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psychiatry in literature

Language and style for psychiatrists: honing our words on Flann O'Brien's grindstone

Alistair Stewart 

Psychiatrists, and not only those in training, often communicate about their patients' mental worlds and struggles in a way which suggests that they have abandoned the resources of everyday language without gaining anything useful in return. This is probably due in part to laziness, in part to the strange vocabulary which grows out of the soil of psychology and in part to absorption of bureaucratic jargon.

I find that a useful antidote to all this is regular immersion in the writings of Flann O'Brien, otherwise known as Brian O'Nolan, or Brian Ó Nualláin or Myles na cGopaleen. As Flann, he is known for a number of mind-bending novels, in particular *The Third Policeman*. As Myles, for over 20 years from the 1940s he wrote *The Cruiskeen Lawn*, a regular column in *The Irish Times*, addressing many different subjects in a range of voices and styles. In these pieces, now collected in various volumes, he lampooned without mercy: blaggers, conmen and hypocrites of all ranks and stations. Since we are all capable of a bit of blagging, we can find ourselves there too. In the Catechism of Cliché, which Myles often rehearsed, he laid bare the ridiculous quality of the stock phrases we use so readily:

'Is treatment, particularly bad treatment, ever given to a person?
No. It is always meted out.
Is anything else ever meted out?
No. The only thing that is ever meted out is treatment.
And what does the meting out of treatment evoke?
The strongest protest against the treatment meted out'

(the Catechism was contemporaneous with George Orwell's observations on the dangerous effects of cliché in political language).

Myles also introduced a cast of characters who remain familiar today. A certain class of civil servant, for example:

'In his view, there is pressure of work. The work is, however, under consideration. Certain separate matters are under review, others are under active consideration. A decision will be taken only on consideration of the facts in all their aspects. The facts will in the meantime be under continuous and active review and a decision will be announced at an early date.'

And not forgetting the intellectuals:

'Suppose I write a symphony. No, that is a crude way of putting it. Suppose that contained in my cranium is a work of dimension so vast, of nature so autonomous, supreme, trisgemistous in its modes that it cannot be noted down on paper. Suffice it that it... explores, discovers, dismantles, inaugurates... stuns!'

Writers of Irish heritage have enriched the English language to a quite disproportionate degree. Myles na cGopaleen offered the following explanation for this:

'It is worth remembering that if Irish were to die completely, the standard of English here, both in the spoken and written word, would sink to a level probably as low as that obtaining in England, and it would stop there only because it could go no lower.'

Those of us in England, if not elsewhere, should do our best to prove him wrong, at least on this point.

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