December 1989

The Craft of Seeming Pedestrian: Flann O'Brien's the Hard Life

Thomas F. Shea

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.4, December 1989, p.258-267

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
The Craft of Seeming Pedestrian: 
Flann O'Brien's The Hard Life

by THOMAS F. SHEA

I considered it desirable that he should know nothing about me but it was even better if he knew several things which were quite wrong.

The Third Policeman

In 1961 Flann O'Brien's long awaited "second" novel, The Hard Life, finally appeared in print. Since The Third Policeman remained languishing in a drawer and An Beal Bocht was cast in Gaelic, The Hard Life was greeted by most as the second book by the author of At Swim-Two-Birds. The twenty-odd-year wait seems to have whetted the enthusiasm of readers and critics alike. The novel sold out in Dublin within two days, and reviewers, especially in England, praised it with gusto.¹

Since then, however, we have seen an about-face in the ranks of commentators. The critical line, nowadays, is that O'Brien spent his talent and played himself out writing his Myles na Gopaleen column for the Irish Times. Both The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive (1964) are often taken lightly as enervated, end-of-career efforts by a writer who once had good stuff.² However, O'Brien's unpublished letters to Timothy O'Keeffe, Niall Sheridan, and A. M. Heath reveal that The Hard Life masquerades as a tame, straightforward novel as it explores how discourses collapse, sounding only a desperately squalid void.

In The Hard Life O'Brien works with readily recognized fictional patterns in order to dismantle them. The text suggests that the mimetic novel—which attempts to simulate our daily world even as it rivals and augments it—is most inauthentic precisely when readers accept it as "realistic." In a letter to his publisher, Timothy O'Keeffe, O'Brien took pains to promote his masking:

The Hard Life is a very important book and very funny. Its apparently pedestrian style is delusive.³

³ Letter from Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien) to Timothy O'Keeffe, 7 June 1961, O'Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
Niall Sheridan, O’Brien’s close friend and trusted commentator, praised this self-effacing performance as it was in progress:

the atmosphere of unbelievable squalor has a powerful fascination and the very cunning simplicity of the style puts it across perfectly.⁴

The “cunning simplicity” of style is definitely intended. It would be a mistake to read the novel for thematic plot development. “Narrative” is in fact faked, with The Hard Life exposing itself as a series of scenes loosely linked by cardboard character development. The novel centers, rather, on the pedantic verbal tennis matches between the uncle, Mr. Collopy, and the neighboring German priest, Father Kurt Fahrt, S.J. Their respective “pedestrian styles” compete and interact, building networks of discourse which ironically affirm the absences they seek to counter.

Writing to his agent, Mr. Mark Hamilton, at A. M. Heath & Company, O’Brien emphasizes the centrality of the periphrastic dialogue in this novel:

Everything was done with deliberation, the characters illuminating themselves and each other by their outlandish behavior and preposterous conversations. . . . A few people here whose opinion I value have seen the MS and all are really impressed, particularly by the Collopy-Father Fahrt dialogues. . . . ⁵

Obviously, the author is pleased with himself. Not as obvious, however, are the ways through which conversations self-reflexively expose language as fields of incomplete, volatile substitution. The two contenders frequently spend an evening in Collopy’s kitchen, engaged in “sapient colloquy” like talking heads. Anne Clissmann expresses concern that there is scarcely a “likeable person” in the novel (287). However, The Hard Life never invites us to consider characters as people. Characters are presented as voices employing distinct rhetorical modes which inevitably reveal a pregnant lack. The omissions which conversation tries to circumscribe are only indirectly and incompletely defined by the failure of words. Like the young boy in Joyce’s “The Sisters,” the reader remains perplexed and intrigued by what’s not said.

The relationship between language and the want it seeks to replace is similar to one Collopy notices in the house of the clergy. When he decides that his nephew Finbarr is ready to attend school, Collopy escorts him to the Christian Brothers’ establishment on Synge Street. As they wait for Brother Gaskett in an anteroom of the rectory, the uncle noses around the encompassing odor of sanctification:

They say piety has a smell, Mr Collopy mused, half to himself. It’s a perverse notion. What they mean is only the absence of the smell of women. (23)

⁴. Letter from Niall Sheridan to Brian O’Nolan, no date, labeled “Saturday,” probably fall 1960, O’Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
A like correspondence motivates the voices of Collopy and Fahrt. As we make our way through their comic nonsense, we confront a disquieting want which makes itself more insistent as we proceed.

