In 1967, Patrick Kavanagh concluded his Bloomsday speech by recalling the 1954 anniversary, when he made a pilgrimage through Dublin with John Ryan, Brian O’Nolan, Anthony Cronin and a few others. The memorable event of that day, he said, was “the incomparable Myles pissing on Sandymount Strand”.¹ This seemingly trivial anecdote presents Flann O’Brien, or rather, Myles na gCopaleen, as a transgressive character, symbolically desecrating the very monument to the cult of Joyce to which he himself had contributed. It also reveals the ambiguity inherent to the very act of transgression, in that it presupposes the normative frame it then proceeds to disregard. There is no doing away with the rules of transgression, and Myles na gCopaleen, however vocal he might have been in criticizing Joyce – “that refurbisher of skivvies’ stories”² – never denied his admiration for the master.

It was Myles na gCopaleen’s job to disrupt and mock received opinions in his satirical column from The Irish Times. The very name of Cruiskeen Lawn (“little brimming jug”) suggests the role and function of its nonsensical satire: it works by excess to emphasize the vacuity of its many targets. Such exuberance reflects a dominant mode of discourse that is defined by its polyphonic and intertextual dimension, sometimes akin to literary collage, and whose self-conscious quality always reminds the reader of the artificiality and arbitrariness of language. The constant polarity between exuberance and void in Flann O’Brien’s work echoes the deconstructive tensions of post-modern writing balancing proliferation of references on the

¹ John Ryan, Remembering How We Stood, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975, 121.
one hand with absence of meaning on the other. Keith Hopper has unsurprisingly called Flann O’Brien the “first post-modernist after Joyce”. Such a polarity is essential to an understanding of Flann O’Brien’s work as both transgressive and subversive, as both notions rely on a dual tension between a discourse and the ideological framework it posits itself against or seeks to overturn.

Flann O’Brien’s work calls for three distinct levels of analysis: a narrative level in which he seemingly disrupts traditional linearity, then a level of discourse pervaded by satirical distortion and finally the level of language itself, through nonsensical language games and flouting of pragmatic rules of communication. Transgression appears to be the main device of discourse, throughout the novels and the chronicles. However, Myles na gCopealen’s transgression operates within the boundaries of licensed satire: like the Bakhtinian carnival, transgression within boundaries effectively deflates its own subversive potential. Flann O’Brien is often seen as a licensed jester, relishing the formatted tricks of the stage-Irishman. However, his subversiveness is in fact distinct from, and more subtle than, a mere transgression of the norm. Whereas transgression only serves to assert the norm it opposes negatively, Flann O’Brien’s language-games and flouting of language put forward a reflexive self-consciousness that questions the very assumptions of linguistic communication. By destabilizing the premises of referential and communicative language, our Dublin writer questions the possibility of knowledge itself. Thus O’Brien’s subversiveness is not about reasserting norms or reversing them into new ones but about questioning the very possibility and validity of assertion.

Flann O’Brien’s subversion revolves around three defining moments that will be analysed in turn: hesitation, confusion and suspension. The disruption of linguistic and narrative rules is in keeping with the Bakhtinian definition of Menippean satire and the carnivalesque, and if taken out of context, pertains to the licensed satire that has been sometimes attached to Flann O’ Brien. One needs to move beyond the mere arbitrary transgression of rules to understand that testing the limits opens a way to a blurring of boundaries: the porosity of embedded narrative levels is thus reflected in the

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