
Fabulism and Irish Censorship

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse the effects of the introduction of Censorship legislation on Irish culture. The analysis focuses on the reasons behind the introduction of the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 and previous cases of literary ostracism. Then, it deals with anti-censorship journalism published in *The Bell* and the most controversial bannings, which increased the general awareness of the inadequacies of the Act and caused it to be lifted. Finally, the article examines the Act's impact on Irish letters, especially the rise of fabulist fiction and the techniques used by writers such as Eimar O'Duffy, Flann O'Brien, and Mervyn Wall to circumvent and ridicule the censorship laws. The emergence of satirical fantasy writing can be seen as a reaction to oppressive legislation. As publishing realistic novels became nearly impossible, Irish writers expanded their range of expression to include non-mimetic fiction.

Key Words: Censorship, satire, fabulism, Flann O'Brien, Mervyn Wall, Eimar O'Duffy.

The aim of this article is to explore the period in Irish cultural history before the country became the fast developing Celtic tiger of the European Union, that is the period between 1920s and 1960s. While nowadays the idea of cultural diversity is seen as beneficial to the uninhibited development of any country and pluralism is perceived as necessary for democracy, during the first decades of the existence of the Free State isolationism was encouraged to protect the fragile identity of the new state while the principles of censorship were written into the 1937 Constitution.

Though citizens were officially given the right to express freely their convictions and opinions, this right was qualified as follows:

[t]he education of public opinion being, however, a matter of such grave import to the common good, the State shall endeavour to ensure that organs of public opinion, such as the radio, the press, the cinema, while preserving their rightful liberty of expression, including criticism of Government policy, shall not be used to undermine public order or morality or the authority of the State.

The publication or utterance of blasphemous, seditious, or indecent matter is an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law (Kelly 1980: 440).

This constitutional article, in fact, only consolidated the already existing law. Various acts regulated the private lives of Irish citizens, limiting the occasion for undesirable behaviour: the Intoxicating Liquor Acts of 1924 and 1927 reduced the number of public houses and their opening hours, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935 prohibited the sale of contraceptives, and the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 restricted the holding of public dances. Censorship of the cinema was introduced in 1923, of printed matter in 1929. Thus, the State interfered in many areas of broadly defined private life.

One of the most conspicuous cases of this interference was the introduction of censorship. The Censorship Board established by this legislation was to consist of five people: one representative of the Catholic Church, a lawyer, a medical man, and one representative from each of the two universities. Anyone could send a book for

censorship, with the questionable passages underlined. If three censors wanted to ban the book, it was banned, and could not be sold in Eire. A book could be prohibited if it exploited violence, made open reference to sexuality, or unnatural methods of contraception or abortion. Though the board was to take into consideration the literary, scientific, or historic value of any questionable publication, censors often had no time to read each book and were often influenced by the marked passages or by the notoriety of authors like Boccaccio or Joyce. The malpractice caused by the physical impossibility of reading every single work of fiction or journal before reaching a verdict was disclosed by Lynn Doyle, after his resignation from the Board in 1937. Dr J. D. Smyth resigned for exactly the same reasons in 1949 (Bellew 1941: 144-146; Adams 1968: 116-117). Nevertheless, the way in which it operated was not altered, though no legal right of appeal existed till 1946.

The reasons behind the introduction of the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 were multiple. The most important ones were the impact of Catholic social teaching and the influence of nationalist Victorian values which replaced the 'looseness' of medieval Celtic society and Gaelic literature with a fabricated, idealised version of a pure and pious Gaelic past. Even before these tendencies became law, there were frequent cases of literary ostracism, such as the Abbey riots following the staging of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1899), *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). Likewise, some novels like Brinsley MacNamara's *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* (1918) were publicly burnt. The reviewer in *The Irish Times* was disappointed that the life depicted in that novel "appear to us to be truer pictures of life in Manchester or Liverpool slums than in a remote Irish village" because it is so "hideous and depressing in the extreme" (O'Farrell 1990: 79). Spiteful gossip, drunkenness, murder, wife-battering, and illegitimate pregnancies might take place in England but not on the Isle of Saints. This line of argument resembles the outrage that followed the Abbey production *The Plough and the Stars*. The character of Rosie, a prostitute, was violently criticized because, as one woman told O'Casey "I'd like you to know that there isn't a prostitute in Ireland

from one end of it th'other" (O'Connor 1988: 196). Likewise, English press was boycotted and some works of art or even advertisements scrutinised for immorality.