Each voice displays a prominent, easily recognizable manner of selecting and combining words. Collopy's sound is that of cliché-ridden, vituperative "Paddy Whack." To the platitudinous provincialisms of the uncle in At Swim, he adds the "bought-and-paid-for-Paddy" talk which O'Brien so objected to in Abbey Theater productions. Collopy's moral modest proposals are littered with folksy Irish expressions such as "pish-rogues," "gorawars," "thooleramawn," "gobshite," and "smahan." Father Fahrt's field of discourse flaunts the well-known Jesuitical dodge. He deflects Collopy's onslaughts with memorized catechistical responses, banal metaphors, and his Order's own brand of "rigorous" logic. Although the two assume they converse, each ultimately talks to himself, trying to assure and invigorate an existence enclosed by claustrophobic formulations. Their friendly disputations traverse the same old ground wearing, not a path, but a trench which determines the course of their counsel as it walls in their horizons.

Their kitchen contentions often canvass biblical scholarship and Church history in an attempt to vitalize something they only vaguely intuit as exhausted. They refer to and "revise" religious traditions, seeking to secure a stable, coherent system of knowing. Ironically, they recover nothing but verbal bedlam:

Did I hear you right when you said 'humble', Father? An humble Jesuit would be like a dog without a tail or a woman without a knickers on her. Did you ever hear tell of the Spanish Inquisition?

I did of course, Father Fahrt said unperturbed. The faith was in danger in Spain. If a bad wind will blow out your candle, you will protect your candle with the shade of your hand. Or perhaps some sort of cardboard shield.

Cardboard shield? Mr Collopy echoed scornfully. Well, damn the cardboard shields the Dominicans used in Spain, those blood-stained bowsies.

My own Order, Father Fahrt said modestly, was under the thumb of the Suprema in Madrid and yet I make no complaint ... 

You have a smart answer for everything. 'Do you believe in the true faith?' 'No.' 'Very well. Eight hundred lashes.' If that's the Catholic Church for you, is it any wonder there was a Reformation? Three cheers for Martin Luther!

Father Fahrt was shocked.

Collopy, please remember that you belong to the true fold yourself. That talk is scandalous.

Eight hundred lashes for telling the truth according to your conscience? What am I talking about—the holy friars in Spain propagated the true faith by driving red hot nails into the backs of unfortunate Jewmen.

Nonsense.

And scalding their testicles with boiling water.

You exaggerate, Collopy.

And ramming barbed wire or something of the kind up where-you-know. And all A.M.D.G. to use your own motto, Father. (35-37)

Throughout the novel, the reader enjoys overhearing privy discussions of torture and disease, urine and vomit. Critics, however, frequently misconstrue these references which feature pain and scatology. First, the comedy of such excessiveness is often overlooked. The context and comportment of learned disputation is wonderfully deflated by imaginative, gratuitous details such as “a woman without a knickers,” “red hot nails,” and “unfortunate Jewmen.” The use of these particulars ( cliché and barely signifying) seems to free Collopy from any stultifying adherence to fact. And his frenetic irreverence progressively builds on itself with cadences like “something of the kind” generating deferential ambiguities like “up where-you-know.” The humor here recalls the “Description of a social evening at the Furriskey household” in *At Swim,* where talk of piles, bedsores, blackheads, and hunchbacks assists the polite teatime banter about crockery, the pianofurty, and passing-the-sugar.

In a letter to his literary agent at Heath, O’Brien awards himself a backhanded compliment on the fulsome flavor of the novel:

I do not think this is a very funny book, though no dog is a judge of his own vomit. It is old, elegant nostalgic piss. . . .

In fact, without his canine mask, O’Brien thought the book hilarious and savored all the praise Niall Sheridan could heap concerning its comic qualities. However, the scurrilous vocabulary is not meant to be merely vulgar; the diction acts as a catalyst for deflation, hurrying the novel’s momentum toward emptiness.

Secondly, the pageantry of sordidness has prompted comparisons with Joyce which often prove reductive. Clissmann states:

The chief reference to Joyce comes, however, in the subtitle, *An Exegesis of Squalor.* The book is an attempt to sum up the atmosphere of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist,* with sly digs along the way at *Ulysses.* (273)

Loose, diffuse generalities such as this victimize Joyce as well as O’Brien. Certainly, Joyce never shied away from dirty ditches or dogs in the blanket, but he would never claim a monopoly on life’s sordid tides. Irish mythology and folklore have long enjoyed a tradition of artistically handling physical messes.

