has upon its subjects. To discuss the text of *Blather*, like many of O'Nolan's works, is to flick between serious analysis and the recognition of clownish comedy. But this is a continuum, not an opposition: the comic, here, is serious, and vice versa.

In the ceaseless comedy of its performance, *Blather* seems to place avant-garde comparisons in parentheses. If the magazine borrows something of the rhetorical excess and self-promotion of the avant-garde, it also displays a penchant for found materials, borrowed and repeated images – in that collage effect which, in Marjorie Perloff's words, 'always involves the transfer of materials from one context to another, even as the original context cannot be erased'.<sup>36</sup> 'The trick of collage', note the Group *Mu* authors quoted by Perloff, 'consists... of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition'.<sup>37</sup> This is clearly true of the photo-montages of *Blather*, in which the same head of de Valera is transposed in November on the body of an athlete, in January on that of a baby. *Blather* does not ask us to take these images seriously – in fact they would fail if we did. Its own rhetoric is as much the object of laughter as any of the features of Irish life it twits. It should be remembered, though, that the avant-gardes – notably Dada – had included strong comical and parodic aspects themselves, specializing in the grotesque and absurd. Indeed, Poggioli treats 'humorism' as a standard feature of the avant-garde, whether its laughter be a nihilistic reaction to modern science, a parody of art, of the 'infantile cerebralism' of verbal play and nonsense verse.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, *Blather* does not conceive itself as part of a concerted and coherent political programme, as did for instance the Russian or Italian Futurists.<sup>39</sup> It represents, rather, a compound of comedy and satire, playful anarchy and pointed polemic. The result is not a cogent manifesto but an unpredictable cocktail of effects. Poggioli's description of the avant-garde's characteristic 'nihilism' captures something of *Blather*'s anarchic spirit, but not the tone of the production, which ranges from wry to uproarious.

The most influential of all academic accounts of the avant-garde has come from Peter Bürger. His *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974, translated into English in 1984) postulates a clear divide between a modernist aestheticism dedicated to preserving the pure sphere of art, and an avant-garde devoted to reintegrating the

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<sup>35</sup> 'Cavalcade', *Blather* I:1, August 1934, *MBM* 162.

<sup>36</sup> Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p.47.

<sup>37</sup> Group *Mu*, eds., *Collages, Revue d'Esthétique*, nos.3-4 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), pp.34-5, quoted in Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp.140-143.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Perloff's reflection on Dada: 'the manifesto is designed less to move the masses to action than to charm and give pleasure to one's coterie, to those who are like-minded'; *Futurist Moment*, 114.

aesthetic into everyday 'praxis'. Bürger's work has itself, in turn, come under severe scrutiny – for instance, for its apparent conflation of modernism with aestheticism, and for its imprecise account of the literary or artistic 'institution' from which the avant-garde seeks to break. But it is possible that the issues he raises have an altered pertinence in the specifically Irish context from which *Blather* emerges. One way into this is offered by Terry Eagleton, who observes that 'If there is a high modernism in Ireland, there is little or no avant-garde – little of that iconoclastic experiment which seeks to revolutionize the very conception and institution of art itself, along with its relations to political society'.<sup>40</sup> Yet Eagleton himself is soon to be found reading the Irish Revival as a whole, with its assorted theatrical, political and spiritual activities, in precisely those terms: 'a quite astonishing transgression of the frontiers between the aesthetic and the social, of a distinctively avant-gardist kind'.<sup>41</sup> Even the poetry of Yeats, he notes, can be seen in an Irish context as socially performative rather than as purely literary.<sup>42</sup> As Eagleton reminds us elsewhere, writing in Ireland had frequently possessed an interventionist and rhetorical character:

The speech from the gallows, along with the sermon, the sectarian pamphlet, the tall tale, the statement from the dock, the denunciation from the church altar and the address from the hustings, are among the most venerable of Irish literary genres. They are performative rather than representational pieces of discourse, as befits a society where, from Swift and Sterne to Bram Stoker and James Joyce, literary realism never really took root, and where the frontier between art and politics was never exact.<sup>43</sup>

