THE DIALECTICS OF FICTION: FLANN O'BRIEN'S *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

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"There are two ways to make big money ... to write a book or to make a book", observes one of the characters of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (O'Brien 1971: 24), addressing the narrator of the novel. *At Swim-Two-Birds* itself, however, first published in 1939, won fame only on its reissue in the early sixties. In 1965 O'Brien himself commented humorously on the belated success of his first novel:

> In the year 1939 a book curiously named *At Swim-Two-Birds* appeared. Adolf Hitler took serious exception to it and in fact loathed it so much that he started the World War II in order to torpedo it. In a grim irony that is not without charm, the book survived the war while Hitler did not (Wäppling 1984 : 13).[1]

Nevertheless, already in the forties, the novel was welcomed by several writers, including James Joyce, Graham Greene, Dylan Thomas and William Saroyan (cf. Wäppling 1984: 26). Joyce, who at that time was disappointed at the misconstrued interpretations of *Ulysses* on the part of many critics and "wished that more of them had realized that [it] was essentially a funny book" (Wäppling 1984: 20),[2] gave a short but enthusiastic judgement on *At Swim...* :

> That's a real writer, with the true comic spirit. A really funny book (Wäppling 1984 : 20).[3]

Interestingly, the history of reception of *At Swim...* mirrors the postwar developments in novel criticism. It is a triviality to say that the sources of critical inspiration which led to the fundamental revaluation of literary standards must be traced back to the manifest declarations and practice of

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[1] Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O'Brien), "Cruiskeen lawn", The Irish Times, 4th Feb. 1965.

[2] Naill Sheridan in a letter to O'Keefe, 4th March 1960, O'Nolan Collection.

[3] Ibid.

the nouveau-roman writers and the harbingers of postmodernism in America. The new novel, with the strategic employment of irony, pronounced its task to 'unmask' the inadequacy of the one-dimensional means of the genre as to the endeavour of describing and reporting multi-dimensional reality. The "comic", the "funny", the ironic became a mode of controlling the alleged expressive 'failures' of fiction; the mode moreover justifying authorial experiments with narrative inventions. By focusing reader's attention on the manipulations with the formal devices of the novel, the writers attempted at exposing a 'fabricated' quality of literary production. The new-novel strategies were waged, in the first place, against imitative techniques. Instead of presenting what was labeled an 'authoritative' vision of reality, the writer's manifested task became to provide the reader with an ostentatiously personal 'construct', an artifice, weaved of the material of imagination, limited only by the explorable possibilities of language, and voicedly pronouncing its independence from the 'external world'.

Defined by Daniel O'Hara as "the power to entertain widely divergent possible interpretations — to provoke the reader into seeing that there is a radical uncertainty surrounding the processes by which meanings get determined in texts and interpreted by readers" (Wilde: 1981: 6–7)[4], the trope of irony became the most daring device of pronouncing the relativism of possible manners of narration which correspond to manifold aspects of reality. *At Swim...*, a practical catalogue of the arguments raised against the traditional as well as the modernist novel in the fifties, was likely to go unnoticed in its own time. The atmosphere of the following decades, however, gradually assenting to the new perspective of the retreat from describing and ordering the world ("writing") to constructing new worlds ("making"), was ripe enough to accept O'Brien's endeavour.

I

This withdrawal from the ambitions of the 'despotically' — oriented fiction to a more private 'construct' of imagination underlies the narrative strategy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Parodying the pedantic, pseudo-scientific jargon of narrative discourse from the works of the nineteenth - century realists, or, even more so, naturalists, with their pompously pronounced "J'observe!", the narrator of *At Swim...* sets the new perspective as early as in the first paragraph of the novel:

> Having placed in my mouth sufficient amount of bread for three minutes' chewing I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression (O'Brien 1971: 9)

[4] Daniel O'Hara, review of *Of grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (Fall 1977), p. 362.

The stylistic irony corresponds with the content of this declaration. The dismissal of the 'outer world', or, in other words, the rejection of the 'well'-tested manners of picturing and reporting reality in favor of the incursions "into the privacy of mind", is consequently reinforced by the substance of apparently ironic and, as the novel unfolds, significantly less and less frequent, "biographical reminiscences" of the narrator. Although their credibility, in the light of the traditional conventions, is purposefully undermined by metatextual comments, they provide an apt background for O'Brien's solipsism. The narrator leads "a life of a dull but not uncomfortable character" (O'Brien 1971: 118). Although a student, he hardly leaves his uncle's house to attend university lectures:

> At all events I recall that I hardly left my room for the first three months of the winter...
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 44)
>
> The weather in the following March was cold... I kept to the house as much as possible...
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 58)

Earlier, at the beginning of the novel, the student-narrator comments on his temperament and resulting habits:

> A contemplative life has always been suitable for my disposition. I was accustomed to stretch myself for many hours upon my bed, thinking and smoking there. I rarely undressed... (O'Brien 1971: 10).