One of the more pregnant kitchen conversations provides a better commentary on the novel’s telling squalor. As Collopy and Fahrt try to refashion a comforting version of the Garden of Eden, Finbarr’s brother, Manus, interrupts his betters:

*Excuse me, Father Fahrt.* . . .

*Yes, Manus?*

The wife of Adam in the Garden of Eden was Eve. She brought forth two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel but afterwards in Eden he had a son named Henoch. Who was Cain’s wife?

7. Letter from Brian O’Nolan to A. M. Heath, December 1960, O’Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
Well, Father Fahrt said, there has been disputation on that point. . . .
Even if Eve had a daughter not mentioned, she would be Cain's sister. If she hadn't, then Cain must have married his own mother. Either way it seems to be a bad case of incest.
What sort of derogatory backchat is that you are giving out of you about the Holy Bible? Mr Collopy bellowed. (54)

We immediately relish the brother's appropriation of Fahrt's logical method, his turning the story of Adam and Eve into a tale of illicit romance. Manus's "innocent query" suggests that the verbal intercourse between the two grown-ups is just as incestuous. More significantly, the scene points up the way all conversation in the novel tries to perform as exegesis, countering the squalor of nonmeaning. Exegesis attempts to "show the way," to secure coherence and compensate for a lack of meaning by making order. Ironically, the disordered incompleteness which talk attempts to counteract becomes more troubling and elusive with each explanation. Words expose themselves as insufficient substitutes for the void they try to fill. All communication remains inconclusive and functions metaphorically like Mr. Collopy's ceramic liquor receptacle:

On the floor beside Mr Collopy's chair was what was known as 'the crock'. It was in fact a squat earthenware container, having an ear on each side, in which the Killbeggan Distillery marketed its wares. The Irish words for whiskey—Uisge Beatha—were burnt into its face. This vessel was, of course, opaque and therefore mysterious; one could not tell how empty or full it was, nor how much Mr Collopy had been drinking. (31-32)

Conversations here amount to comic "crocks"—impaired, mysterious, opaque vessels which hide an interesting emptiness inimical to words.

This theme of avoidance is saved from being staid, however, by O'Brien's unflagging posture of play. "Avoidance" becomes a diverting escapade when it is literalized with respect to women. The two philosophers often descant antiphonally and at length on Collopy's "work," his "urgent mission." The uncle is obviously obsessed with some arcane corporal work of mercy designed to benefit women, but "as usual, the subject under discussion was never named" (31).

Writing to A. M. Heath, O'Brien again provides a salient, semi-serious critique:

two of the comics in it are Father Kurt Fahrt, S.J. and our Holy Father the Pope, but there is absolutely no irreverence. The theme, never specifically mentioned though obvious to any reader, is the most preposterous in all the literature of the earth.8

Despite the innocent "who me?" posture, O'Brien's irreverence becomes more blatant the longer the "theme" remains hidden, the longer his characters' linguistic references miss their mark. As readers, all we know is that Collopy is infuriated over some portentous matter which he believes the municipal authorities ought to rectify. He constantly blames the Dublin Corporation for the dismal state of affairs and has marshalled a

8. Letter from Brian O'Nolan to A. M. Heath, December 1966, O'Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
committee of concerned citizens to agitate for the cause. Eventually, near
the end of the novel, we find out that his allusive enterprise is the establish­
ment of women’s public lavatories in Dublin. Like Leopold Bloom, Col­
lopy laments the lack of fair play. If caught short, a man can always duck
into a pub; a woman, however, has to hunt for a cake shop to “settle my hat
straight.”9 More often than not, the dialogic pluralities collapse into
cliched contradictions:

Decent people should look after women—isn’t that right? The weaker sex. Didn’t God make
them the same as he made you and me, Father? (42)

The reader’s uncertainty and pleasure derive from O’Brien’s linguistic
play. We are constantly kept guessing, asked to feel our way through a
peculiar penumbra of verbal substitution.

Collopy and Fahrt frequently shift the focus of their discussions,
obliquely tacking with camouflaged transitions:

Tell me this Father. Would you say it’s natural for a woman to have children?
Provided she is married in a union blessed by the church—yes. Most natural and most
desirable. It is a holy thing to raise children to the greater glory of God. Your catechism will
tell you that. The celibate and priestly state is the holiest of all but the station of the married
man is not ignoble. And of course the modest married woman is the handmaid of the Lord.

