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FLANN O’BRIEN, WITTGENSTEIN, AND THE IDLING OF LANGUAGE

Abstract. This article examines unrecognized points of conceptual and stylistic convergence between the work of Flann O’Brien and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Though operating in quite different generic and discursive modes, both writers critique impulses to metaphysical systems, idealized models of language, and skepticism. O’Brien and Wittgenstein adopt as correctives to these tendencies techniques to train their readers’ attention on the zones of overlap in linguistic usage where points of confusion tend to arise. Finally, this comparison with O’Brien casts new light on Wittgenstein’s later work as it illuminates satirical and ironizing styles that have often been overlooked.

Flann O’Brien, the most widely recognized pseudonym of Brian O’Nolan, has in recent years been recognized as a major experimental Irish writer whose work has drawn comparisons to that of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Whereas Beckett’s solution to the problem of writing after Joyce was to pursue a minimalist aesthetic and a reduction of literary forms, O’Brien adopted alternative strategies of metafiction, fantasy, and satire in works such as *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, *The Poor Mouth*, and *The Dalkey Archive*. While recognition of his achievements as a novelist has grown in recent years, it was primarily his satirical column in the *Irish Times*, Cruiskeen Lawn, written under the pseudonym Myles na Gopaleen, that reached the largest and most avid audience during his lifetime. Despite the formal heterogeneity of his work, O’Brien’s oeuvre exhibits conceptual and discursive consistencies that, I argue, come into focus when placed in relation to the work...
of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The aim of this article is to illuminate these surprising and unrecognized points of methodological convergence between the novelist and the philosopher and to think through their consequences for our understanding of both. Recent scholarship has begun to reevaluate the work of Wittgenstein in relation to the larger field of literary modernism, and this article also contributes to that unfinished project.2

In his later lectures and writings, especially *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein worked to relieve modern philosophy of its tendencies toward metaphysical systems, theoretical generalization, scientism, and skepticism—impulses that O’Brien also combats in much of his writing. Intractable problems of metaphysics and epistemology arise, Wittgenstein argues, when language is removed from its ordinary situations of use. Such problems may be dissolved by recognizing the differences among the multitude of “language games” and restoring terms to their normal domains of usage. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey write of Wittgenstein’s later work, “Gone . . . is the grand enterprise of theory building in the image of science, or the construction of speculative systems. In their place is the apparently mundane activity of describing how linguistic expressions are used in practice.”3

False analogies and category errors arise when, for example, the language of physics is applied to discussions of mind or when causal explanation is invoked where only references to reasons should apply. Of a particular paradox regarding mental sensations, Wittgenstein suggests that the “paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever.”4 Wittgenstein’s interventions in many long-standing problems in the philosophy of language and mind take the form of observations on the heterogeneity of language games and their differential conditions of application.

The kind of understanding that Wittgenstein promotes requires attention to specific cases embedded in particular forms of life. Literature generally—and the works of Flann O’Brien in particular—may serve as a training ground for this kind of attention to the rules and grammar of particular language games. Garry Hagberg writes that “it is perhaps literature that best provides the vast catalogue of cases of other- and self-understanding of precisely the kind Wittgenstein repeatedly suggested we assemble,” and he suggests that literary texts often serve as “reminders of what we actually, contra the picture, say and do—in order
to change our way of seeing, to loosen the grip of the falsely unifying picture." In his fiction and satirical newspaper column, O'Brien's writing satirizes the impulse to generality and theory building; he constructs scenarios that underscore the ways that language tends to be used and what happens when normal usage is violated. It is in this way that his project should be read as concordant with Wittgenstein's.

