

Flann O'Brien

- Unconscious Pataphysician

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Introduction: Pataphysics

Pataphysics, most strongly identified with French poet and playwright Alfred Jarry (1873- 1907) is an esoteric philosophy that defies rational belief systems and exults in its inutility, its profound uselessness. It is one of the most pervasive and resilient French cultural imports of the past 150 years or so. Though it cannot exactly be described as a movement, which is one of the reasons it has retained its vibrancy, Absurdism, Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, Situationism and other movements find roots in its soil. It has also had a demonstrable impact on theatre, music, painting, literature, sculpture, philosophy, digital media and critical theory. Its influence may be seen inter alia in the postmodern writings of Deleuze, Foucault and Baudrillard, the angular sound collages of Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, John Ashberry's surreal and self-defeating poetic images, the comedy of the Marx Brothers and the Goons, J.G. Ballard's abstract science fiction, the Japanese Butoh dance of Tatsumi Hijikata and Akaji Maro.

Though its main influence is cultural, pataphysics is rooted in a disdain for the claims of empirical science. It is a word that has been variously defined, yet continually eludes definition- as Andrew Hugill notes in his recent study, this very undertaking is problematic as the idea of "definition" may be felt to be unpataphysical in that it purports to be comprehensive and unexceptional. Nonetheless, a good place to start is with Jarry himself, who wrote;

Pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. Pataphysics will

examine the laws which govern exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one..DEFINITION. Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments (qtd. in Hugill, 2012, p.3).

Hugill reduces the central tenets of pataphysics to the following "bullet-points" which convey the essence if not the complexity of the subject;

- Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions
- Pataphysics is to metaphysics as metaphysics is to physics
- Pataphysics is the science of the particular and the laws governing exceptions
- Pataphysics describes a universe supplementary to this one. (Hugill, 2012, p.4)

Since Jarry there have been various additions and developments to these definitions. Raymond Queneau declared that pataphysics "rests on the truth of contradictions and exceptions." Boris Vian emphasized the idea of Equivalence, stating: "One of the fundamentals of Pataphysics is that of Equivalence, which may explain this obstinacy that we have with regard to what is serious and what is not.; for us there is no distinction: it is Pataphysics." A universe comprised of exceptions implies an equivalence between imaginary solutions, while mutually exclusive opposites can and do coexist (Marshall, 2014). Jean Dubuffet and Eugene Ionesco were drawn to the anarchic possibilities: "The pataphysical position seems to me to be essentially explosive, implying a mixture of radically incompatible fluids, so why not proclaim permanent detonation?" (Hugill, 2012, p.5).

To some, pataphysics is a mere schoolboy's raspberry, for others a way of life, a doctrine, a deeply ironic religion- its presence in the world, however unacknowledged, is difficult to deny. Its main constituents are a resolute anti-empiricism, an anarchic irony and a wholehearted embrace of the useless, or "inutlous" as it is referred to in pataphysical circles.

There is no evidence to suggest that Irish writer Flann O'Brien was familiar with the writings of Alfred Jarry (though James Joyce almost certainly was) or the ideas of pataphysics in any conscious way, however I would like to suggest pataphysics as a useful/useless hodological reading path into his writings, specifically the two early novels "At Swim Two Birds" and "The Third Policeman" which are by critical

consensus his most achieved works. Many of the hallmarks are clearly evident here, including the will to comic disruption that is one of the principal sources of pataphysical energy, the equivalent and literal-minded treatment of unreal (fictional) worlds and the savage lampooning of the pretensions of empirical science.