Very good, Mr. Collopy said warmly. Then tell me this. Is the other business natural?
Certainly. Our bodies are sacred temples. It is a function.

Very well. What name have you for the dirty ignoramuses who more or less ban that
function?
It is, ah, thoughtlessness, Father Fahrt said in his mildest voice. Perhaps if a strong hint
were dropped. . . .
If a hint were dropped, Mr Collopy exploded. If a hint were dropped! . . . (34)

First hearing this, we are far from sure if or how they have moved from
the Church’s stand on procreation. Such phrases as “other business” and
“that function” as well as ingratiating ambiguities like “Our bodies are
sacred temples” warily and deftly circle what is missing. O’Brien’s game,
of course, is to delay the disclosure as long as possible; consequently, solu­
tions to the problem are proffered with inventive equivocation:

Why not have the whole scandalous situation denounced from the pulpit?
Oh. . . . dear. . . . The Church’s first concern, Collopy, is with faith and morals. Their ap­
plication to everyday life is pretty wide but I fear your particular problem is far, far outside
the pale. (39–40)

Fahrt’s reference to “the pale” raises an interesting, paradoxical metaphor.
In one sense, the conversations enact a performance of words circling a
lack. But Collopy’s and Father Fahrt’s talk might seem more limited if it
were considered as constituting “the pale,” the fenced-off area encom­
passed by and determined by absence. In both senses, however, the attrac­
tion of all oral substitutes is the light punning way hints are dropped.

After extensive thought, the good Father does manage to prescribe a cure which would conform with Church policy: prayer. However, Mr. Collopy is more the man of science than faith. He is sure that the Lord Mayor will be more moved by measurement, data, documentation than he will be by any dose of celestial grace. With the help of his committee, he devises a scheme whereby concerned ladies will utilize technological apparatus to gather evidence:

There now, Rafferty, didn't I tell you, what? That articles on the table is a clinical hydrometer. As we agreed, you are to bring it to Mrs Flaherty. Tell her to take careful readings day and night for a fortnight from next Saturday at noon. And keep the most meticulous records.

Oh, I understand how important that is, Mr Collopy. And I'll make Mrs Flaherty understand.

In these modern times, you are damn nothing unless you can produce statistics. Columns and columns of figures, readings and percentages. Suppose they set up a Royal Commission on this thing? Where would we be if we couldn't produce our certified statistics? What would we look like in the witness chair? . . . And when Mrs Flaherty has given us her readings, we will give the next fortnight to Mrs Clohessy. (96–97)

It must be remembered that congregating compatible incidents like this is more than a bit misleading. What seem like obvious references after the fact are actually imaginatively puzzling insinuations while read. Talk of Collopy's project is never sustained for long. The matter is usually alluded to, then quickly dropped, remaining incomplete, underground.

This comedy of obfuscation comes to a head as Collopy and Fahrt travel to Rome for a private audience with Pope Pius X. Their visit is designed to effect a miraculous cure for Collopy's physical afflictions, but Cardinal Baldini inadvertently redirects their purpose with his appraisal of the Pontiff:

'... the man you are going to meet is the Pope of the Poor and the humble. In any way he can help them, he always does.'

'Is that a fact?' Collopy said. (134)

The papal pomp and circumstance, complete with Swiss Guards and the Fisherman's Ring, are about to get soiled with supplications for metropolitan conveniences. The humor, however, acquires its charge not so much from incongruity as in the suggestive dexterity of presentation. Collopy knows no Latin or Italian and the Pope no English, so Monsignor Cahill acts as interpreter between the shepherd and his flock. Manus, who reports the incident in a letter back to Finbarr, is seated too far away to hear any of the whispered exchanges. He is only privy to the Pope's startled facial reactions and his foreign-tongued rejoinders:

At the time I had no idea, of course, what the subject of the audience had been or what had been said in Latin or Italian by the Pope. It was only when I interviewed Monsignor Cahill the following day that I got the information I have set down here. I asked him what the subject of Mr Collopy's representations were. He said he had given his word of honour that he would not disclose this to anybody. (139)
The interview is transcribed as a crazy, one-sided conversation which we cannot resist trying to complete. The reader has to work backwards from verbal pauses, rhythms, and inflections the way one might if he or she were to overhear half of a telephone conversation from a distance which blurred the words. Preliminary greetings over, Collopy gets down to business:

(After a little more desultory conversation Mr Collopy said something in a low voice which I did not catch. Monsignor Cahill instantly translated. The Pope seemed startled. . . .)

