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Is It About a Typewriter?

Brian O’Nolan & Technologies of Inscription

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Abstract

This article brings Friedrich Kittler’s media determinism to bear on a selection of works from Brian O’Nolan’s *œuvre*. It briefly examines Myles na gCopaleen’s play with posthuman hybrids in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, seeing his vignettes as extravagant, humorous depictions of the ways our bodies and symbolic order are determined by the mechanical. It then maps the movement between typed and handwritten texts in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, considering the progression between modes of inscription as a commentary on modernity, meaning, and presence. Despite *At Swim-Two-Birds*’s overt commitment to the typewriter’s mode of impersonal, mechanical assemblage, we find, at the novel’s core, inscriptions that are invested in the personal and immediate, and which are driven by intention. The novel’s modernist detachment and technological investments are underpinned by nostalgic desires, ironically and earnestly presented, for the immediacy and presence of more traditional relations with language and the text. By tracing the implications of the writing implements used by the various authors in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, we uncover a new aspect of the novel’s mediation between modernity and tradition.

Keywords

Friedrich Kittler, mediality, typewriter, posthumanism, authenticity, presence, modernity

When Ergo Phizmiz was adapting Brian O’Nolan’s second novel into *The Third Policeman – An Electronic Neuropera Vaudeville Machine*, a chance encounter with ‘Pitman’s Gramophone Course of Typewriter Keyboard Instruction’ changed the performance’s sounds. ‘Pitman’s Gramophone Course,’ which Phizmiz found on shellac records dating from the 1920s or ’30s, was not the dry audio of a typing manual, but orchestral recordings of popular classical music overlaid with the sounds of the typewriter, through which were interspersed regular calls of ‘Carriage, Return!’¹ Phizmiz inserted

elements from 'Pitman's Gramophone Course' into his adaption of *The Third Policeman*, thereby placing 'the idea of the creative process, the act of writing, at the centre of the work.'² In emphasising the means through which the novel had been written, Phizmix draws our attention away from the bicycles that dominate the policemen's jurisdiction and asks us instead to engage with a different kind of machine: the typewriter.

The revolution of the bicycle wheel might be the prevailing form of technology in *The Third Policeman*, but the typewriter remains unobtrusively at its core. When the narrator, Pluck, and MacCruiskeen go to the novel's mechanised version of eternity, they walk across a floor 'like the railed galleries that run around a great printing press.'³ MacCruiskeen produces bewildering articles that '*lacked an essential property of all known objects*' by 'press[ing] two red articles like typewriter keys and turn[ing] a large knob away from him.'⁴ Eternity might run on helical gears, but its ability to manifest desires depends on printing technologies.

Many decades later, in a memorial piece in *The Irish Times*, Micheál Ó Nualláin describes his brother's mode of writing in terms reminiscent of *The Third Policeman's* atomic theories. In so doing, he renders the origins of the concept of molecular exchange a little less certain:

Brian sat at one end of the table, his back to the fire and his Underwood typewriter in front of him. First, he would look over some notes and cuttings (put hand in pocket, pull out filthy scraps of paper); all would be quiet. Then the firing would start. He would hammer in continuous and sustained, machine-gun-like bursts. To make it worse, the entire table acted as a baffle board and vibrated. *The molecules danced to the tune of his typewriter.* Nature of tune: Fortissimo.⁵

That O'Nolan's atomic theory was inspired by the tapping of fingers on a keyboard rather than the vibrations between saddle and posterior is speculation I wish I could prove. It is probable that Micheál's description above is indicative of the popularity of the atomic theory after O'Nolan's death, rather than influenced by an early connection. However, the connection he makes serves to remind us of the technologies involved in creating the novel's human-machine hybrids. For regardless of whether it was cycling or typing that O'Nolan had in mind, it was on a typewriter that he inscribed the policemen's obsessions.