Even more complex than its reasons were the consequences of censorship. The negative ones were obvious: banning of most world's classics made law-abiding citizens limit their choice of reading matter to literature for adolescents, since any serious literature for adults would be incongruous with the standards of Irish censorship. Listing the works of Boccaccio, Hamsun, Hemingway, Faulkner, Moravia, Nabokov, Proust, Remarque, Shaw, Steinbeck, and Wells next to sensational erotic fiction like *First Passions or Parade of Virgins*, *Four Handsome Negresses*, *Nuns in Jeopardy*, *Silken Sin* made at least two generations of readers perceive writing only in opposite terms of 'innocent' or 'smutty' instead of good, bad, thought-provoking, difficult, controversial, disturbing, etc. As Julia Carlson notices, 'virtually no serious contemporary fiction was on the shelves' of libraries and bookstores (1990: 11).

As far as the authors are concerned, it made many outstanding writers choose to travel extensively (Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faolain) or live abroad (Frank O'Connor, James Stephens, Stephen MacKenna, Oliver St John Gogarty, Eimar O'Duffy, Sean O'Casey, George Russell). Ironically, many of them were formerly involved in the struggle for independence and soon after it was achieved they moved to England, the former adversary. It deprived the nation of many members of its native intelligentsia and contributed further to the intellectual impoverishment of the country.

Thinking about the effects of censorship in a positive way may seem oxymoronic; nevertheless, there were some positive consequences. Needless to say, the creators of the Censorship Act could not have predicted that the limitations they imposed would force Irish writers to discover new channels of expression. First of all, I want to focus on the anti-censorship campaign started by Sean O'Faolain in *The Bell* between 1940 and 1946. *The Bell* "prepared the ground for the more accommodating sense of Irish identity which began to develop in the 1960s and 1970s" (Welch 1996: 41). As O'Faolain believed that

“all the greatest cultures had been the creation not of separate racial units but of blended hordes of peoples of various ethnic origin”, he tried to acquaint his countrymen with a wider, European outlook on life and succeeded in *The Bell* in weakening the Irish xenophobia (Harmon 1994: 140).

The Bell published writers like Brendan Behan, Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Frank O'Connor, and Mary Lavin. Moreover, the analysis of the more controversial bannings which was frequently undertaken by the magazine (for example of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*, Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty*, Halliday Sutherland's *The Laws of Life*, Frank O'Connor's translation of Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* into modern English) increased the general awareness of the inadequacies of the Act and its frequent abuse. This eventually resulted in the establishment of an Appeal Court in 1946 and new censorship legislation in 1967.

Last but not least, the Act unintentionally contributed to the rise of fabulist fiction: satirical fantasies frequently taking place in fabulous worlds yet resembling modern Ireland and mercilessly exposing its absurdities. Thus, cultural oppression created favourable circumstances for the development of satirical fabulism since there was plenty to criticise though it could not be done openly. As it was nearly impossible to write realistic novels about contemporary Ireland without being prohibited, satirical parables and fantastic allegories were employed, as, in James Stephens's words “humour may be defined as the last refuge of the intellectually destitute”(Forster 1993: 242).

The rise of fantastic satires has seldom been seen by critics as an indirect result of the harsh censorship. They have traced it back to its literary predecessors such as Gaelic, Anglo-Irish and modern Irish satirical and fantastic writing in English, mainly to the works of Jonathan Swift, James Stephens and the 19th century Gothic writers such as Sheridan Le Fanu, Charles Maturin, Bram Stoker or Oscar Wilde, the interest in the supernatural and fantastic of the Celtic Twilight, or even late Victorian allegorical tales of adventure. Likewise, the term ‘fabulism’ and the choice of writers considered as fabulists deserves some attention. Some critics, like James Cahalan, used it to refer to writers like Eimar O'Duffy, Lord Dunsany, Joseph O'Neill, Austin Clarke,

