

Fintan O'Toole: The Flann O'Brien guide to understanding Brexit

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O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* – with its unending, hellish plot – is the Brexit Code

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Fintan O'Toole

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In 2005, viewers around the world were sucked into a meandering TV drama called *Lost*, in which it was never quite clear what was going on.

Then the writer let it be known that, in the third episode of the second series, there would be an important clue. The clue was that one of the characters was seen reading Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*, written in 1940, in which the reader begins to realise what the nameless narrator does not: that he is in hell.

This made sense of *Lost*. But I can now reveal that *The Third Policeman* is also the secret key to another long-running drama in which everyone is lost, no one quite knows what is going on and everything begins to look a lot like hell: Brexit.

Here is the history of Brexit in 12 passages from *The Third Policeman*.

1. The Leave campaign's promises

Early in the book, the narrator encounters an “eccentric queerly-spoken” and “tricky-looking” man.

He is a ruthless robber but he takes a shine to the narrator and offers him a grandiose gift.

“He put his hand into a pocket at his crotch and took out a round thing. ‘Here is a sovereign for your good luck,’ he said ‘the golden token of your golden destiny.’

I gave him, so to speak, my golden thank-you but I noticed that the coin he gave me was a bright penny.”

This is of course a foretelling of Boris Johnson and the other tricky-looking fellows; the Leave campaign's promise in 2016 of both £350 million a week for the National Health Service; a golden destiny and the promise of a shiny sovereignty that turned out to be really a bad penny.

2. The Leave campaign's illegal breach of spending limits, purloined Facebook data and use of secretly targeted digital propaganda.

“Apparently there is no limit,” Joe remarked.

“Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed.”

3. The consequence of having no feasible plans for what would happen after the referendum.

In *The Third Policeman*, the notebooks of the “savant” De Selby, with whose obscure works and bizarre experiments the narrator is obsessed, contain rough sketches of his designs for houses.

“These structures were of two kinds: roofless ‘houses’ and ‘houses’ without walls.”

One French commentator on De Selby suggests that he may have drawn these absent-mindedly as doodles.

“The next time he took it up he was confronted with a mass of diagrams and drawings which he took to be plans of a type of dwelling which he always had in mind and immediately wrote many pages explaining the sketches.”

The Brexiteers likewise looked at their own absent-minded political doodlings and wrote infinite pages (mostly in highly remunerated columns for the Tory press) justifying their plans for a great Brexit house with no roof or no walls.

4. The backward glance to empire and the second World War.

De Selby became fixated on the idea that, if you look at yourself in the mirror, you are seeing an image of yourself as you were a fraction of a second before.

Thus, by constructing a series of parallel mirrors, he claimed to have been able to recede to an image of himself as a “beardless boy of twelve” with “a countenance of singular beauty and nobility”.

So entranced was he with the idea that he eventually “refused to countenance a direct view of anything” and looked at everything through a rear-view mirror.

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Equally, the Brexiteers looked in the mirror and saw a singularly English vision of past beauty and nobility.

“It’s Agincourt! It’s Crecy! It’s Waterloo! We always win these things,” cried Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Like De Selby, they refused to countenance a direct view of anything that might be called contemporary reality and walked backwards with a flattering mirror in front of their faces.

5. The triggering of article 50 with no road map for negotiations

De Selby is convinced that there is no need for a sense of direction because a good road will have a “certain air of destiny, an indefinable intimation that it is going somewhere, be it east or west”.

When Theresa May triggered article 50 in March 2017, she had absolutely no sense of direction, yet was certain that Britain was nonetheless on the road to destiny.

When David Davis turned up in Brussels to begin negotiations (the easiest ever conducted, he predicted) with scarcely a piece of paper in front of him, he was following De Selby’s teachings: “If a friendly road should lead you into a complicated city with nets of crooked streets and five hundred other roads leaving it for unknown destinations, your own road will always . . . lead you to safety out of the tangled town.”

6. The increasingly ludicrous hype

The actual negotiations made it ever more obvious that the only really achievable Brexit was a kind of second-class membership of the European Union and that the whole exercise was thus inherently futile.

But this resulted, not in calm reflection, but in an ever-increasing volume of noise: Global Britain! Vassal state! D-Day! Independence Day! British pluck! Colony! Bloody Germans! WTO rules! Brexit means Brexit! Saboteurs! Enemies of the people! Go whistle for your money!