Flann O'Brien

Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, Brother Barnabus, Count O'Blather, John James Doe, George Knowall, Oscar Love, West-Briton Nationalist- these are only some of the noms de plume Brian O'Nolan adopted in the course of his multifarious activities as a writer. Appropriately enough for an author who was possessed with a persistent desire to challenge fixed systems, names appear to have been provisional, a potential source of amusement rather than significant identity markers. He completed five novels and an enormous amount of journalistic commentary in his Cruiskeen Lawn columns in the Irish Times for which he was most famous during his life. *At Swim Two Birds* was published on March 13 1939 without much fanfare. O'Brien later claimed that the book's lack of success was connected with the alleged fact that Adolph Hitler took offense, and in order to torpedo it started World War 2. "In a grim irony that is not without charm," O'Brien wrote, "the book survived the war while Hitler did not." (qtd. in Imhof, 1985, p.41). *The Third Policeman* was completed in 1940, but did not find a publisher until 1969, the year after his death.

While the critical reception to his fiction has grown steadily over the past few decades, what has generally emerged resembles a diffusion of perspectives rather than any sustained theoretical framing of his work. He has been described as writing in the vein of Menippean satire of the dogmas of Western Cartesianism (Booker, 1995)- or as a proto postmodern metafictionist, attacking the sacred cows of mimetic fiction (Hopper, 1995). He has also been read as a modern Dantean or flawed allegorist (Ruczaj, 2011), a Thomist (Flor, 2011), a postcolonial commentator (McKibben, 2003), an Irish nihilist (Mellamphy, 1995), suggesting in his work a resistance to critical trends however partially useful all of these are for illuminating certain aspects of his books. Ideologically minded readers have struggled with *At Swim Two Birds* and *The Third Policeman* primarily because no amount of deliberation on society or politics could possibly yield a plausible critical model in texts that are so clearly focused on breaking down narrative centres rather than

allowing them utterance (Murphy, 2005).

Pataphysics as a conceptual principle, blithely unconcerned with ideology, may offer a useful reading approach with its hostility to formal coherence, its spirit of debunking various sites of pseudolegitimacy without championing any alternate sources, its "useless guffaw." That Flann O'Brien was an unconscious or accidental exemplar of an anarchic pseudophilosophy from continental Europe may seem a whimsical notion at best. However, the essential ideas and practices of its texts can be clearly seen in the two novels examined here; it is proposed that pataphysics offers the clearest lens through which to observe and understand his writing.

At Swim Two Birds

At Swim Two Birds sets out its metafictional stall in vigorous fashion. In simple terms, the story goes as follows. The novel's narrator, an indolent, verminous UCD student is writing a book about a pub owner named Trellis who has two principal activities, writing and sleeping. Trellis is planning a melodramatic novel that will "show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to humanity" (O'Brien, 2005, p.31), borrowing his cast of characters from folklore and cowboy romance and compelling them to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel "so that he can keep an eye on them and see there is no boozing" (p.30). However, with what Mellamphy describes as "a Luciferian non serviam on their lips", the characters hatch a plot against the tyrannical Trellis in order to be able to live their own lives. Having found out that in his sleep Trellis cannot retain absolute control over them, they keep him in a comatose condition by drugging his Guinness. Furriskey, designated villain of the piece, decides not to rape Shiela Lamont, as intended by the moralising author, but instead to marry "a domestic servant" and lead a virtuous life, opening a "sweet shop in Dolphin's Barn" (p.106). Trellis himself cannot resist the charms of his own fair Sheila and lures her into his bedroom to force his attentions on her with the result that a son, Orlick, is born. Orlick, who has inherited his father's "gift for literary composition" (p.126) will, in turn, be hired by Trellis's characters to compose a story about his father as punishment for the ill-usage he has given them.

As the book opens we find the narrator lounging in his bedroom, withdrawn into the privacy of his own thoughts, contemplating the inadequacy of the single ending and single opening of conventional literary works. Why not three entirely

dissimilar openings, one romantic-folkloric, one realistic-scientific, one heroic-mythic, all ideally leading to 300 times as many endings, all ideally interrelated in the prescience of the writer's mind? The narrator puts forward a theory of fiction which anticipates the post-war preoccupations of Robbe-Grillet and the practitioners of the nouveau roman in its attack on the faux verisimilitude of mimetic fiction:

(that)...a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service..Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required..The modern novel should be largely a work of reference (pp.19-20).