Most often, it is scientism that comes under Wittgenstein's attack, and O'Brien frequently draws limits on the application of scientific discourses where other linguistic practices are more useful. P. M. S. Hacker argues that, with regard to the natural sciences and mathematics, Wittgenstein's form of philosophy "can clarify their conceptual features, and restrain their tendency to transgress the bounds of sense." This can also serve as a fair account of O'Nolan's many engagements with the sciences, such as Myles na Gopaleen's response to certain pronouncements of Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger, in which he asks:

What does Einstein know of the use and meaning of words? Very little, I should say—though in that department of human folly he would, no doubt, be "inclined to consider" certain things in his capacity of layman. For instance, what does he mean by terms like "truth" and "the facts of experience"? We do not know and can therefore extract no meaning from his speech. His attempt to meet shrewd newspaper readers on their own ground is not impressive, and involve in his mind confusion of the function of the word and that of the mathematical symbol. Neither can be expressed in terms of the other. This is an absolute exclusion. No mathematical statement can be "explained" in terms of words. The "truth" and "facts" established mathematically are mathematical truths and facts, things valid within the mathematical canon but not necessarily reconcilable with either our Greek word aletheia or with that grim corpus of hallucination, the "facts of experience."?

Like Wittgenstein, Myles distinguishes the uses of specialized language (such as mathematics and physics) from those of ordinary language to draw distinctions between the rules, criteria, and functions of what Wittgenstein calls distinct "language games." Myles also asserts the utility of ordinary forms of language where such use is appropriate. He suggests that, with regard to questions concerning not physics or mathematics but "truth," Einstein would be well instructed "to consider" certain things in his capacity of layman." This can be recognized as a rather Wittgensteinian suggestion, since it implies that Einstein has many capacities—fluency in multiple language games—and that, in this instance, the language of theoretical physics may not be most
appropriate. Further, Myles insists that his own authority derives from his familiarity with ordinary linguistic usage and practices: “I am, forsooth, a layman!” (Further Cuttings, p. 97). While Myles is making claims about apparently philosophical categories—“truth” and “experience”—he rather surprisingly suggests that it is not as a philosopher but as a layman that he is best equipped to deploy and understand these terms.

Despite Myles’s appeal to one’s capacity as a “layman,” it does not follow that O’Nolan adopts a form of anti-intellectualism or that he makes any simple or consistent identification with the average person. Rather, like Wittgenstein, his concern is with the uses and misuses of discursive tools, whether they are those of the man on the street (a figure who recurs in Myles’s columns) or the specialist vocabularies of particular disciplines. Myles often exhibits an impressive range of knowledge, and while this is often performed in an ironizing mode, his erudition also has the effect of distancing himself from the layman with whom he will sometimes tactically identify (as may be implied by the out-of-place, Shakespearean interjection “forsooth”). Carol Taaffe argues that while Cruiskeen Lawn often deflates the pretensions of the elite, the “Plain People of Ireland” are just as often targets of the column’s satire. She cites one passage in which Myles clarifies the singular position he occupies: “I need hardly say that there is no foundation whatever for the assertion that I am no different from the people to whom I speak. I am, as they have good reason to know, very different indeed; furthermore, I am even more different from the persons I’m not speaking to, and there are thousands of them.” By turns the “layman” and the posturing mandarin, Myles tactically invokes a variety of positions in order to illuminate and ironize the linguistic absurdities that might arise in virtually any domain.

The incursion of specialized, academic knowledge into the domains of ordinary practices, usage, and common sense is also a target of critique within the fictional worlds that Flann O’Brien constructs. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein famously writes that “to imagine a language game is to imagine a form of life” (PI, §19). This might serve as a fair account of O’Brien’s strategy in The Third Policeman, which stylistically shows how absurd one’s world becomes when the impulse to theorize takes over. The narrator of the novel has become obsessed with the bizarre metaphysical and scientistic writings of a thinker named “de Selby.” The speculative theories of de Selby challenge the givenness or validity of ordinary experience and practices in ways that only slightly exaggerate the claims of certain modern philosophers and physicists.
The absurd world of the novel is one in which this thinker’s thought experiments, theoretical speculations, and epistemic doubts are made the conditions of one’s lived experiences. The narrator notes, “It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena” (CN, p. 265).