'Media,' Friedrich Kittler writes, 'determine our situation.'⁶ This article moves from *The Third Policeman* to O'Nolan's first novel, *via* the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, to consider the aspects of *At Swim-Two-Birds* that are brought to light when we examine the writing technologies employed by the novel's various authors and consider the implications of their technological preferences. Carol Taaffe notes that it is 'the paraphernalia of print culture which makes this novel possible,'⁷ and much scholarly

work on *At Swim-Two-Birds* focuses on its investment in the culture industry and its representation of fiction as discrete parts collated through assembly-line production.⁸ Marion Quirici has explored O'Nolan's tendency to include commentary within his shorter works on the processes of their compositions, and the connections between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Walter Benjamin's theories of mechanical reproduction have been of particular interest to critics, with Denell Downum, Alana Gillespie, Eamonn Hughes, and Taaffe contributing to wider conversations.⁹ Rather than Benjamin or Pierre Bourdieu, however, I am interested in bringing Kittler's media determinism to bear on *At Swim-Two-Birds*. By tracing the inscription technologies that the narrator, Trellis, and Orlick employ, I will study the novel's relationships with language and presence. Despite *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s overt commitment to a mode of impersonal mechanical assemblage that I associate with the typewriter, when the different modes of writing are analysed, we find, at the novel's core, inscriptions invested in the personal and immediate, and which are driven by intention. That is, as we move through the layers of the novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* reveals itself to be a palimpsest built on the foundations of presence and the pen.

* * *

Kittler's influential works *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* claim that our modern media technologies not only shape how we create and retain text but dictate our relationship with language. In early 20th-century Germany, Kittler argues, a rupture in representations of the human took place, caused by the movement from handwriting to the typewriter. The discourse network of 1800 had created 'so-called man' – that is, the concept of an autonomous, self-determining subject – from connections between writing, bureaucratic and military institutions, the nation state, and the family. During this period, language became transformed 'from a recalcitrant material force into the spiritualised vessel of a transcendental inner voice.'¹⁰ But the introduction of the typewriter and its increasing popularity in the discourse network of 1900 changed writing from a handcrafted inscription of the subject into a mechanised procedure that required 'the tapping of keys, the pulling of levers, and the pushing of buttons – a process not unlike the operation of industrial machinery in factories and plants.'¹¹ The imposition of the typewriter restructured writing from inscriptions in which meaning and intention were in supposed accord, to input processes that separated 'paper and body during textual production.'¹² As machines grew in importance, they changed the way language was transcribed, as well as the individual processing it, so that gradually 'human essence began to escape into apparatuses.'¹³ For Kittler, then, new information technologies changed humanity's physical connections with language and thereby our aesthetics, our epistemologies, and ontologies.

The new writing tool placed language in a contested relation to the self. As Martin Heidegger insists, mechanical inscription 'tears writing from the essential realm of the head, i.e. the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something "typed".'¹⁴ The word, that is, is no longer of the flesh, but of the machine. One of the clearest and most evocative statements on this separation comes from Angelo Beyerlen, an engineer and founder of the first German typewriter business:

In writing by hand, the eye must constantly watch the written line and only that. It must attend to the creation of each written line [...] [and] guide the hand through each movement. For this, the written line, particularly the line being written, must be visible. By contrast, after one presses down briefly on a key, the typewriter creates in the proper position on the page a complete letter, which not only is untouched by the writer's hand but is also located in a place entirely apart from where the hands work.¹⁵

The connection between eye, hand, and text is interrupted by a typewriter, because if we look at our hands the text appears elsewhere, and if we look at the text produced our hands work out of sight. This disconnect has, of course, given us speed, efficiency, and uniformity, but for these gains we have lost, Kittler argues, an intimacy and connection between ourselves and the text. The standardised text, particularly for those encountering it for the first time, effaces the familiar marks of the author's own hand and causes the text, as well as the writer producing it, to seem distant. As Hermann Hesse wrote in 1908, 'the coldness of type, which starts to look like printer's proofs, means that you come face to face with yourself in a severe, critical, ironic, even hostile way. Your writing turns you into something alien.'¹⁶

Myles na gCopaleen, ever early and belated, plays with the depersonalisation associated with the typewriter by presenting Remington, whose company produced the first commercially marketed typewriter in 1874, as a human-typewriter hybrid. In a column published in 1942, and repeated, with minor changes, in 1957, Myles writes:

Remington I knew well. He had the whole of his insides taken out of him, bones and all, when he was a lad – he was suffering from diffused chrythromelalgia – and had new bones made for him out of old typewriters. And, mark this, when he grew up, he was as fine a looking man as you'd meet in a dazed walk.¹⁷

Victoria Olwell argues that to type 'is to bar a body's substance from the materiality of the text. Typing constitutes a certain loss of the body,' as the typewriter replaces writing by hand with writing by machine.¹⁸ By exchanging Remington's skeletal structure and

internal organs with machines, Myles presents a hyperbolic, embodied/mechanised version of this argument.