This too is foretold in *The Third Policeman*.

The narrator recalls the hammering noises that were heard while De Selby was conducting supposedly delicate

experiments: “no commentator has hazarded a guess as to what was being hammered and for what purpose”.

But one of them “has put forward the suggestion that loud hammering was a device resorted to by the savant to drown other noises which might give some indication of the real trend of the experiments.”

7. The promised trade deals with other countries fail to materialise

De Selby believes that “A journey is an hallucination”.

It is all in the mind. Thus, when he has to undertake a “journey” from Bath to Folkstone, he shuts himself in his room with a series of postcards depicting the places that he would traverse were he actually to travel this route, “together with an elaborate arrangement of clocks and barometric instruments”.

After seven hours, he emerges “convinced that he was in Folkstone and possibly that he had evolved a formula for travellers which would be extremely distasteful to railway and shipping companies. There is no record of the extent of his disillusionment when he found himself still in the familiar surroundings of Bath.”

Effectively, the British government and the Brexit-supporting press shut themselves up in their own room for two years and concentrated very hard on visualising all the milestones on the journey towards the glorious post-Brexit global future.

In this room, they were travelling to the old white colonies (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and to China and India to sign fabulously advantageous trade deals.

They were waving blue passports with proper British insignia as they passed unimpeded through foreign airports to be greeted with renewed respect and affection by the friendly natives who had always longed for their return.

They were sailing their new aircraft carrier, the Queen Elizabeth II, into the South China Seas (as the witless defence secretary Gavin Williamson promised) to remind everyone who is in charge.

(I cannot remember whether it was De Selby or Williamson who said: “Brexit has brought us to a great moment in our history. A moment when we must strengthen our global presence, enhance our lethality and increase our mass.”)

We do not yet have the record of the full extent of their disillusionment when they opened the door and found themselves still in Bath.

8. The backstop

“The savant spent several months trying to find a satisfactory method of ‘diluting’ water.” Could there be a clearer foreshadowing of the problem of the Irish backstop?

The backstop is the insurance policy placed in the withdrawal agreement to ensure that there could be no imposition of a hard border on the island of Ireland.

The British government agreed to it in December 2017 when Boris Johnson was foreign secretary and David Davis was Brexit secretary. And then they spent more than a year trying to dilute it.

“We stand by Ireland,” warned Guy Verhofstadt. “There is no majority to reopen or dilute the withdrawal agreement in the European Parliament, including the backstop.”

But the British carried on thinking up various ways of diluting water. Amazingly, they couldn’t do it.

9. The indicative votes

“Do you not see that every reply is in the negative? No matter what you ask him he says No.”

Early in *The Third Policeman*, the narrator encounters the man he has murdered, Old Mathers. When he asks Mathers questions, the answers are “I am not”, “No”, “I do not”.

Eventually Mathers explains that having been led into bad ways in his youth by agreeing to the suggestions of others, he decided to keep himself out of trouble by resolving to “say No henceforth to every suggestion”. He holds that “‘No’ is, generally speaking, a better answer than ‘Yes’.”

In one of its more arcane moments of delusion, the House of Commons became fixated on something called the Malthouse Compromise, which was really another way to dilute water.

But when that evaporated, the parliament settled on what should surely have been called the Mathers Compromise. It realised that the safest way to answer every question thrown up by Brexit is in the negative: no, we do not, none of the above.

It has now twice gone through lists of possible outcomes and rejected each of them one by one. Brexit was always a negative reply – the British (or more accurately the English) said what they do not want, but have not really been given a chance to say what they do.

10. The mirage that keeps receding into the distance

The epigraph to the novel is a quote from De Selby: “It ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death.”

This should rightly serve to remind us to keep everything in perspective: it ill becomes any man or woman to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as the end of Brexit.






The Third Policeman does not really end.

In this hell, the narrator thinks he has escaped but we find him on the last pages approaching again the place he has just been, with no memory of it all, doomed to repeat the same terrible adventures forever.

When will Brexit be over?

“The wisest course on this question” writes the narrator, “is probably that taken by the little-known Swiss writer Le Clerque. ‘This matter,’ he says, ‘is outside the true province of the conscientious commentator inasmuch as being unable to say aught that is charitable or useful, he must preserve silence.’”