In this sense the congress between the social and the aesthetic that Eagleton posits in the Revival is a continuation of, not a break with, tradition. *Blather* itself clearly represents another episode in this tale of discursive intervention, public textuality, mischief on the border of the literary and the political. Indeed, Gerry Smyth's account of the Irish journal as an interventionist, argumentative form, which we considered earlier, already lands us in this cultural territory. *Blather*, in parodying that genre, takes this mode of Irish public textuality to another level of self-consciousness: it gleefully makes a formal intervention in what was already a form dedicated to intervention. If the historical avant-gardes of Bürger's account sought to dissolve the 'institution of art' from within, *Blather* performs a destabilizing action from another cultural location, that of the periodical press. As an 'anti-magazine', however, it subverts public discursive norms in a manner analogous to Perloff's description of the Futurist manifesto, 'occupying as it does a "space that lies between the arts" and conflating verbal strategies that do not conventionally cohere'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, *Blather* fits peculiarly well into the stand-off that Perloff develops between an austere high-modernist aesthetic of autonomy and an avant-garde tendency towards rhetoric, the address and implication of the audience, and all the other elements of what Michael Fried disparagingly called 'theatre'.<sup>45</sup>

The question of the aesthetic can be framed differently, in a way that brings us back to modernism. The Ready-Made School were all post-revolutionary writers; as

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<sup>40</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p.299.

<sup>41</sup> Eagleton, *Heathcliff*, p.303.

<sup>42</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), p.284.

<sup>43</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Larry Kept His Mouth Shut', *London Review of Books* 23:20, 18 October 2001, p.19.

<sup>44</sup> Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p.111.

<sup>45</sup> See Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, pp.109-110.

pertinently, they were also post-Joycean writers. *Ulysses*, in particular, was a challenge to them – a work which had made new literary possibilities imaginable, but which was also an almost impossible act to follow. Many twentieth-century writers, in many places, were intimidated by Joyce’s example; but none so struggled with it as unendingly as Brian O’Nolan himself. O’Nolan’s entire career is studded with reference to his precursor – references which would grow more splenetic and frustrated as the decades passed. Virtually on his death bed, in his final interview, O’Nolan was still to be found harping on Joyce, as though in a last, self-defeating attempt to wriggle clear of his legacy.<sup>46</sup> Anthony Cronin records that even in the *Blather* years, O’Nolan’s UCD generation had adopted a convenient view of Joyce: ‘his challenge would be defused by making him a mere logomachic wordsmith, a great but demented genius who finally went mad in his ivory tower. Admittedly he was a great low-life humorist as well, but he was one whose insensate dedication to something called art would finally unhinge him’.<sup>47</sup> Joyce was thus treated as ‘predominantly aesthetic’ – a view which O’Nolan was still espousing in his essay on Joyce in 1951.<sup>48</sup> It is as though O’Nolan and company hold to a caricatured version of Bürger’s account of modernism. O’Nolan’s own dedication, from the early 1940s on, to writing for the newspapers must be viewed in this context. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column was much preoccupied with the idea of ‘art’ – an idea from which the column itself was generically excluded.<sup>49</sup> ‘Poetry’, Myles na gCopaleen would complain, ‘gives no adequate return in money, is expensive to print by reason of the waste of space occasioned by its form, and nearly always promulgates illusory concepts of life’.<sup>50</sup> If some of O’Nolan’s later writing could be characterized by the merely philistine hostility to art hinted at here, the earlier work of *Blather* suggests an more stimulating play with the border between the real and the unreal, the aesthetic and the journalistic. O’Nolan, with his dread of the pretentious, might have mocked any association with the idea; but *Blather*’s montages and distortions create a belated Irish counterpart to some of the features of the ‘historical avant-garde’, aestheticizing and making ludic the strange real world of Ireland in the 1930s. What we witness in *Blather* is a one-off: a half-advertent Irish avant-garde, an anti-aestheticism that briefly flowers as an anti-aesthetic.