As Remington aged, a weak chest prompted him to 'have a complete brand-new typewriter built into the upper part of his metal torso.' Remington became a man wholly made of typewriters: some disassembled, and some, it seems, in perfect working order, as 'mysterious tips for horse races were often found on his internal roller: (be that as it may) (certain it is) that he never went out without a sheet of paper stuck in his "carriage".' Preternaturally working order, that is: the internal typewriter could offer horseracing tips of its own accord. Or, perhaps, of Remington's accord, as the dictates of the machine are also the dictates of Remington himself: the image of the writing machine working independently in Remington's core is equally an image of an automatic writing accessing the unconscious self. The machine/Remington, whose connection is already inscribed in the name that marks man and machine in public discourse, thus represents interior-exteriority and exterior-interiority, as Remington's hybridity offers a picture of a machine automatically controlling a body, as well as a body automatically controlling a machine. Collectively, the Remington human-machine produces an '*écriture automatique*' that liquidates the 'media-technological basis of classical authorship.'¹⁹

Before 1910, 'typewriter' referred both to the machine and the person working it, and the recognition of the physical connection between human and typewriter proliferates throughout typing guides from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the physicality of typing and the need for the typist to have a kinaesthetic relationship with the machine are emphasised.²⁰ For Kittler, the growth of information technology like the typewriter meant not merely a tactile connectedness, but one in which machines 'take over functions of the central nervous system' and humans become extensions of media technologies.²¹ Much like the bicycle-human hybrids in *The Third Policeman*, Myles's Remington has become posthuman, as the machine is an inextricable, if not dominant, part of the self: bones and lungs and psyche. Even in O'Nolan's letters, in which he tends to be less fanciful, contested symmetries between the writer and typewriter remain. As he writes in 1965: 'I apologise for botching the spelling of your name, but the fault was not mine: it was my typewriter's. It has a mind of its own and possibly suffers from having got too much oil, as I occasionally do myself.'²²

The determining influence of machines, with their ability to give operators standardised text, does not negate the possibility of human mistakes, however. With the introduction of a technology that radically increased the speed of composition, a new kind of error, and a different relationship with mutability and unpredictability, became a factor in writing. The mediation of the typewriter meant that misspellings and slips in writing were no longer inevitably the result of memory, intellect, or education, but could stem from faulty physical manipulation of the typewriter's keys. Mistakes could

arise from sequencing errors, as fingers hit the wrong keys, or the right keys in the wrong order. The permanent possibility of imperfect control of the typewriter means that, as Paul Benzon puts it, 'human beings and machines do not wholly collaborate, nor does one entity simply dictate to the other. Their engagement is instead marked by the irreducible possibility of error.'²³ In this sense we can surmise that, as is the case in Myles's machine/man Remington, Kittler's posthuman relation between human and machine is an imperfect hybridity. Mark B. N. Hansen argues that Kittler saw 'human-machine co-functioning as an *indirect* co-functioning,' because with the movement from handwriting to a typewriter's word processing comes the shift 'from a human-centred symbolic to a properly machinic symbolic, from a symbolic correlated with natural language to one correlated with (computable or finite) number.'²⁴ We, then, become embroiled in a Lacanian symbolic order 'determined by technical standards.'²⁵

In his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, Myles frequently plays with the typewriter's introduction of errors. Despite the fact that O'Nolan was an excellent typist – there are limited typographic errors in his letters – Myles uses the general ubiquity of typos as an excuse for puns and word play. Many of the 'errors' in the columns play with the tensions between intentionality and contingency, and the tussle between writer and machine. To take one example from 1947:

Cynics may scoff and critics may carp, but the simple people of Ireland who are my friends and readers will rejoice with me that so much is being done to end the clamant national scandal of perdition. (Partition take this machine! Nowhere is the struggle between man and mechanisation so acute, so bitter, as in this thrice-weekly, thrice-accused (not accused – *accursed!*) encounter between me and my toy prater – PARDON, typewriter!)²⁶

Perhaps the word play originated in homophonic connections, and perhaps it stemmed from a genuine error of inscription, but without the presence of a machine that produces words from sequences of letters and thereby enables such errors, the joke simply could not work. This is technologically inspired humour masquerading as linguistic wit.