Mervyn Wall, Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, and Francis Stuart (Cahalan 1988: 220-260). The only feature this list of novelists apparently shares is that their writings do not fall into the category of even broadly defined realistic fiction. Cahalan, nevertheless, notices that all of them experienced “a revulsion with what they saw as the puritanical and oppressive tendencies and practices of the ironically named Free State” and expressed their disgust creating “remote realms, distant in time or space, which often suspiciously resemble modern Ireland”(220). The term “fabulism” is also used by another historian of the Irish novel, John W. Foster. For him fabulism and fantasy writing are synonymous expressions, so W.B. Yeats, James Stephens, George Moore, Padraic Colum, Darrell Figgis, Eimar O'Duffy and Lord Dunsany are all fabulists (236-237; 273-298). Some other critics, however, most notably José Laners, the author of a very detailed analysis of fantastic satires in independent Ireland, does not refer to this term at all. As her title *Unauthorised Versions. Irish Menippean Satire, 1919-1952* suggests, she prefers Bahtin's terminology.

Though the number of writers classified as fabulist is rather big, some wrote and published their novels before the Censorship of Publications Act was introduced. On the other hand, some novels written in English after 1929 and dealing with the disillusionment with the narrow-mindedness of Irish life are not fantastic enough to be called fabulistic since *The Various Lives of Marcus Igoe* (1929) by Brinsley MacNamara or Austin Clarke's medieval romances do not defy the conventions of realism. Thus, in fact only O'Duffy, O'Brien and Wall can be called true fabulists as their writing is fantastic yet through allegory and satire makes a direct reference to Irish life in the first two decades after Censorship of Publications Act and in the few years preceding it.

There were several techniques common for the three fabulists. These similarities can be observed in the structure of their narratives and the properties of the language they used. The most noticeable feature they share is the shifting of the setting either to the past (Wall's *Fursey* novels: *The Unfortunate Fursey* and *The Return of Fursey*), future and space (O'Duffy three novels: *King Goshawk*

and the Birds, *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street* and *Asses in Clover*, known also as Cuandaine trilogy), the afterlife (O'Brien's *Third Policeman*), or an intertextual, metafictional zone (O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, to a lesser degree O'Duffy's novels). Despite the shift of time and place of the setting, notable analogies between that presented in the novels and the Free State can be easily tracked. The analogies may be drawn through exaggeration. For instance, in both O'Duffy's Cuandaine trilogy and Wall's Fursey novels the issue of censorship is presented. Its impact on everyday life is, however, much stronger than it was in reality. O'Duffy's Ireland is populated with zealous censors controlling thought and action. The state intervenes even in the way the citizens dress as [t]he costumes of women, both as to cut and material, were all regulated by statute, the length of the skirt and the thickness of the stockings being the subjects of the most stringent legislation; for the enforcement of which the Inspectors were furnished with tape-measures and calipers, with instructions to test any garment that might excite their suspicions (Wall 1948: 82).

They resemble policemen, wearing white uniforms and with lily-shaped batons, and arrest Cuchulain for courting a woman without matrimonial intent. Likewise, in Wall's vision of medieval Ireland, a Censor appointed by the Synod of Cashel is an indispensable figure. He orders all Greek and Latin manuscripts to be burnt, including some copies of the Old Testament, which he suspects of indecent tendencies. He is equipped for his difficult task because "each of his eyes moved independently of the other, a quality most useful in the detection of double meanings" (82). He is skilful enough to locate them even if they are "disguised as a moral platitude" (88).

Another method used by the fabulists to draw the analogies between modern Ireland and their fictive worlds is opposition or reversal of traditionally accepted values. It is Satan, not the clergy, who cares for Fursey and wants to protect him. In a similar manner, Pooka MacPhellimey in *At Swim-Two-Birds* seems to be a much more honest and likeable character than the Good Fairy. In O'Duffy's vision of the future Eire, it is contraception that is