## Na2 Co3

*Blather* was a kind of collective façade, and it was purportedly backed by another fiction: the O’Blather, aged statesman and proprietor. But in the mid-1930s the forest of guises had hardly begun. It would flourish more luxuriantly in the *Irish Times* of 1940, in the last instance to be examined here of the *Blather* generation’s interference in public conversation. Here, on two occasions, Brian O’Nolan and several friends developed spurious, lengthy debate on the letters pages. In June 1940, a controversy was manufactured out of an innocent reader’s letter requesting that the Dublin public should support its theatre. O’Nolan wrote to the paper as ‘F. O’Brien, Dublin’, and a series of other strange aliases followed this one into the discussion. The controversy

<sup>46</sup> See Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p.247.

<sup>47</sup> Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p.52.

<sup>48</sup> See Brian Nolan, ‘A Bash In The Tunnel’, in Flann O’Brien, *Stories and Plays* (London: Paladin, 1991), pp.169-175.

<sup>49</sup> See Joseph Brooker, *Flann O’Brien* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), ch 6.

<sup>50</sup> Myles na g Copaleen, *The Best of Myles* (London: Picador, 1977), p.239.

spiralled into a surreal series of ridiculous claims about great literary figures, whom the various correspondents claimed to have known personally. F.O'Brien, Lir O'Connor, Whit Cassidy and others outbid and outdid each other in deliberately absurd assertions about the hair of Henrik Ibsen or the sex of Joseph ('Josephine') Conrad. The controversy lasted over a fortnight, and exactly a month after its end a new one was generated, this time around a book review by the poet Patrick Kavanagh. Contributors included H.P., Whit Cassidy, Paul Desmond, Luna O'Connor, 'F.L.J', N.S. Harvey, Judy Clifford, Jno. O'Ruddy, Hilda Upshott, The O'Madan, 'South American Joe', 'Lanna Avia', 'Na2 Co3', and F. McEwe Obarn – not to mention the mysterious Oscar Love, a shadowy figure whose name appears to gesture back at the teasing personae of Wilde. Through the first summer of the Second World War, an unusual amount of space was given over to this farcical activity.

Like *Blather*, the controversies were a joint production. It is difficult to ascertain the authorship of any particular letter, and it is possible that some were written by strangers getting in on the act. The reader of one of these controversies is faced with a mysterious body of writing, whose peculiar character deserves some reflection. In one sense it is inherently a thing of fragments, a chance collection of bits to be placed in chronological sequence. Its authors are certainly multiple, though we cannot be sure how multiple. It has no predetermined order, no destination inscribed in it from the start: it is a text whose end its first author cannot foresee. At the same time, the controversy it possesses a kind of continuity: the comic spirit that runs through the whole is a signal asking not only to be received and interpreted correctly, but to be appropriated and redirected. The debate tacitly asks those who get it to join in and extend it: to pick up the tone is to enlist in a restricted club. A kind of unitary work – though one without a central narrative – is fashioned: but this is done by a process of calculated accident. The chancy nature of the letters column, which might always attract another uninvited author, is taken into account, chosen as the very basis of the enterprise. The fake controversy is built on the vagaries of the public textual space offered by the newspaper: it acknowledges and invites the irruption of contingency and surprise.

A number of the features of *Blather*, and indeed of O'Nolan's other work, are clearly visible here. We may note the following. Comedy is the genre of choice – a comedy pushing towards absurdity and the ridiculous. Authorship is not single or clear, but scattered among a series of names. The work is a collation of fragments, disjointed almost by design. It is open to chance and contingency. It takes place in public – and not in a book, but in the workaday reams of the daily press. Yet it is also somewhat esoteric: its tone must be decoded by the able. It forms a sort of secret message in plain view: the reading matter, perhaps, of a coterie with the right references.