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Fintan O'Toole: My first Christmas as a grandfather and my first as nobody's child

There are times when the wonder of death and birth seems overwhelming


© Mon, Dec 24, 2018, 06:00

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 Christmases are like the marks we make on the kitchen wall to show how tall a child is growing. Except that they are marks on the memory, annual calibrations of our notions of family. And unlike the real marks, they don't go in one direction only. They rise and fall as our families change. In childhood they seem to grow as new members join the circle. Then they diminish rapidly as you and your partner cross that watershed of independence and decide, at last, to stop going to your respective families and be your own little family. They grow again as that new family becomes its own thing and swell even further when you reach that other watershed and your parents start coming to you. They lessen again as death takes its toll.



And of course, Christmases can expand and contract at the same time. This Christmas will be first one in my 60 years in which I will not be somebody's child. My mother, Mary, has been dead a few years and my father, Sammy, joined her in February. I had become used to them at the Christmas dinner table, my mother pretending to be guilty that she was being waited on but secretly loving it, my father's utter relish of food, the primal pleasure he took in its abundance making him the perfect guest. His savouring gusto always seemed to carry a living reminder of the time when this feast was not just a continuation of endless overconsumption but a rare and therefore truly marvellous departure from the norm of dearth.

When you are little you always think about "when I grow up", but if you're lucky it doesn't actually happen for a very long time. Because the rituals of Christmas are repetitions of childhood. It is the time when, if you are fortunate enough to still have your parents, you are most conscious of not yet being quite the grown-up, of still being their child. On this day in particular, you are living in two states, fussing around in the busy, convivial now while steeping in the warm bath of memory. You are half responsible adult and half delighted child.

I am the roof

For my own sons there were always grandparents – my mother and father and my wife's mother, Eileen – at the table. And all three of them are gone now. In no time at all, it seems, the table has grown shorter and there are fewer places to set. There is no need to bring those extra chairs down from the attic. There are vivid spaces, radiant absences. No more grandparents.

Except that there are: and we are them. My wife and I are the grandparents now. In October, our grandson, Bjørn Oisín was born in Zurich. Since last Christmas I have not just lost the generational roof over my head – I have become part of the roof over a new generation's head. Silly as it seems, I have gone from being a child last Christmas to being a grandfather this Christmas, with, as it feels, nothing in between. Those spaces above us are not empty – we are filling them ourselves. One mark on the wall is erased and ours is the mark that replaces it.

Fintan O'Toole with his late parents, Sammy and Mary, his sons Fionn and Sam and his brother Patrick. Photograph:

While we were waiting anxiously for Bjørn's birth, knowing that his mother had gone into labour, my wife and I went for a walk in the Botanic Gardens and, needing to keep circling, cut off into Glasnevin Cemetery. Purely by chance, we came across the grave of John Stanislaus Joyce, who died in December 1931. His son James thought of him a few months later, in February 1932, when he got the news that his own grandson Stephen had been born. The simple lines that he wrote down came into my head that morning:

A child is sleeping;
An old man gone.

Overwhelming

Nobody can, or should, replace anyone else. But there are times when the simple wonder of death and birth seems overwhelming and for me this Christmas is one of them – the great darkness of a whole life passing in a last breath; the great blaze of a whole life announcing itself in a cry. This was, of course, the point of the winter solstice that our ancestors marked by imagining the death of one year and the birth of another. And it was the point of those early Christians who transferred this feeling from the birth of the year to the birth of a child. This year I will be especially glad of this ritual moment when the family contracts and expands – like the pulse of a human heart. A child is sleeping, an old man gone, my own childhood laid to rest in the cradle of a new one. The baby in the manger is the living miracle of life's renewal. As Joyce wrote on that day:

Young life is breathed
Upon the glass,
The world that was not
Comes to pass.