advocated while procreation is banned. On the planet Rathe, sexual activity is uninhibited yet eating is a taboo subject. Moreover, the Ratheans, who are officially Devil-worshippers, are in fact a peace-loving, honest and hardworking nation. Similar examples could be multiplied. Finally, transportation of real characters or events into the fictive world is used. For instance, Wall's Bishop Flanagan is modelled on the character and physical appearance of the Dublin Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. Both are thin, sinewy men with sharp features and a piercing look. They influence current affairs and are obsessed with sexual looseness. One episode from the novel mirrors McQuaid's behaviour. Before Bishop Flanagan's arrival in Cashel "it was actually the practice of merchants to display articles of women's underwear on their stalls during the monthly fairs, to the grave detriment of morals" (Wall 1995: 41). The strict Bishop was, nevertheless, able to stop this sinful habit by sending respectable women to the merchants, who threatened to "withdraw their custom unless such raiment was kept under cover and not displayed before the gaze of men" (42). The humour of this passage arises not only from the fact that it is difficult to imagine how medieval coarse-linen underwear could be perceived as frivolous, but also from its open allusion to McQuaid's outrage at "scandalous display of woman's underclothing, corsets and the like, in the shops in the Grafton Street area of Dublin" (Wall 1982: 64). Similarly, in *King Goshawk and the Birds* Seumas Vanderbags is an obvious parody of Eamon De Valera as the Gaelic name and foreign surname suggest. Likewise, Madame Przemysl might remind the reader of Constance Markievicz as both have difficulty to pronounce Slavonic family names. Thus, some taboo subjects like the issues of censorship or contraception can be tackled in disguise. Also respected public figures like Easter 1916 veterans or an archbishop may be ridiculed.

Next, all of these novels dwell on the broadly understood motif of rebellion and prosecution. All the principal characters run away from something or someone. This is most conspicuous in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, since the theme of rebellion dominates in all three narratives: Trellis's characters reject his authority as omnipotent narrator, first ignoring his wishes, and later torturing him

through Orlick's writing while Sweeny, a mythical king of Dal Araidhe, resists Christianity as symbolised by cleric Ronan. The "non serviam" theme applies also to the structure of student's novel as he rejects the conventions of a traditional, realistic novel. The student gives vent to his anger by means of the cruel descriptions of Sweeny's sufferings or Trellis's mutilated body and by formal experiments in novel writing. In O'Duffy's trilogy, eager guardians of peace and morality chase Cuchulain, Flann O'Brien's policemen pursue the unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman*, while Mervyn Wall shows both clergymen and demons hounding Fursey.

Finally, some fabulistic novels are written in a manner that makes conventional, linear reading impossible. The multi-registered texts include lengthy footnotes, diagrams, newspaper headlines and passages from articles, fragments printed in regular font and italics. The layout makes the reader confused as all fragments seem of equal importance yet they cannot be read simultaneously, which is most conspicuous in the de Selby footnotes of *The Third Policeman*. The main narratives of O'Duffy's Cuanduine trilogy or *At Swim-Two Birds* are so filled with digressions that they stop being dominant. The whole second book of the Cuanduine trilogy can serve as case in point here. In fact, *The Spacious Adventures of the Man in the Street* is a letter written by a minor character from the first novel, explaining his absence from that work. His story has nothing to do with Cuanduine's quest against Goshawk. The function of polyphonic narration is to denounce any authority, to destabilise the homogeneity of discourse within the text itself. Lack of single narrative voice (and of its consequence – a single viewpoint through which the text is shaped) permits the emergence of other voices, often representing contradictory points of view. Thus, the reader encounters plurality of alternative meanings, none of which is presented as the correct one. This stylistic diversity strengthens the anti-authoritarian aim of the satire.

Likewise, the novels often play with conventional expectations, presenting apparently good characters as evil and vice versa. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* this reversal is presented in the subplot about Pooka MacPhellimey and the Good Fairy. Pooka is described as "a member of the devil class"

who specialises in "evil, revolt, and non-serviam" while the Good Fairy, an angel-like figure, should be the embodiment of fairness (O'Brien 1981: 9; 150). In compliance with the fairy tale tradition or Christian allegories they both go to witness the birth of Orlick Trellis and fight for supremacy over his soul. At the beginning of their conversation both are equally courteous and good-tempered; the Good Fairy, however, soon becomes irritable and arrogant. He is patronising and openly rude towards Jem Casey, a working-class poet and Sweeny, whom he suspects of being drunk. He disapproves of the suggestion that one of the characters was hiding in the bushes to answer a call of nature as mentioning such matters is low and inappropriate. It is Pooka who has to remedy the situation and pacify the offended members of the group. The Good Fairy's dishonesty and hypocrisy is finally revealed when it turns out he cannot pay the money he lost gambling and asks Pooka not to reveal his shameful secret to other players as it would irrevocably destroy his reputation. Despite the Good Fairy's assertion of his moral supremacy, there is no real value to support his words – he has neither moral values nor money. Thus, the character who is seemingly the embodiment of goodness is disclosed as untrustworthy, conceited and prudish while the representative of Evil turns out to be civil, sympathetic and kind. In the Fursey novels, the critical descriptions of members of the clergy and their attitude to sensuality and beauty are contrasted with the sympathetic way Satan and other demons are depicted. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the treatment Fursey receives from the two parties serves the same purpose. His abbot expels him from the monastery and later wants to burn him while Satan remains loyal and rescues Fursey from the stake as a token of friendship.