Wittgenstein wishes to relieve philosophy of precisely this form of doubt and the intractable, absurd problems that tend to arise from it. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he directly addresses the radical doubt that René Descartes famously established as a method for modern philosophy in which, for example, one might entertain the premise that the figures outside one’s window are mindless automata.

But that is not to say that we are in doubt because it is possible for us to imagine a doubt. I can easily imagine someone always doubting before he opened his front door whether an abyss did not yawn behind it, and making sure about it before he went through the door (and he might on some occasion prove to be right)—but for all that, I do not doubt in such a case. (*PI*, §84)

The tone of absurdity with which Wittgenstein responds to such thought experiments marks their difference from the ordinary language games to which Wittgenstein would restore language, and the same sense of absurdity permeates the world of *The Third Policeman*. De Selby asserts, for example, that the continuity of experience is an illusion that conceals what is actually a succession of discrete, unconnected states. “The illusion of progression he attributes to the inability of the human brain—‘as at present developed’—to appreciate the reality of these separate ‘rests,’ preferring to group many millions of them together and calling the result motion” (CN, p. 264).

This establishes a running pattern in *The Third Policeman* in which the narrator is forced to confront the gap between phenomena as they are ordinarily experienced and a reality described and distorted by de Selby’s theorizing. In each instance, the narrator’s sanity is threatened; when he first encounters a strange police station, he observes, “my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder” (CN, p. 266). The things the narrator is lured into believing through his reading of de Selby surpass the limits of ordinary observation and
practices. These include infinite regressions and microscopic objects that may or may not exist—a set of notions that, in the narrator’s words, have the effect of constantly “meddling oppressively with our minds” (pp. 288–89). What is crucial in each instance is that the emphasis is placed more on the linguistic and theoretical positing of these unknown and perhaps phantasmatic objects than on their actual existence.

These attempts to posit some unknowable noumena or to transgress the boundaries of what is thinkable often result in psychopathological effects for the narrator. This is the tendency in philosophical thought that Wittgenstein often condemns, and his aim is to treat these “philosophical diseases” (*PI*, §593) through an explicitly therapeutic project. “The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question” (§133). Like Wittgenstein, O’Brien’s work casts the unusual epistemic doubts that arise from philosophical theorizing and confusion as forms of illness.

Such illnesses often manifest as failures to orient oneself in the world. When he inquires into the size of the peculiar place to which he has been taken, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* receives a strange response: “It has no size at all . . . because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality” (*CN*, p. 341). Elsewhere, the speculative element “omnium” is defined as the “inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and it is always the same” (p. 319). Theorizing is the mode in which the inhabitants of this world operate, and paradox is often the result. Under the influence of de Selby’s theories, the narrator experiences moments of existential panic, in which “I was deprived of definition, position and magnitude and my significance was considerably diminished” (p. 327). The world of the novel is a place in which differences are lost and reduced to a theoretical principle. In contrast to this theorizing impulse to generality, Wittgenstein chose as the epigraph for *Philosophical Investigations* a line from *King Lear*: “I will teach you differences.” The differences among language games, the heterogeneity of linguistic practices, and the confusions that arise when these differences are forgotten are the principal insights that Wittgenstein returns to throughout his later work; the absurdities that arise when these differences are not observed are what Flann O’Brien represents in his fiction.

The strangeness of *The Third Policeman* cannot be disarticulated from the language games to which the narrator is so committed. On the
discursive style of the novel, Joseph Brooker writes, “Ineffable beauties and wonders of nature are expressed by an inappropriately scientistic eye, whose way of rendering them is to catalogue and dissect. The blend is less a supernal harmony, more a disturbing dissonance.” The need to resolve the dissonance and confusion that arise when language games are extended beyond their domain is precisely what motivates Wittgenstein, who writes,

Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. And this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, brought about, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language. (PI, §90)