This autocritique allows O'Brien to puncture the possibility of fictional illusion by continually commenting on the fact and process of its own making. Conventional fiction is the main target of his parody here and, by extension, the enterprise of constructing meaning, something also firmly in the sights of any (conscious) pataphysicist worth her salt.

Faustroll's Brother

O'Brien's main approach in *At Swim Two Birds* is in taking the tenets of representative fiction literally and thereby achieving a *reductio ad absurdum*. The central character of Trellis's moral fable, archvillain Furriskey, is created by a process of "Aestho-autogamy", which is the art of "producing a living mammal from an operation involving neither fertilisation nor conception" (p.37). This character has the distinction of being born at the age of 25 and of entering into the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account either for the memory, the fillings in his tobacco-stained teeth, the inscrutable status of his virginity or the knowledge of physics which extends as far as Boyle's Law and the Greasopot Photometer. "Stated to be doing 'very nicely', the new arrival is about five feet eight

inches in height, well-built, dark and clean-shaven" (p.36). The similarities (and differences) with a passage describing one of Alfred Jarry's best-known literary creations, Doctor Faustroll are immediately apparent.

The Doctor was "sixty three years old when he was born in Circassia in 1898.. At this age, which he retained all his life, Doctor Faustroll was a man of medium height, or, to be absolutely accurate, of $(8 \times 10 + 10 + 4 \times 10 + 5 \times 6)$ atomic diameters; with a golden-yellow skin, his face clean-shaven, apart from a pair of sea-green mustachios, as worn by King Saleh; the hairs of his head alternately platinum blonde and jet-black, an auburn ambiguity changing according to the sun's position; his eyes, two capsules of ordinary writing ink flecked with golden spermatozoa like Danzig schnapps" (qtd. in Hugill, 2012, p.220).

So far so metafictional, as many critics have identified- O'Brien is emphasizing the ontological instability of the fictional world and undermining its pretensions.

Equivalence

It is perhaps in the novel's primary textual strategem, its use of bricolage or montage that the pataphysical leitmotif of the book may be most clearly seen. The novel, in line with our narrator's theory of fiction, is composed from fragments of a broad array of textual predecessors high and low in cultural style that directly call to mind the pataphysical concept of Equivalence. Facets of mythic, folkloric, romantic and realistic imitations of reality are all arranged with equal immediacy and with equal prominence, all equidistant from the nucleus of unmeaning at the centre of the book. O'Brien's student narrator "borrows" Finn MacCumhaill and Sweeney from Irish Epic; Shanahan, Lamont and others from Irish cowboy books; the courteous, mystic devil-figure of the Pooka from Irish folklore and alludes to various other modernist texts with metafictional elements such as Joyce's 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' and Aldous Huxley's 'Point Counter Point'. The various characters and literary styles of their rendering are juxtaposed with no suggestion of hierarchical position or validity. Initially separate and distinct, by the end the voices blend haplessly into one another to form a pataphysical Babel where Indians fight with Irish policemen on the streets of Dublin circa 1940 and folkloric giants play poker with inner city roughnecks: "They have passed below me in their course, the

stags across Ben Boirche, their antlers tear the sky, I will take a hand." (p.150). The spare anguish of the original Buile Suibhne- O'Brien's translation from Gaelic of the tale of the nobleman cursed to flit among treetops eternally as punishment for tossing a saint's psalter into a brook;

Sweeny the thin-groined it is
in the middle of the yew;
life is very bare here,
piteous Christ it is cheerless(p.134).

is reworked in the plain style of street poet Jem Casey:

When stags appear on the mountain high
with flanks the colour of bran
When a badger bold can say goodbye
A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN (p.158).