Myles frequently presents himself as humbled before the agency of the machine – 'As Grand Mufti of Ireland I have, not unnaturally, dedicated myself to certain historic tusks. I *meant* "casks" – sorry, "tasks" – but blessed be he who accepteth with humility the *diktat* of machinery, be it a Remington or Underwood.'²⁷ The typewriter is presented again as possessing a creative license of its own, which changes the nature of the mistakes, rendering them deliberate interventions by a controlling machine, rather than pleasing serendipities arising from a poorly controlled one: 'Let us without delay proceed to a clam consideration of the facts. (Clam is good – I don't know where I'd be without this typewriter).'²⁸ That is, not mistakes, but dictations by the technological

manifestation of a mechanical symbolic order. Of course, with the recognition of the impact of one machine comes the recognition of the impact of other machines and other people. Benzon reflects on the fact that the typewritten page most commonly existed in an office setting, which meant that multiple eyes, hands, and machines increased the likelihood of introduced errors. Myles's frequent asides to copy editors and editors comment on the multiple points at which errors can be introduced in the form of mistaken corrections. 'A thing I must get for this typewriter,' he writes, 'is a stetoscope'²⁹ – a 'stet' marker and viewer that would prevent the correction of intended non-standard spelling or syntax into standard yet incorrect and unintended text.

* * *

Jennifer Wicke argues that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the 'first great modern novel in British literature' because of its engagement with 'the developing technologies of the media in its many forms'³⁰ – including, most prominently, Mina's typewriter. Much like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Dracula* is a 'narrative patchwork' comprising a variety of media forms, which turn the novel into a 'motley fusion of speech and writing, recording and transcribing, image and typography.'³¹ By the late 1930s, however, the typewriter was no longer a new object, but an inevitable part of a young author's equipment. Most British publishers of the early 20th century expected submitted work to be typewritten, and Mark Twain had announced in 1904 that in the beginning 'a type-machine was a curiosity. The person who owned one was a curiosity too. But now it is the other way about: the person who doesn't own one is a curiosity.'³² *At Swim-Two-Birds* is an intriguing example of a typed novel, I contend, not because of the radical newness of the typewriter, but because of the innovative ways it moves between the typed and handwritten text.

Let us turn from the impact of the typewriter on the human body, as playfully explored by Myles, to the impact of the typewriter – and the pen – on the body of the text. This section moves through *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s authors and looks first at the technological medium that the student narrator employs. A typewriter is not mentioned in the sketch of his bedroom, and yet his novel is repeatedly described as in typescript: 'I paused to examine my story, allowing a small laugh as a just tribute. Then whipping typescript from a pocket, I read an extract quickly for his further entertainment.'³³ The words 'manuscript' and 'book' also feature in the narrator's biographical reminiscences, but while manuscript might refer to a work that is handwritten or typed, a typescript only refers to a typed document, and in his letters O'Nolan is consistent in this use. The narrator's writings, we can thus surmise, were typewritten. And as he certainly does not have the means to pay someone to do his typing for him, we can presume that the narrator, a young man of modern Dublin, typed.

The narrator's typing, I argue, sheds light on his manifesto and his approach to his text. His insistence that novels should be 'self-evident shams'³⁴ calls for a deliberately estranged relationship with the text, one that recognises it as a fabrication rather than a series of real, immersive events. This forfeiture of illusion does not mean that uniqueness should be the novel's defining feature; instead, characters should be repeated across numerous works, making the modern novel 'largely a work of reference.'³⁵ Novels, then, should be texts of assembled unoriginality. Conceiving of the novel in this way – a series of repeated characters assembled to form new works – calls strongly to its typed origins. For Kittler, the typewriter served to reduce language to a series of marks, as, when typing, each letter has to be hit separately and in sequence, which presents language at the level of the letter rather than the word:

In the play between signs and intervals, writing was no longer the handwritten, continuous transition from nature to culture. It became selections from a countable, spatialised supply. The equal size of each sign – a lofty, distant goal for the genetic method of writing instruction – came about of itself. [...] The only tasks in the transposition from keyboard to text remained the manipulations of permutation and combination.³⁶

We move, then, from the fantasy of a continuous, organic writing, one in which the word is full of meaning and present to itself, to a recognition of the word as assembled from letters and therefore easily broken down into other letters. Every word is seen to be a latent anagram, simply a series of letters that can be used to form other words, and which, in themselves, have no specific meaning. In this splitting of the word, writing is recognised as akin to coding and therefore that which is often hidden, fragmented, incoherent. Modernity, for Kittler, is a period in which we acknowledge the impacts of the typewriter's encoding, knowing that writing is a series of ciphers without straightforward keys or answers.