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Fintan O'Toole: Boris Johnson is the fool who would play the king

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Johnson gets away with unabashed lying because he shifts between joker and politician

Tue, Jun 18, 2019, 05:00

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Boris Johnson has received 114 out of 313 votes in the first poll to succeed Theresa May as Conservative leader, comfortably topping the poll ahead of his nearest challenger Jeremy Hunt on 43. Video: Reuters



If lies were flies, the swarm around him would be so thick that Boris Johnson would be invisible. His gruff, mock-jovial Etonian tones would be drowned out by their incessant, deafening hum. There is ordinary political lying – evasions, circumlocutions, omissions, half-truths. And then there is Johnsonian lying – bare-faced, full-throated, unabashed. I wonder is this the real mark of how far British political life has fallen: people are so sick of the first kind of dishonesty that they actually find Johnson's upfront mendacity refreshing. Is this the only kind of authenticity some of them can now imagine: the honest liar whose fabrications are unadulterated by any vestigial belief that truth even exists?

When Johnson was Brussels correspondent of the Telegraph, his colleagues from the rest of the British media made up a version of Hilaire Belloc's Matilda in his honour: "Boris told such dreadful lies/ It made one gasp and stretch one's eyes./ His desk, which from its earliest youth/ Had kept a strict regard for truth,/ Attempted to believe each scoop / Until they landed in the soup." He got away with it, of course, because mostly what he lied about, in public at least, was the European Union. Even for once-respectable Tory papers such as the Telegraph, the EU has always been a free-fire zone. The rules of engagement are different – minimal respect for facts is not required.

Influential figure

I went back and read Johnson's Telegraph column of March 16th, 2016. It is important because it is the one in which he announced that he was backing Brexit in the referendum. We now know that Johnson had in fact submitted two columns – the other one arguing passionately for Remain – because he had not, at deadline time, decided where the greatest advantage lay for his own career. Had the other column been printed, Brexit would not have happened: polls show that Johnson was by far the most influential figure in the referendum campaign. On such idiocies the fate of nations turns.

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The EU says you can't recycle a teabag – lie

The core of the column that did appear is the intolerable craziness of EU legislation: “Sometimes these EU rules sound simply ludicrous, like the rule that you can't recycle a teabag, or that children under eight cannot blow up balloons, or the limits on the power of vacuum cleaners. Sometimes they can be truly infuriating – like the time I discovered, in 2013, that there was nothing we could do to bring in better-designed cab windows for trucks, to stop cyclists being crushed.”

The EU says you can't recycle a teabag – lie. The truth is that some local councils in Britain itself had introduced this restriction: nothing to do with the EU. Children under eight cannot blow up balloons – lie. EU safety rules simply say that packets of balloons should carry the words: “Warning: children under eight can choke or suffocate.” Limits on the power of vacuum cleaners – half true. The EU did have such limits, for good environmental reasons, but they were subsequently overturned by the European Court, which Johnson hates. Johnson as mayor of London being prevented by the EU from requiring safer cab windows to protect cyclists – a flaming beacon of deceit. In 2014, when he was mayor, Johnson actually made precisely the opposite complaint, that the British government was failing to back EU proposals for safer cab windows: “If these amendments, supported by dozens of cities across Europe, can succeed, we can save literally hundreds of lives across the EU in years to come. I am deeply concerned at the position of the British government and urge them to embrace this vital issue.”

False claim

How does he continue to thrive on lies? In part because of a disgraceful dereliction of duty on the part of the Telegraph, which pays him almost €300,000 a year but refuses to hold him to the most basic standards of professional journalism. In April, when the paper was forced to retract a false claim by Johnson that polls showed a no-deal Brexit to be the most popular option, it added that Johnson was “entitled to make sweeping generalisations based on his opinions” and that his column “was clearly comically polemical, and could not be reasonably read as a serious, empirical, in-depth analysis of hard factual matters”.

“

He operates in the space between politics and buffoonery and shifts from one side to the other whenever it suits him

Comically polemical says it all. Johnson has managed to claim the privileges of the Fool while seeking to play the King. He operates in the space between politics and buffoonery and shifts from one side to the other whenever it suits him. When he is lying, he is making political statements that shape the views of millions. When he is called out on the lies, they are just jokes.

In this, Johnson embodies more than anyone else the weirdly performative nature of Brexit as a jolly jape with real and awful consequences. It is simultaneously tragic and farcical. No one better captures this than BoJo the clown who doubles as Johnson the ringmaster. There is a horrible logic to the man whose own newspaper insists he “could not be taken seriously” rising to lead his country in its most profound crisis for many decades. Who better to speak for a reckless and decadent ruling class for whom everything is desperate but nothing is serious?

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