We might regard this as a distinctly lateral form of analysis, as distinct from the surface-depth topologies implied by the language of exposure and unveiling that have become tightly associated with critical theory. In a similar way, O’Brien’s work functions through combinatory methods by which different modes of discourse are placed in unusual relation to one another to produce nonsensical effects. O’Brien’s method therefore shares much with that of Wittgenstein, who writes, “Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. —Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us” (PI, §126). Wittgenstein explicitly turns away from the modes of philosophical critique and exposure that aim to go beyond or beneath what is already manifest. Regarding the philosophical question about the “essence” of language, Wittgenstein writes:

For it sees the essence, of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes surveyable through a process of ordering, but as something that lies beneath the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see right into the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth. (PI, §92)

The tendency to look beyond the variety of everyday practices in order to disclose some hidden, unifying principle that would explain all phenomena has the effect of overlooking subtle differences and often results in unnecessary confusions. This approach is both modest and frustrating in that it refuses the demand that often motivates students of philosophy for a single, novel, and unified account of phenomena.
Elsewhere, Wittgenstein writes, “The name ‘philosophy’ might also be
given to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions” (PI, §126). The fetish for discovery and the new that has long been associ-ated with the modern is more often mocked than endorsed by both O’Brien and Wittgenstein, who asserts, “The problems are solved, not by coming up with new discoveries, but by assembling what we have long been familiar with” (§109). Their projects therefore may be read as refusals of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as “strong theory”—the forms of analysis often associated with Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud that aim to organize a wide range of phenomena through a single, generalizable explanatory principle whether it be capital, power, or desire.10 The search for ever-deeper explanations behind manifest phenomena is precisely what Wittgenstein aims to interrupt:

Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and
my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”
Remember that we sometimes demand explanations for the sake not of
their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one;
the explanation a kind of sham corbel that supports nothing.) (PI, §217)

Wittgenstein suggests that the expectation of ever-more underlying explanations or justifications is an artificial one born of the formal patterns of thought common to philosophy that extend beyond the requirements of everyday practices. We do not generally require additional justifications and explanations for what we do. Nevertheless, our everyday practices are not experienced as precariously suspended above a groundless void; the feeling of such precarity only arises when we expect the same form of explanation to be found for all phenomena. A lack of further justification only becomes a problem when we look for one where none is needed.

The impulses to theory, explanation, and generality need not only take the form of elite discourses such as philosophy, physics, or political theory. They may also manifest in strange obsessions, hobbyhorses, or other transports, as is evident in the monomaniacal query mindlessly repeated in The Third Policeman: “Is it about a bicycle?” Just as there are other ways of getting around in the world, there are many language games—each suitable for particular purposes. Confusions and absurdities may arise from the promotion of a single, ideal mode of discourse.

Myles’s deflation of ideal language games also extends to avant-garde and modernist experiments with language. He writes in one installment of Cruiskeen Lawn,
Twenty years ago, most of us were tortured by the inadequacy of even the most civilised, the most elaborate, the most highly developed languages to the exigencies of human thought, to the nuances of inter-psychic communion, to the expression of the silent agonised pathologies of the post-Versailles epoch. Our strangled feelings, despairing of a sufficiently subtle vehicle, erupted into the crudities of the war novel. But here and there a finer intellect scorned this course. Tzara put his unhappy shirt on his dada (Fr. for hobby-horse as you must surely know), poor Jimmy Joyce abolished the King’s English, Paulsy Picasso started cutting out paper dolls . . .