If typing causes us to figure writing as a series of 'selections from a countable, spatialised supply,' then writing a novel as the narrator requires is simply an extension of a typewriterly relationship to language. Words are not organic wholes but are made up of letters arranged and rearranged, and novels are not organic wholes but are made up of plots, phrases, and characters that are arranged and rearranged. Characters are effectively moveable types written by an editor, a compiler, a stenographer. As David E. Wellbery writes, 'the modernist discourse network unravels language, reduces its wholeness and centeredness to a tangle of nervous, sensory-motor threads, to a scatter of differential marks.'³⁷ *At Swim-Two-Birds* not only assembles multiple genres, styles, and media, but theorises this assemblage in the narrator's manifesto and the movement of characters across the layers of narrative.

And yet, it is these very characters who appear to interrupt what is a wholly legitimate manifesto for the typed novel. While insisting that the novel should be an obvious fake that would not provoke sympathy for the 'fortunes of illusory characters,' the narrator makes the characters real: capable of resisting the intentions of the author and deserving of basic human rights. This contradiction is easier to understand when we return to the idea of the dissolution of the language of plenitude into moveable code. The characters are always more than the specific roles they play: they cannot inhabit a role to the extent of being only that role, and a role cannot inhabit them to the extent of negating everything else that they are. In other words, they are never marked by fullness and completion, are never fully present to a part, and are always able to figure in a different work. Typewriters heralded in a modernity in which the keys make us relate to the materiality of our composition and our characters. There is always another role for each protagonist, the letter never fully arrives, and the keyboard can be hit another time.

Interestingly, while the narrator is the writer most committed to a typewritten aesthetic, he is also the writer who includes the most sustained references to oral literature. The content cannot negate the medium, however: this is an oral literature transcribed originally on medieval manuscripts and then on printed pages. Fionn mac Cumhail becomes, the narrative tells us, 'without honour in the breast of a sea-blue book, [...] twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web': the typed pages turn the 'god-big' storyteller into 'Mr Storybook.'³⁸ The movement from the immediacy and presence of orature might, for Fionn, involve a sense of loss, but modern discourse networks inevitably move away from god-big authors giving melodious oration. The novel, as a modernist discourse network, maps the movement from orality to medieval manuscript to printed page to typescript, using the typed form to assemble, rearrange, and reinscribe intimacy into impersonality. O'Nolan's works frequently explore the tensions between tradition and modernity, and the consequences of the inscription of older forms into the technologies of the discourse network of 1900. In a section of *An Béal Bocht* described as 'the shanachie and the gramophone,'³⁹ Myles has a folklorist visiting the Gaeltacht record the sounds of a drunk pig and later be awarded a degree because of the 'lore which he had stored away in the hearing-machine that night.'⁴⁰ For Kittler, the gramophone blurred the lines between sense and nonsense by indiscriminately recording everything in range, rendering the soundtrack to the 20th century a blend of noise and meaningful sound. In *An Béal Bocht*, when the gramophone and the prestige of the foreign academic combine, the medium changes authentic Gaeilge into meaningless background hum and the moans of an inebriated pig into pure Irish.

If the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a typist, through what technological means does Trellis create his text? Trellis's bedroom is not described as containing a

typewriter, although beside the bed is 'a small table with books and type-darkened papers.'⁴¹ When we are privy to Trellis's processes of composition we are shown him labouring with a pen, and so we can surmise that while Trellis, who can afford a housekeeper, perhaps might have his literary efforts typed later, his creative acts are conducted by hand. Should Trellis employ a typist, it is important to note that she would very likely be female. The influx of female office workers into the labour force, Kittler argues, demystified the relationship between idealised versions of Woman and Nature and enabled women to create texts themselves. But that movement from the symbolic to a material object reinscribed women into an office space in which they were subordinated once again as 'pretty typewriters.'⁴² It is of little surprise that a man such as Trellis would reinforce servile positions for women.

Trellis's act of composition is one of bed-bound labour:

Propped by pillows in his bed in the white light of an incandescent petrol lamp, Dermot Trellis adjusted the pimples in his forehead into a frown of deep creative impact. His pencil moved slowly across the ruled paper, leaving words behind it of every size. He was engaged in the creation of John Furriskey, the villain of his tale.⁴³

Trellis clearly has little penmanship, and yet his pen is the only virile thing in his bedroom. His bedroom contains a marker of modernity, the clock, but while it grapples with each new day, fragmenting it into standardised time, it is 'quiet, servile and emasculated; its twin alarming gongs could be found if looked for behind the dust-laden books on the mantelpiece.'⁴⁴ Trellis's engagement with technology is that of a man behind the times, a man aware of new forms and yet resistant to them.