O'Brien regularly and lovingly pressgangs the high latinate literary style into the service of low content. "The three of us were occupied in putting glasses of stout into the interior of our bodies and expressing by fine disputation the resulting sense of physical and mental well-being" (p.34). "Purporting to be an immoral character, I accompanied him on a long walk through the environs of Irishtown, Sandymount and Sydney Parade, returning by Haddington Road and the banks of the canal.

Purpose of walk: Discovery and embracing of virgins" (p.45).

This latter is one of the devices by which O'Brien breaks up the text to emphasize the inadequacy of plot, plausibility, temporality and causality in contemporary fiction and to muddy the standard relationship between a reader and a novel. This technique is used as punctuation throughout *At Swim Two Birds*: Relevant extract from manuscript; Biographical reminiscence part the 5th; Nature of explanation offered; Extract from Literary Reader, the Higher Class, by the Irish Christian Brothers. In such a manner are the various elements of the book announced and aligned- biography, chunks of borrowed text, translated poetry, physical description, grammatical commentary, dialogue, all given equal novelistic billing.

Anti-Empiricism

As well as being a sustained assault on the underlying assumptions of fiction and narrative sequence, *At Swim Two Birds* exhibits a clear hostility towards the validity of empiricist knowledge and the pretensions of science, the authority of meaning. Mock-scientific precision is applied to the business of everyday life; "Minutae. No. of cigarettes smoked 8.3; glasses of stout or other comparable intoxicant, av. 1.2; times to stool, av. 1.4; spare-time or recreative pursuits, 6.63 circulating" (p.161). In another scene, O'Brien pokes fun at the type of scholarly learning which consists of a useless accumulation of facts, very much a target of pataphysicists from *Jarry on*. Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan try to outdo one another by bowling factoids back and forth in a parody of learned discourse:

It is not generally known..that the coefficient of expansion of all gases is the same. As gas expands to the extent of a hundred and seventy-third part of its own volume in respect of each degree of increased temperature centigrade. The specific gravity of ice is 0.92, marble 2.70, iron (cast) 7.20 and iron (wrought) 7.79. one mile is equal to 1.6093 kilometres reckoned to the nearest ten-thousandth part of a whole number.

True, Mr. Furriskey, remarked Paul Shanahan..True knowledge is unpracticed or abstract usefulness. Consider this, that salt in solution is an excellent emetic and may be administered with safety to persons who are accustomed to eat poisonous berries or consume cacodyl, an evil-smelling compound of arsene and methyl. A cold watch-key applied to the neck will relieve nose-bleeding. Banana skins are valuable for imparting a gloss to brown shoes (p.206).

"Serious" science becomes mumbo-jumbo.

The Third Policeman

At Swim Two Birds anticipates many of the writerly concerns that O'Brien develops in *The Third Policeman*, where we see a more fully realised enactment of some of pataphysics' central ideas; the debunking of philosophical reputations,

the utter disrespect for established orthodoxies, the hamstringing irony and most particularly, the bizarre distortions of scientific and mechanical laws which expose these as incomplete and provisional systems of explaining life. Perhaps the best summary of Flann O'Brien's (unconscious) pataphysical attitude is the quotation from pseudo-savant de Selby that prefaces the book: "Human existence being an hallucination containing in itself the secondary hallucinations of day and night (the latter an insanitary condition of the atmosphere due to accretions of black air) it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death."

The Third Policeman is ostensibly a murder mystery in which the narrator outlines a grisly crime then his efforts to retrieve the booty while encountering the ghost of a man he killed and a central police station populated by policemen who commune intimately with bicycles. The revelation that our narrator is dead isn't made until near the end of the text, by which time the limits of logic and the illusion of literary realism have long since been irrevocably breached. The primary assault on rational comprehension is that the entire tale, even the remembered pre-death days, is told from the perspective of a dead man, and the normal regulatory logic of everyday reality no longer applies- a fertile starting point from which to parody the presumption of orthodox human intellectual systems, which is the novel's main drive.