For Myles, the problem with certain avant-garde techniques is not so different from the pretensions of Einstein and Schrödinger: ordinary language practices do not necessarily require improvement. Confusions arise from attempts to install an ideal language of the future as well as programs to resuscitate a lost language of the past, as he implies in the same sequence: “Being an insulated western savage with thick hair on the soles of my feet, I immediately suspect that it is that fabulous sub-mythical esperantique patter, the Irish, that is under this cushion—beg pardon—under discussion” (Best of Myles, p. 102). The nostalgic, nationalist fixation on an antique language (this from a writer and speaker of the Irish language) is compared to proposals to create a synthetic, artificial language of the future: “esperantique.” Neither may suit the demands of the current forms of life. Of course, Myles implicates himself in these failed attempts to improve on ordinary language both through his Joycean punning and his admission that he has contributed to the Gaelic revival: “Having nothing to say, I thought at that time that it was important to revive a distant language in which absolutely nothing could be said” (p. 102). The reference to a “distant language” suggests the positioning of particular practices within a wider survey of language games that do not have total priority over one another but rather occupy different spaces within the field of practices—precisely the model that Wittgenstein uses to describe his own methods. Equally important is Myles’s admission that he has “nothing to say,” an admission that explains why he turns to various modes that make saying nothing possible in his present time and place. However, if he is drawn to scenarios in which, as Wittgenstein put it, “language is, at it were, idling” (PI, §132), Myles clearly regards himself as self-professed linguistic idler.

This recursive style of critique, in which Myles includes himself among the ironized targets, is a trap Wittgenstein also sets for his readers throughout Philosophical Investigations. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost
write that Wittgenstein’s technique “does not establish itself by con-
futing what it would interrogate but by going on from it, in effect it
incorporates into itself the presence of an interlocutor or a number
of interlocutors, of voices in conversation with each other, which are
not always easy to sort out.” What begins as a Socratic dialogue often
devolves into a self-undermining operation in which the apparently
sensible voice is also proven to be naïve, deluded, or prone to theoriz-
ing in some unexpected way.

This recursive pattern is performed in a column in which Myles initially
appears to produce a taxonomy of “Bores” whose obsessions, addictions,
and repetitive patterns of behavior are catalogued; however, a second-
order class emerges that is composed of those bores who observe the
behavior of other bores under the repetitive patterns of speech “It’s a
Disease, You Know” and “But If We All Did That.” This Möbius strip of writ-
ing alternately performs, undermines, and performs again the boring
behavior of observing boring behavior.

Yes, there are innumerable morons moaning out that excruciating parrot-
cry [“Ah, but if we all did that . . .”], polluting millions of conversations
with it throughout the globe, agonisingly inserting it into all manner of
decent and reasonable talk, coming out with it even when I am present!
It’s a disease, you know. (Further Cuttings, p. 67)

This last line repeats the “excruciating parrot-cry” that had been per-
formed and critiqued earlier in the same column. Crucially, this final
iteration is not in quotation marks, indicating that Myles does not com-
ment on this circular system from outside of it but is fully implicated in it.

Wittgenstein asserts that the meaning of language emerges in its use,
and the mastery of a particular language game is established by one’s
capacity to “go on” according to its rules and patterns of use.

One learns the game by watching how others play it. But we say that
it is played according to such-and-such rules because an observer can
read these rules off from the way the game is played—like a natural law
governing the play. —But how does the observer distinguish in this case
between players’ mistakes and correct play? —There are characteristic signs
of it in the players’ behaviour. Think of the behaviour characteristic of
someone correcting a slip of the tongue. It would be possible to recognise
that someone was doing so even without knowing his language. (PI, §54)
The process of learning the protocols and rules of such games recurs across O’Brien’s oeuvre, and is often explicitly rendered as a process of game playing. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the narrator observes, “The craft of billiards was unfamiliar to me but in politeness I watched the quick darting of the balls, endeavouring to deduce from the results of a stroke the intentions which preceded it” (*CN*, p. 41).

This strange moment may be read as a synecdoche for much of O’Brien’s fiction, in which a character must discern the rules and protocols according to which a strange new world might operate. If we understand a genre to function as a kind of language game—with its own internal rules, logics, situations, and uses—then *At Swim-Two-Birds* stages an experiment in which those distinct language games are made to overlap with one another: the novel is fashioned by placing into literal conversation representatives of the generic language games of Irish legend, Western dime novels, and the *Künstlerroman*. The effect is to demonstrate not only O’Brien’s capacity to follow the rules of these language games but also to show the absurdities that might be produced when these rule-bound worlds are made to intersect and distort one another. What becomes evident is that these characters do not play by the same rules, and they often find the speech acts of their interlocutors incommensurable with their own narrative practices. The wider view that emerges is consistent with that of the later Wittgenstein: language is not a homogeneous system subject to generalizability but rather a motley of rule-bound practices that lose their shape when dislocated from their normal applications.