As an author neither wholly of the typewriter nor wholly of the pen, Trellis is a liminal figure, much like his prototype Brother Barnabas, who in 'Scenes in a Novel' (1934) is 'penning [...] a posthumous novel,' but whose possessions also include an 'ingenious home-made typewriter, in perfect order except for two faulty characters.'⁴⁵ In many respects, Trellis is the physical enactment of the narrator's theories: he is an author who not only borrows roles but whole lives, as he features characters from other books in his own writings while also making them reside in his home. And yet, Trellis is not fully committed to the narrator's manifesto, as he creates his own characters as well. John Furriskey and Sheila Lamont are engendered through aestho-autogamy, *At Swim-Two-Birds's* distinctive mode of literary reproduction, which replaces fertilisation and conception in the traditional sense with the generative powers of the lone male author in his bedroom. This gives us, of course, a joke about literary creativity as mental masturbation, but if we think of the technology involved in aestho-autogamy's creative process, we see that Trellis's act of aesthetic self-fertilisation is not

a procedure requiring the tapping of keys, the pulling of levers, and the pushing of buttons, but a handcrafted, manual exercise. The hand has replaced the body as the site of reproduction. For this kind of literary creation, if you'll excuse the extension of masturbatory play, one cannot have both hands on the typewriter. In deviating from the narrator's modernist theories of typewriterly reproduction, Trellis is returning to the early intimacies of the pen and the soul building of Kittler's discourse network of 1800. There is nothing assembly line or programmatic about this: in creating Sheila Lamont, Trellis creates an exact physical manifestation of his specific desires.

In Trellis's rape of Sheila, and the subsequent birth of Orlick, we find ourselves even further from a separation between text and body. We have thus moved from the narrator's mechanical theories of writing as re-producing other writers' works, to aestho-autogamy's writing as productive masturbation, and on further to writing as coerced reproduction. And it is from the sexual/textual assault of Sheila Lamont that we are given an author who has no direct links with anything typed: Orlick, the patricidal author who writes everything by hand.

Orlick's inscription of his father's torture is not conducted *via* any technological or mechanical prosthesis, but with the immediacy of the pen. There is none of the interruption between eye, hand, and text that Kittler associates with the typewriter, nor the commitment to speed and standardisation. Instead, we are presented with a form of writing that is intimate, slow, and very personal. Kittler writes that in 'standardised texts, paper and body, writing and soul fall apart. [...] The dream of a real visible or audible world arising from words has come to an end.'⁴⁶ If Orlick is to create a 'real' world in which words murder his father, how can he do so with a typewriter? Instead, he uses a gold-nibbed pen. The intimate connection between Orlick and his text is further reinforced by descriptions of him inserting the pen into his mouth: 'Orlick placed his pen in the centre of his upper lip and exerted a gentle pressure by a movement of his head or hand, or both, so that his lip was pushed upwards.'⁴⁷ At other times he inserts himself into his pen, a pen, we should note, that has the elegance required of Faustian blood pacts: 'On his smallest finger Orlick screwed the cap of his Waterman fountain-pen, the one with the fourteen-carat nib; when he unscrewed it again there was a black circle about his finger.'⁴⁸

Although Orlick conforms to the narrator's manifesto by not creating any new characters – all of his are borrowed – in his torture of Trellis persecution and writing about that persecution become identical: his writing produces not product but immediate effect that Trellis is powerless to resist. All of the characters across the various levels of the narrator's writings are bound to do as their respective authors dictate, but in keeping with the manifesto a degree of resistance is usually possible: even before they start sedating Trellis, Peggy and Furriskey promise each other that their evil acts will merely be simulated.⁴⁹ Simulated wrongdoing and actual wrongdoing

become indistinct in practice, even outside the pages of fiction, but at the core of the characters' pact is the agreement that they are more than these forced acts, and that Trellis's intentions cannot define them. This returns us to the claim that, as moveable character-types, they are never fully present to their roles and always potentially other to them. Even though Furriskey is created by Trellis, rather than borrowed by him, Furriskey is more than the role for which he was produced.