Space and Time (dis-) Continuum

The text constantly destabilizes our sense of space and time as things normally felt to be measurable and comprehensible. Spatial dimensions are disrupted when the author initially approaches the police station only to discover that there is a front and back, but no sides to the building. "It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child" (p.53). He subsequently claims that the station house is like something "glimpsed under ruffled water" and approaches the building, peers in and sees a policeman inside, despite the fact that the building has no depth and he can see back and front simultaneously. Policeman MacCruiskeen disorients and terrifies the narrator with his various inventions; his invisible chests within chests, a spear the point of which is too thin to be seen and a curious musical instrument which produces "vibrations of the true notes...so high in their frequency

that they cannot be appreciated by the human earcup" (p.75). At another time he shows him a mangle by which light can be stretched until it becomes sound (p.106).

The human comprehension and ordering of time is also a focus of O'Brien's barbed humour. The main events of the narrative seem to take place in a matter of a few days but are later discovered to have actually taken sixteen years. There are two temporal zones- the narrator's life with the policemen and that of real time-compressed into one, and the effect is to destabilise the ultimate validity of either. This disjunction is further complicated by plot inconsistencies, as for example when Inspector O'Corky informs the sergeant that "a man called Mathers was found in the crotch of a ditch up the road two hours ago with his belly opened up with a knife" (p.115). The time frame is completely disrupted because at this point old Mathers has been dead for years and he hadn't originally been stabbed, so temporal zones are broken, as are descriptions that were primarily presented as factual.

Jarry's Bicycle

The centrality of the concept of the bicycle to the story is one of the novel's great symbolic links to Jarry, himself an avid cyclist whose blasphemous text "The Passion considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race" posits the symbiotic relationship between man and machine, which in Giles Deleuze's analysis brings about "the great turning of the Earth" (qtd. in Hugill, p.99). In this case, the bicycle is O'Brien's vehicle for applying the principles of Atomic Theory to everyday life with parodic literal-mindedness (a technique we have seen applied to narrative conventions in *At Swim Two Birds*) and thereby achieving a *reductio ad absurdum*. Pluck outlines his version of the theory to a bemused narrator, who remarks "Your talk..is surely the handiwork of wisdom, because not one word of it do I understand" (p.67).

The explanation goes: "Everything is composed of small particles of itself and they are flying around in concentric circles and arcs and segments and innumerable other geometrical figures too numerous to mention collectively, never standing still or resting but spinning away and darting hither and thither and back again, all the time on the go. These diminutive gentlemen are called atoms..They are as lively as twenty Leprechauns doing a jig on the top of a tombstone" (p.84). This application of atomic theory to objects of everyday use results in the molecular exchange between bicycles and their riders to the effect that habitual cyclists will be over fifty percent

bicycle and as a result spend much of their time leaning with one elbow on walls or standing propped by one foot at kerbstones. The sergeant's great-grandfather, on account of the time he spent on horseback during his life, lived the last year of his life as an actual horse. His old horse Dan "was in the contrary way" and got himself into trouble interfering with young girls and as a result had to be put down. "So my family shot him but if you ask me it was my great grandfather they shot and it is the horse that is buried up in Cloncoonla Churchyard" (p.91).

Imaginary Solutions

But it is in the character of de Selby, Faustrollian inventor and scientist whose story is almost entirely told in the extensive footnotes of the novel, that we encounter O'Brien's most pataphysical invention. The narrator dedicates his life to collecting and commenting on "the great man's works" with an imbecile adoration that acts as a caustic comment on the legitimacy that is generally bestowed upon scientific thought. De Selby's own attitude towards his scientific oeuvre could be considered quintessential of pataphysical science: "It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena" (p.52).