In its more parodic modes, Cruiskeen Lawn often performs the capacity to adopt a language game and carry it out to absurd effects. Myles often displays an impressive capacity to invoke and deploy the discourses of law, finance, aesthetics, and Hegelian-Marxist dialectics. In one instance, it becomes difficult to know to what extent the discourse is ironized, until he is interrupted by his editor who complains, “We can’t have much more of this, space must also be found for my stuff,” to which Myles responds, “All right, never hesitate to say so. I can turn off the tap at will” (*Best of Myles*, p. 155). That Myles can turn on or “turn off the tap” of a particular language game indicates that he is able to master its rules and “go on” as needed. The further implication may be, for many readers of both O’Brien and Wittgenstein, a deflationary one: that there is little more to particular forms of language than this performative capacity to “go on” in a particular fashion.
Often, Myles’s capacity to “go on” in the mode of a particular discourse accomplishes very little, other than to show what happens, as Wittgenstein puts it, “when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work” (PI, §132). When parts of language are repeated out of context or detached from their usual domains of application, the effect is similar to a component of a machine that is no longer connected to the larger assembly. “I set the brake up by connecting up rod and lever.’ —Yes, given the whole of the rest of the mechanism. Only in conjunction with that is it a brake-lever, and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing” (PI, §6).

If this suggests that O’Nolan’s work is reducible to the trivial humor of a gifted satirist, Myles sometimes allows himself to engage in a sustained way with questions of modern aesthetics or the limits of scientism. After one such discussion that threatens to become too pedantic, he anticipates his audience’s impatience:

_The Plain People of Ireland:_ Another day gone and no jokes.
_Myself:_ Yes, curse you. (Best of Myles, p. 95)

This may give the false impression that one could distinguish the comparatively serious intellectual forays in Cruiskeen Lawn from the merely humorous columns. While Cruiskeen Lawn varies in scope and project, absurdity and irony are often deployed as instruments for both humor and significant intellectual work—uses with which Wittgenstein was quite familiar despite his reputation for humorless stoicism. Austin Quigley writes that Wittgenstein’s “readiness to reconsider the importance of the proposition is accompanied by an interest in upgrading various other forms of language. . . . And he once suggested, as Norman Malcolm records, ‘that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes (without being facetious). Another time he said that a philosophical treatise might contain nothing but questions (without answers). In his own writing he made wide use of both.’”13 If we follow the points of resemblance between the methods of O’Brien and Wittgenstein in both directions, we may find that not only does O’Brien conduct a deflation of metaphysical confusions but Wittgenstein also deploys the resources of irony, absurdity, and humor more commonly associated with the Irish satirist. Among the strange and challenging techniques of _Philosophical Investigations_ is a heavy reliance on ironizing rhetorical questions and absurd thought experiments that are entertained to significant ends.
Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, both Wittgenstein and O’Brien underscore the slapstick absurdity of the states of philosophical distress of which they wish to relieve themselves and their readers. Toril Moi writes that “Wittgenstein . . . describes the ‘ideal’ as ‘the purest crystal’ (PI, §97). The quest for ‘crystalline purity’ (§107 and §108) will lead to nothing but clownish pratfalls: ‘We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!’ (§107).”14 At times, Wittgenstein’s writing becomes surprisingly acerbic and sarcastic as he expresses his clear exasperation at the manifest absurdity of certain questions that arise within philosophy of mind. On the common error to imagine that something like “inner ostensive explanation” is possible, he writes: “How do I recognize that this is red? —‘I see that it is this; and then I know that that is what this is called.’ This?—What?! What kind of answer to this question makes sense?” (PI, §380).