The difference between Orlick's and Trellis's writing is that for Trellis, as representative of an author straddling the discourse networks of 1800 and 1900, the characters are simply a means through which a story can be told. They are present primarily in accordance with the narrator's manifesto – to represent different types of sin, rather than be sinners. Borrowed or created, Trellis wishes to work with characters rather than people and wants them simply to submit to his intentions and enact the roles his novel requires. This typewriterly attitude is blended with a writerly investment in the author-as-god: Trellis's treatment of them is despotic because he finds their wishes and needs irrelevant before his authorial intentions. Orlick, however, is leading a rebellion rather than writing a book. His goal is not a novel but world-change through the enactment of plot, as the purpose of his writing is not to create a finished work but to murder Trellis. The goal, reminiscent of Kafka's writing machine in 'In the Penal Colony,' but importantly, without its mechanical operation, is to inscribe justice and allow a jury of Trellis's own creation to sentence him to death, with the intention that his death in the pages of Orlick's red copybook will truly kill him and set them free. Despite a seeming connection between Orlick and the narrator's theories of mechanical reproduction – Orlick repurposes characters and lines – Orlick is not re-using Trellis to *represent* the figure of the villain. Trellis is to be tortured as Trellis, to be pierced with a pluperfect as himself, and the purpose of the text is to pierce him terminally. Orlick's text is not the narrator's work of reference, but an attempt to kill a specific creator-character through careful inscription, and in such a way that he is impossible to resurrect. The purpose, then, of Orlick's text is the death of the author, but because another author absolutely intends it.

The sections of *At Swim-Two-Birds* about Orlick are dedicated to the fantasy of a writing that is fully present, with no separation of paper and body, and an author whose authorial intentions will bring about absolutely real effects. Trellis's trial might be a show trial in the sense that the outcome is predetermined, but the intention behind it is very real. In the centre of a story playfully warning about the limits of authorial intentionality – the characters revolt and try to commit patricide/deicide – is a narrative invested in an authorial intentionality that can take effect in very real and literal ways. When we look through the typed palimpsest, we find that buried underneath a tale about literary reproduction is a narrative far removed from mass production, distant from the assembly line, and other to the separation of body and text. We get further

from Benjamin and from typewriters the deeper we move through the layers of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, until we arrive at Orlick, where there is no disconnect between hand, eye, pen, and reality: his handwriting is literally what we used to call 'joined-up.' Orlick's conception was word made flesh, and his revenge is to make word pierce flesh.

At Swim-Two-Birds's wry modernist detachment, we can argue, has a very non-modernist core. In the hands of O'Nolan the typist, the work is at its most fragmentary, interrupted, and incoherent, and the narrator happily demonstrates his theories of mechanical restructuring and re-coding in the pieces he writes. The long sections written by Orlick, however, speak to a very different relationship with the text. At the heart of Orlick's penmanship is a desire to write so intimately that one is no longer writing but bringing into being, which corresponds to a desire to read so fervently that one is no longer reading but witnessing live events. This is not the laborious process of aesth-autogamy, a creative writing as reproductive process, but a live writing that brings real events into immediate being. Through Orlick we confront literature's paradoxical death/life wish: a literary desire for literature to cease to be literature, that is, fixed by the page and bound by repetition and absence, and instead to be real, alive, and concrete. This desire is played on in various ways throughout the layers of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but as we progress from the typewritten to the pen, we move from fiction to the blurring of the lines between fiction and reality, to the desire to create the real.⁵⁰

This is not to imply that the novel's core can be read as an earnest endorsement for presence or the pen. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a modern, typewriting student creates a pen-yielding avatar of himself, and we are, I suspect, meant to respond to the narrator's creations and desires with wry amusement born of understanding. Orlick represents wish fulfilment: the narrator's wish to torture his uncle, and – perhaps – the shameful wish behind even modernist or experimental writing: for realism so real that it lives. Modernity's obsession with the new was and is balanced by nostalgia for the past, and typing's disconnect creates the allure of the presence of the pen. But, in the end, although not without some ambiguity, the desires Orlick embodies are safely processed, and he, his pen, and his red notebook are committed to the flames. Handwritten presence is burned alive, while the typewriter lives on.

At Swim-Two-Birds is a typed novel that moves riotously across various forms. Its folkloric and oral investments are given loud, 20th-century processing, as the full immediacy of the spoken is inserted with humour, celebration, and loss into 'gap-worded' inscriptions.⁵¹ Of primary interest to this article, however, is the novel's play with the impact the typewriter and the pen have on meaning and presence. *At Swim-Two-Birds* was written in a modernity in which wistfulness for the past and mockery of the past, optimism for the present and anxiety about the present, had become interwoven. In embracing the new, it still contains within itself elements of the past, as examined here in the tensions between the typed and the handwritten.

