

# Editorial

Michael Hinds

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## *Policeman's Helmet Soup*

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# Editorial:

## Slanting

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Michael Hinds is from Omagh, Northern Ireland. He is currently Head of the School of English, Dublin City University, where he is an Associate Professor of American Literature and Poetry. He was formerly a lecturer at the Mater Dei Institute and the University of Tokyo. He co-edited the collection of essays [Rebound: The American Poetry Book](#) (Brill) with Stephen Matterson, and his book, [Johnny Cash International: How and Why the World Loves the Man in Black](#), co-authored with Jonathan Silverman, was published by University of Iowa Press in 2020 and won the 2023 Peggy O'Brien Book Prize for Publications in American Studies. He is currently co-editing a book of essays on the Indian Poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. Aside from his writings on poetry, he has also published widely on American literature, popular music, sports and other phenomena of American culture.

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Why do people study English Literature at University? If continuing to study English after school means anything, the answer to that question should come in the form of a question: why shouldn't they? The English language is more fundamentally a global phenomenon than ever before, it is something that people work with and through for all of their lives. It follows that we are surrounded by literary and cultural representations which reflect the prevalence of English, but that they also evolve continually. Some of these representations are amazing, some are banal, some are bogus, but irrespective of their relative merits, we have to adapt our ability to foster critical thinking in the face of all of it. Studying English allows for the exploration of that thinking, it is a way of engaging decisively and responsibly with how the world works through language and how language warps the world, for better or worse. It should be liberating and it should be fun.

On the website of the journal, we offer a brief account of how it came to be named *Policeman's Helmet Soup*. The title is adapted from a letter brimming with mischief that James Joyce sent to his son Giorgio and daughter-in-law Helen on October 16, 1934, responding to their protestations of hunger (Joyce himself was no stranger to either hunger or protest). He sent them a Maggi stock cube, as well as instructions for making soup with the help of a policeman:

*I was so overjoyed to see that you are now at last doing things on the cheap and having glueplate lunches. After years my teachings and preachings have borne fruit. But the good work is only begun. I am sending you something even better. It is a small cube of Maggi's Allerleigemuslisuppe. You take off the wrapper and let the square-inch cube drop into a ten gallon copper washing pot filled with inexpensive water. Leave it to boil gently for an hour asking the local policeman to have an eye to it and to stir it every five minutes with his truncheon. Then take off your boots and stockings and put some soot over your face and go out carrying a large sack. Then go round to the back door of the convent of S. Vincent de Paul and pull the bell which is marked Paupers. 'When the lay brother opens the door tell him about the Maggi suppe. Address him as Monsignor and he will be so flattered that in half a minute he will be gone and back again with an armful of bits of hard crusty bread left over by the community. Thank him, calling him Your Holiness. Take this bread home and after having washed and scrubbed it well hammer the pieces and drop them into the pot of now roaring soup. Do not forget to thank the policeman and allow him to dip his truncheon in the soup and lick it. Remember to call him Policeman Esquire not Mr Policeman as people who have not been to a University sometimes do. Then wash and dry yourselves and allow the soup to cool. Then take a bowl of it and two spoons and eat it and the bread very slowly, saying: Every little bimbo has a big babbo, but no little bimbo has such a good big babbo as our good big babbo. Eat a bowl a day and the potful ought to last till the middle of next month. If you leave before then send out cards to your friends and let them have a spoonful each.*

Joyce did not have any money, and he did not really have any food to send other than a cube of powder. But he had words, and he had an incredibly capable imagination. By the end of reading the passage, you are thoroughly outside of yourself, freed by the liberating force of language. You can sense Joyce's taking of liberties here, and you can add to it. What else is a policeman's helmet for, other than making a good broth or a bouillon? If a literary imagination does anything

well, it allows for alternative lines of interpretation and inference to be drawn, and the flourishing of possibility that might follow from that departure from conventional thinking. To think critically is not to explain, but to query, to conjure and to joke, “to tell the truth, but tell it slant -” as Emily Dickinson put it. It might be added that to tell the truth in the contemporary age, where human sovereignty over language is being so abjectly surrendered, you have to tell it slant.

Telling it slant means not seeking to offer up easy paraphrases or glib answers that head off difficulty or unpredictability, and it means that there must be a preparedness on the writer’s part to discuss things that might be conventionally uncomfortable. One of the pleasures of editing this issue lay in remarking the diverse ways in which DCU’s students of English sought both to slant things and see them as slanted, often in complementary ways. A look at the contents page indicates very clearly how much of what is under discussion here has a foundation in the visual, either directly engaging with film and TV or adaptations of literary productions into screen formats. This is not surprising, given the visual turn in culture and that we live more than ever in a Society of the Spectacle, yet at the same time all of our writers are drawn to a sense that words very much matter in these adaptations and screen-texts, and that they exist in a necessarily anxious relationship to the images that they present. Such productive tension also accompanies the work done by some of the writers here in the gothic and dystopian modes of fiction. It might say something about the current cultural and historical moment that our research options in these areas are usually the first to fill up, but it is also a necessary reminder that writing and imagination are fundamental strategies for us to resist the depredations of bad politics and bad actions. Thinking about life through literature, through the hypothetical means of our fictions, poems and performances, provides us with a set of tactics for achieving a good life, even in bad times.

That is what the School of English seeks to promote, and through the journal we seek to provide Students with a means of communicating that freedom, as well as the mischief and guile that we might identify in Joyce’s letter. The work published in this journal emerged out the work done by all DCU students of English in their final year of study, across a range of programmes. We were only able to select a few articles for development towards journal publication, and there were some very fine pieces of work which could not be included because of space issues. With that in mind, we should both congratulate those whose work is featured here, but all of their fellow students who contributed to the research culture of the seminars from which these pieces originated. Thanks should also be offered to all of the members of the School of English involved in the administration and teaching of the research seminars, as well as everyone who volunteered to read a manuscript or to join in the work of the Editorial Committee. Thanks also to Thomas Caffrey, for his wonderfully weird Policeman’s Helmet illustration, and to Ciara Nitz for her brilliant design of the issue. Ciara is a student from the BAJH, currently on Intra Placement, she will be back to finish her degree in September 2026, Thomas recently completed his PhD at the School of English in DCU and is about to publish his first book on the Haruki Murakami and Fandom with University of Iowa Press. Most importantly, the School of English must thank Geraldine McNamara and Alexander Kouker from DCU Library who first

approached us with the bright idea that we should produce a journal of Undergraduate Writing. None of this would exist without them. Enjoy the soup, whatever the flavour.

Michael Hinds

Dublin, February 10, 2026.