Elsewhere, he abruptly dismisses thought experiments that extend the language of “consciousness” beyond its ordinary forms of use: “Could one imagine a stone’s having consciousness? And if someone can do so—why should that not prove merely that such image-mongery is of no interest to us?” (PI, §390). The seductions of such “image-mongery” are satirized in The Third Policeman through the “atomic theory,” which posits that bicycles may acquire the identities and capacities of their riders through an exchange of atoms and this results in a bicycle being tried, condemned, and hanged (CN, p. 314). Such examples not only perform Wittgenstein’s strategy of redrawing the limits of particular language games but also demonstrate the tendencies toward irony, satire, and “going on” with a particular mode of thought that unifies O’Brien’s oeuvre.

Finally, the points of unexpected convergence between O’Brien and Wittgenstein are not limited to their methods but extend to particular points of analysis that recur in the works of both. At the heart of Philosophical Investigations is a persistent critique of Cartesian dualism and internalist models of the mind. Cartesianism is also a recurrent target of O’Brien’s satire, as Dirk van Hulle observes: “O’Nolan often seems to poke fun at the internalist model of the mind; for instance, in The Third Policeman when he makes the Sergeant insist three times on the internal aspect of his mind, as he asks MacCruiskeen for ‘the readings’ in order that he can ‘make mental comparisons inside the interior of [his] inner head.’”15
The narrator’s soul, Joe, his “secret inner self,” is rendered in the novel as part of an infinite regress of bodies within bodies—a critique of the Cartesian model of interiority that anticipates what philosophers of mind such as Daniel Dennett have called the “homunculus fallacy.” The attack on Cartesian dualism and internalism is not limited to The Third Policeman. At Swim-Two-Birds opens with a mock Cartesian withdrawal into interiority: “I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression” (CN, p. 5). The cogito is satirized a few pages later when the narrator’s friend jokes, “I’m thirsty. . . . I have sevenpence. Therefore I buy a pint” (p. 17).

Van Hulle has suggested that the model of mind that emerges in O’Brien’s work is not one of depth or interiority but a “widening out.” His conceptual frame of reference is recent postcognitivist and enactivist theories of the extended mind, and while these models certainly apply in many instances of O’Brien’s work, we might bear in mind the reluctance to theorize or generalize on the basis of a single language game which, I have argued, O’Brien shares with Wittgenstein. The latter writes, “And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place” (PI, §109). Given this proviso, we might take care not to seek positive metaphysical assertions in the work of O’Brien or Wittgenstein; instead, their works teach us to examine specific cases in which a topical hobbyhorse is ridden into the ground or the wheels of a theoretical bicycle go flat.

Wittgenstein famously opens the Investigations with the programmatic line, “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own” (PI, preface, n.p.). This might serve as an equally suitable warning for readers of Myles na Gopaleen, who writes, “Leaving aside the primary purpose of languages as a means of the study of my own immense pieties: the profane purpose of education is the liberation of the mind from all cants, superstitions, shibboleths and unclean political creeds” (Further Cuttings, p. 86). In Culture and Value, Wittgenstein describes the task that he sets for himself with regard to ordinary language: “Sometimes you have to take an expression out of the language, to send it for cleaning—& then you can put it back into circulation.” This describes well the operations that Myles often performs on clichés and dead metaphors in Cruiskeen Lawn. The effect of his verbal play is to draw our attention
to the language we commonly use in order to show us what it is that we have been doing all along—a distinctly Wittgensteinian project.

O’Brien and Wittgenstein demonstrate the confusions and absurdities that arise when language is removed from its normal situations and forms of use. Their common project is a deflation of metaphysical speculations and systems that purport to reduce all phenomena to a single principle or ideal form of language. Despite their ostensible differences—a novelist and columnist on the one hand and a philosopher on the other—the critical projects and discursive methods of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Brian O’Nolan show so many surprising points of similarity that one might hesitate to decide which of them declared that his project was “to pass from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense.”

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