The frequent use of unusual lexical items is also worthy of consideration. While O'Duffy excelled at anagrams, O'Brien was a master of sexual innuendo and conspicuous omissions. Frequently, the vocabulary belonging to one context would be employed in another, making the passage suspiciously suggestive of sexual activity. The most famous examples here are the student's programme of study in his bedroom which alludes to masturbation, ball games which suggest homosexuality or a

bicycle ride described in terms of a sexual intercourse. The vocabulary used by the unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman* is clearly erotic: “crouch submissively”, “spread invitingly”, “desirable”, “charming invitation of slim encircling handle-arms”, “competent and reassuring pump” (O’Brien 1993: 177-178). After passing his hand “with unintended tenderness – sensuously, indeed – across the saddle” he is seduced into mounting (177). The union of the rider with his machine is described as follows:

I led the bicycle to the middle of the road, turned her wheel to the middle of the road, turned her wheel resolutely to the right and swung myself to the centre of the saddle as she moved away eagerly under me in her own time.

How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? [. . .] She moved beneath me with agile sympathy in a swift, airy stride, [. . .] swaying and bending skilfully to match my changing attitudes [. . .]. I sighed and settled forward on her handlebars. [. . .] My feet pressed down with ecstasy on the willing female pedal (179; 200).

Though Wall less frequently employed such techniques, an old monk’s ‘pious ejaculation’ at the thought of scantily dressed female demons could serve as a notable exception (Wall 1948: 20). It can be interpreted as a banal moralistic reaction or a physiological one.

Censorship legislation, paradoxically, forced the authors to invent effective techniques to circumvent the regulations and undermine the greatest literary taboos of Ireland: Catholic sexual morality, cultural chauvinism and the belief in the positive results of isolation and the necessity of censorship itself. Thus, ironically, though the Censorship of Publications Act was undoubtedly a hindrance to frank realists, who had their books banned, and increased the intellectual provincialism of Irish cultural life, it contributed to the unprecedented outburst of fantastic literature. Yet, fabulist fiction appears to be a temporary literary measure taken as a result of particular circumstances with a particular therapeutic aim in mind. Unfortunately, since much of the humour of the Cuanduine trilogy or the Fursey novels depends on the reader being able to follow

the allusions to contemporary people and events, a modern reader’s inability to do so immensely reduces the artistic value of these works nowadays. Freud notices the sad doom of many excellent jokes which were popular at a certain time but because

they contained allusions to people and events which were “topical”, which had aroused general interest and still kept it alive. When this interest had ceased and the business in question had been settled, these jokes too lost a part of their pleasurable effect and indeed a very considerable part (1983: 171).

Since the issue of contraception has been finally settled, the parts of the Cuanduine trilogy dealing with St. Progressa and her anti-baby campaign are no longer so funny, neither is the veiled criticism of censorship in *The Return of Fursey*. Likewise, nearly thirty years after John Charles MacQuaid’s death, most contemporary readers hardly know who the Archbishop of Dublin was and what events he was involved in; thus, they cannot recognise Wall’s Bishop Flanagan as his caricature and fully enjoy the novels’ satirical edge. Even for contemporary foreigners, Wall’s fabulistic writing was incomprehensible and an American journal commented that *The Unfortunate Fursey* “has little of general appeal to the American market” (Hogan 1972: 72).

The only exception, if popularity and contemporary readership are an indicator, is Flann O’Brien. In the case of his writing, the satirical criticism of the Free State is balanced by independent metafictional experiments, intriguing style and pure humour, which is not solely involved in unmasking the absurdities of Irish life. Thus, *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *The Third Policeman* have not lost their appeal now and have not shared the sad fate of the works of O’Duffy and Wall. Their works did not survive the test of time as their main aim was subversive, not artistic. However, since the system they opposed has faded away one could say their role was successfully fulfilled.

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