Competing Interests

Maebh Long is currently an editor of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies*. She became an editor after this article was submitted and peer reviewed. She had no involvement with the peer review or acceptance process.

Notes & references

¹ Ergo Phizmiz, 'Colour, Noise, and Craniums: Adapting *The Third Policeman* as an Electronic Opera,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 37–8. Available at <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3342>.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 336. Hereafter CN.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 343, 342.

⁵ Micheál Ó Nualláin, 'A Very Intense Person,' *The Irish Times* (1 April 1986): 12 [emphasis added]. Anthony Cronin's biography offers a version of this story. 'For many years, even after they began to appear every day, the columns were written in batches on Sunday afternoons. He would sit with his back to the fireplace at one end of the long polished mahogany table in the room known as the dining room in Avoca Terrace, hammering them out on his Underwood typewriter with scarcely any hesitation or apparent agonising. During the week he made notes on scraps of paper which he carried in his pockets and the Sunday afternoon ritual would begin with the study of these. Like many writers, he used only two fingers and he hit the old Underwood with a quite unnecessary violence. [...] Over the years the initial UND of the bold lettering which said UNDERWOOD STANDARD TYPEWRITER would become obliterated by his left thumb as it darted up to click the roller round, as likewise would the last four letters of the word "typewriter" be erased by his right thumb as it swept up to whip back the carriage.' Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm International, 1998), 115.

⁶ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.

⁷ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 36.

⁸ *Flann O'Brien and the Culture Industry*, ed. Jack Fennell, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016), available at: <https://parishreview.openlibhums.org/issue/287/info/>; Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁹ Marion Quirici, '(Probably Posthumous): The Frame Device in Brian O'Nolan's Short Fiction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 46–59; Denell Downum, 'Citation and Spectrality in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *Irish University Review* 36, no. 2 (2006): 304–20; Alana Gillespie, 'In Defence of "gap-worded" Stories:

Brian O'Nolan on Authority, Reading, and Writing,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 204–18; Eamonn Hughes, 'Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Irish Modernism: Origins, Contexts, Publics*, eds. Edwina Keown and Carol Taaffe (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 111–28.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Silicon Sociology, or, Two Kings on Hegel's Throne? Kittler, Luhmann and the Posthuman Merger of German Media Theory,' *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2000): 396.

¹¹ Rubén Gallo, *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technical Revolution* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005), 67–8.

¹² Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ Qtd in *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁵ Qtd in *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶ Qtd in Martyn Lyons, 'QWERTYUIOP: How the Typewriter Influenced Writing Practices,' *Quaerendo* 44 (2014): 231.

¹⁷ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (7 December 1942): 3. Hereafter CL.

¹⁸ Victoria Olwell, 'The Body Types: Corporeal Documents and Body Politics Circa 1900,' in *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture*, eds. Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 49.

¹⁹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 204, 203.

²⁰ Olwell, 49–50.

²¹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 16.

²² Brian O'Nolan to Henri Morisset, 9 March 1960, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 460.

²³ Paul Benzon, 'Lost in Transcription: Postwar Typewriting Culture, Andy Warhol's Bad Book, and the Standardisation of Error,' *PMLA* 125, no. 1 (2010): 94.

²⁴ Mark B. N. Hansen, 'Symbolising Time: Kittler and Twenty-First-Century Media,' in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, eds. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 225.

²⁵ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997), 133.

²⁶ CL, 21 July 1947, 4.

²⁷ CL, 14 June 1946, 4.

²⁸ CL, 6 November 1945, 2.

²⁹ CL, 17 November 1944, 3.

³⁰ Jennifer Wicke, 'Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and its Media,' *ELH* 59, no. 2 (1992): 467, 469.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 469, 470.

³² Morag Shiach, *Modernism, Labour, and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67; Mark Twain, 'The First Writing-Machines,' in *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain* (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011), 285.

³³ CN, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 195.

³⁷ David E. Wellbery, 'Foreword,' in Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, xxx.

³⁸ CN, 15, 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² See Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 347–68, and Lawrence Rainey, 'Pretty Typewriters, Melodramatic Modernity: Edna, Belle, and Estelle,' *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 1 (2009): 105–22.

⁴³ CN, 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁵ Brother Barnabas, 'Scenes in a Novel,' in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 49.

⁴⁶ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 14.

⁴⁷ CN, 165, see too CN, 170.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁰ In this sense, we can connect Orlick's penmanship to Derrida's work on poesis in 'Che cos'è la poesia,' in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* ed. Peggy Kamuf, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 221–40.

⁵¹ CN, 15.