**The Pope**

*Che cosa sta dicendo questo poveretto?*

*What is this poor child trying to say?*

**Monsignor Cahill spoke.**

*E tocco? Nonnunquam urbis nostrae visitentium capitibus affert vaporem. Dei praesidium hujus infantis amantissimi invocare velimus.*

*Is this child in his senses? Sometimes the heat of our city brings a vapour into the heads.*

**Father Fahrt spoke.**

*Ma questo è semplicemente mostruoso. Neque hoc nostrum officium cum concilii urbani officio est confudendum.*

*But this is monstrous. Nor should our office be confused with that of a city council. . . .*

*Bona mulier fons gratiae. Attamen ipsae in parvularum rerum suarum occupationibus verrentur. Nos de tantulis rebus consulere non decet.*

*A good woman is a fountain of grace. But it is themselves whom they should busy about their private little affairs. It is not seemly to consult us on such matters. (135–38)*

The interview continues for quite some time, compounding its complications and picking up momentum the longer the “matter” remains verbally veiled. The supplicants are finally dismissed on something less than a benedictory note:

As a matter of fact the Pope told us all to go to hell. He threatened to silence Father Fahrt. (133)

The entire sequence derives its vitality from the way silences are verbally evoked: “holy discourse” engages our imaginative “sound of sense” as it embarrassingly envelopes the unmentioned. The Latin and Italian delivery really animates the humor because even the middling scholar and the infrequent churchgoer have learned to respond to such vibrations deferentially. The sound of liturgical rhythms freighted with “bus,” “mus,” “ium,” “rum” endings lends an air of reverential dignity to the proceedings. These passages charm and captivate as the incensed sermonets eventually disclose themselves as so much papal bull for skirting the private little affairs of women. Niall Sheridan congratulates his friend:

the final episode in Rome (including the papal audience and your man’s fantastic death) is one of the most uproarious comic climaxes I can remember.10

10. Letter from Niall Sheridan to Brian O’Nolan, no date, labeled “Saturday,” probably fall 1960, O’Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
Sheridan is correct in pointing out the episodic character of the novel and the placement of climax. The uproar, however, centers not on invented plot but on the tumult fostered by language which just won't sit still.

Subsequently, matters quickly resolve themselves in a manner which underscores the absurdity of the plot. Collopy dies in Rome but leaves a will with a codicil which compensates for the dereliction of the Dublin Corporation. A large portion of his estate is earmarked for a characteristically peculiar trust fund. Resting in peace in Rome, Collopy arranges for women to do something similar on Dublin streets:

The trust will erect and maintain three establishments which the testator calls rest rooms. There will be a rest room at Irishtown, Sandymount, at Harold’s Cross and at Phibsborough. Each will bear the word PEACE very prominently on the door and each will be under the patronage of a saint—Saint Patrick, Saint Jerome and Saint Ignatius. Each of these establishments will bear a plaque reading, for instance, 'THE COLLOPY TRUST—Rest Room of Saint Jerome'. (152-53)

O’Brien’s consequential comedy underscores how, even in death, Collopy’s language eludes him. What self-respecting Dublin woman would seek rest or peace in a room that sounds as if it were comprised of saintly urinals?

Through its pose as realistic fiction, *The Hard Life* rebukes the reader looking for authenticity in the novel. Focusing on dialogue, it investigates “communication” as interestingly enjoined by a void beyond words. An English character in another novel once said of Irish talk:

> "If the essence of conversation is communication, then the Irish failed the test, dealing as they did in evasion and obfuscation. Irish conversation was like one of those Celtic designs in the Book of Kells made up of a simple form like a serpent that tied itself into thousands of ornamental knots before finally eating its own tail."  

Prejudicial and incorrect in general, these remarks score well when applied to *The Hard Life*. The conversations of Collopy and Fahrt constantly miss the mark, but their failures comically enable further intricate failures. The pleasure of this text is hearing the formation of various verbal knots and tasting, imaginatively, the tang of the tale.

**Works Cited**


----. Letter to Timothy O'Keeffe. 7 June 1961. O'Nolan Collection, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.


WAIN, JOHN. “To Write for My Own Race.” Encounter, July 1967, pp. 79–85.