De Selby's theories are perfect illustrations of Jarry's science of imaginary solutions, of the laws governing exceptions. Empirical science must elect a solution that fits the given facts- travel of light or fall of an apple. Pataphysics welcomes all scientific theories and treats each one not as a generality but as an attempt, sometimes pathetic and sometimes heroic, to pin down one point of view as 'real'. De Selby is a scientific Quixote, flinchless in his folly, utterly undeterred by his theories' proven untenability. His disquisitions on night and sleep will serve as a fitting example. He held that;

..(a)..darkness was simply an accretion of "black air" i.e, a staining of the atmosphere due to volcanic eruptions too fine to be seen with the naked eye and also to certain "regrettable" industrial activities including coal-tar by-products and vegetable dyes; and (b) that sleep was simply a succession of fainting fits brought on by semi-asphyxiation brought on by (a) ..As in many other of

deSelby's concepts, it is difficult to get to grips with his process of reasoning or to refute his curious conclusions. (pp.116-117).

Idiot (Savants)

The endless feuding of deSelby's "learned" commentators leads itself ad absurdum, with each critic accusing the others of being charlatans and proclaiming insupportable views. The footnote apparatus is, in the end, as absurd as de Selby's theories and as the wonderland of the policeman, best exemplified when examination of a particularly obtuse text leads one critic to interpret it as "a penetrating treatise on old age" and another as "a not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm". The narrator comments: "Such disagreement, it must be confessed, does little to enhance the reputation of either writer" (p.167).

It is hardly suggested that the reader takes any of de Selby's suggestions as being viable, even in a playfully lampooning pataphysical sense- indeed, as another commentator remarks: "The beauty of reading a page of de Selby is that it leads one inescapably to the happy conviction that one is not, of all nincompoops, the greatest" (p.92). There is nonetheless a beauty to some of his ideas, his observation of a Faustrollian alternate universe, supplementary to the one we are given to understand. Elsewhere, de Selby asserts that

A journey is an hallucination...Human existence de Selby has defined as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematographic films which belonged probably to his nephew. From this premise he discounts the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life, denies that time can pass as such in the accepted sense and attributes to hallucinations the commonly experienced sense of progression as, for instance, in journeying from one place to another or even 'living'...motion is also an illusion. He mentions that almost any photograph is conclusive proof of his teachings (p.50).

Conclusion

In O'Brien's *Third Policeman*, the possibility of the attainment of secure knowledge appears to be quite literally, a fool's game. Whether one is a scientific genius or a mad policeman with aspirations to supreme knowledge, it matters little because empiricism, epistemological systems, our comprehension of time and space, all produce nothing more than ever-increasing layers of farce. At *Swim Two Birds* calls into question the validity of the fiction-making process in a spirit of unravelling rather than championing alternate causes or ideologies, all equivalently futile. "Pataphysics is a machine for exploring the world", stated Fernando Arrabal (qtd. in Huggill, 2012, p.5). Since pataphysics is an imaginary solution to an anomalous universe, so its practitioners have not always realised the extent to which their ideas may be pataphysical. (The literary group, Oulipo has a phrase for such pataphysics *avant la lettre*; plagiarism by anticipation). The pataphysical presence in the world has been partly conscious and acknowledged, and partly (the greater part) unconscious and unacknowledged.

Critics have struggled to put O'Brien's heterogeneous works into the itchy Sunday jackets of mainstream theoretical frameworks- none makes an entirely convincing fit. Not anti-religious, or socio-critical, or allegorical or proto-postmodern or nihilistic enough, too diffuse, too anarchic. The novels, as one suspects their author would have intended, almost heroically resist the attempt to be shackled to something as constraining as a fixed mode of interpretation or ideological movement. As has previously been commented, O'Brien seems not to have been directly aware of the work of Jarry and his contemporaries- nonetheless, the essence, the philosophical approaches and practices of pataphysics are vividly exemplified in a literary context. This most flexible apparatus for representing alternate realities while debunking existing ones may be the most appropriate hodological reading guide to O'Brien's novels that have proven so resistant to conventional critical theory.

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