Patrick Kavanagh, bringing the second controversy to a close, thought that he had detected another, more telling feature. In the review that had started the second controversy, he recalled, he had written of 'the empty virtuosity of artists who are expert in saying nothing. Ploughmen without land.... if ever a critic was proved right, all round, by his critics it happened this time'. Kavanagh believes that he has seen through to the vacant heart of the epistolary satirists:

It is to be feared that the diletantish disciples of Joyce and Eliot are no more a credit to their masters than are the followers of Lord Baden-Powell and Margaret Mitchell [the Boy Scouts and *Gone With The Wind* had featured in



the controversy]. I am referring chiefly to the undergraduate-magazine writers who reached the heights of epic literature in a balloon filled with verbal gas....

As I write these words a feeling of deep pity comes over me – the pity that is awakened by the contortions of a clown’s funny face.... There is tragedy here, and I for one, am shy to bring these literary scouts and touts to a raw awareness of their tragedy. Too soon they will know the misery of literary men without themes, poets without burdens, ploughmen without land.<sup>51</sup>

Kavanagh seizes the tone of the conversation, abruptly reinstating the voice of regretful sincerity in the teeth of the many layers of irony which have preceded this contribution. His admonition is oddly rich in implication, and is worth mulling over.

‘Undergraduate-magazine writers’: given that they had graduated some eight years previously, this is less a description than a condemnation. The correspondents, in Kavanagh’s eyes, are young wits, callow, untested souls. His central charge is emptiness: O’Nolan can generate verbiage from nothing, spin the most elaborate of forms around the most minimal content. The terms of Kavanagh’s description suggest an opposition between earth and air: the land that the honest literary ploughman needs, and the air into which the ballooning ‘gas-man’ sails. This looks like a version of the opposition between the Irish Revival and Joyce: on one hand localism, peasantry, the rural; on the other, the Dedalian flight beyond nets and constraints, into the airspace of modernity. In this sense, O’Nolan’s faction carries the sign of the future, the literary attitude which will last into the rootless days of the later twentieth century: Kavanagh’s is a naive rhetoric of earth. Still, there is something more precise at stake in Kavanagh’s critique: for he is drawing a distinction between the generation of Joyce and that of O’Nolan, the high modernist and the man who comes after. The latter figure is the ‘dilettante’, left – *unlike* his modernist heroes – with nothing to say. The ‘tragedy’ Kavanagh posits is the predicament of the writer in this time and place, faced with the complex realities of political independence rather than the impending dream of the Republic; the writer, Anthony Cronin adds, whose subject matter has been given its definitive treatment by Joyce.<sup>52</sup> Kavanagh’s ultimate implication is that the *Blather* generation is already showing its decadence.

We should take Kavanagh’s strictures seriously. The literary ventures of O’Nolan and his associates cannot be reckoned wholly successful. *Blather* itself only survived for five months. O’Nolan’s career as a novelist stalled after the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Longmans’ rejection of his follow-up, *The Third Policeman*. A number of commentators have argued that his subsequent devotion to journalism – a result of this initial contact with the *Irish Times* – was at best a compromise, at worst simply a waste of his gifts.<sup>53</sup> The other members of the *Blather* generation made still less literary impact after the 1930s. But to reconstruct the context of their work in the 1930s is to begin to see an episode in Irish cultural history which has been given insufficient attention. In one sense, *Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather* join existing Irish traditions, of broadside, satire and parody. They also form a part of the history of the Irish magazine which has not been given space in existing narratives. At the same time, they belong to their own moment, arriving in the wake of high modernism as well as the Irish Revival, and satirizing both those formations.

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Literary Criticism’, *Irish Times*, 7 August 1940, *MBM* 225.

<sup>52</sup> Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, p.ix.

<sup>53</sup> See for instance Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p.257, and Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.512.

The ludic interventions and cut-ups of *Blather*, I have suggested, can be understood as a belated, parodic Irish contribution to the European avant-garde. Around the magazine we might begin to construct an alternative cultural history of Ireland in the 1930s. This would involve failure as much as success, laughter as well as misery. It would read the history of the new state through the cracked looking-glass – or perhaps the blue litmus-paper – of comedy, with its peculiar distortions and revelations.

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