Dermot Trellis, the central figure in the story unfolding "in the privacy of mind", and himself an 'author', follows a similar routine:

> Dermot Trellis was a man of average stature but his person was flabby and unattractive, partly the result of his having remained in bed for a period of twenty years. He was voluntarily bedridden and suffered from no organic or other illness.
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 26)

No matter how comic, or even absurd, these revelations may appear, they nevertheless mark effectively the borderlines of O'Brien's fictional world. The student-narrator consciously secludes himself from the "illusions of existence" (O'Brien 1971: 98) and at his own choice retires to the realm of imagination.

In this "kingdom of mind" there unfolds a bizzare and far-fetched story about a novelist who invents a novelist inventing still another novelist. As Robert Alter pointed out, the implementation of such a structural scheme invites the author to give free rein to his inventiveness: the devise in itself justifies the most improbable tricks played on the reader's expectations (cf. Alter 1975: 223). Actually, this organization well-suiting O'Brien's intentions was suggested by Aldous Huxley in *Point counter point*, the book alluded to early in the novel ("my small collection contained works ranging from those of Mr. Joyce to the widely read books of Mr. A Huxley, the eminent English

writer"):

> Put a novelist into a novel. He justifies aesthetic generalizations, which may be interesting — at least to me. He also justifies experiments. Specimens of his work may illustrate other possible or impossible ways of telling a story. If you have him telling parts of the same story as you are, you can make a variation on the theme. But why draw the line at one novelist inside your novel? Why not a second inside his? And a third inside the novel of the second? (Huxley 1969: 298)

Alongside this overall structural design, O'Brien proceeds to rationalize his story by locating its imaginative sections in the formula of a dream vision. Dermot Trellis, the second-removed novelist in the story of the first-person narrator, is boycotted by the characters "employed" for his future novel. On having been dozed excessive amounts of sedatives by them, he yields to an unconscious coma. While Trellis is asleep, the protagonists are free to act on their own. Finally, having resigned the roles he had assigned to them, they persuade Orlick, fathered by Trellis, to write a chapter on his father's tortures and subsequent trial. Fortunately, at the climactic point, "by a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened" (O'Brien 1971: 215), Trellis's servant Teresa burns Orlick's manuscript and saves the tormented author from his characters' revenge. Dermot wakes from his insane dream-in-the-dream. Although not entirely relieved from frustration (neither is the reader, still impressed with the fluid borderlines of the fiction levels), he devolves the responsibly for the developments in the novel upon the hallucinatory visions activated by exhaustion:

> I am ill, Teresa. I have done too much thinking and writing, too much work. My nerves are troubling me. I have bad nightmares and queer dreams and I walk when I am very tired. The doors should be locked
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 216).

In the course of the novel, O'Brien often juxtaposes the notions of passiveness and activity, dream and awakening, "the bedroom" and the world. It is crucial to observe that the narrative proper unfolds in "the kingdom of shadows", be it the student-narrator's imagination or Dermot Trellis's coma. The application of the metaphorical formula of a dream vision to the narrative structure has had its numerous predecessors. Carroll's Alice got lost in the labyrinth of hallucinatory and arbitrary rules which governed the world in the looking-glass. The protagonist of Borges's "Circular ruins" dreamt that he belonged to a dream of another man. The organization of the Nighttown section in *Ulysses* was likewise 'modeled' on delirious hallucinations. In this particular manner, Carroll, Borges and Joyce seem to have found the credible justification for transcending traditionally-conceived realistic modes of narration. Dream motivates and gives validity to the improbable. Metaphorically applied to fiction, it can motivate and give validity to any assault on long established models of fiction-writing.

In psychological aspect, the incursions into the material of dreams and imaginative visions happen on the verge of inevitable conflict with the certainty of recognition based on sensual data regulated by activity of ordering intellect. In other words, dreams by their nature distort the rationally-ordered image of reality. The surrealists assumed that a mutual interplay of dream and awakening which takes place within the self leads to their fusion in one "hyper-reality". In cognitive terms, the "hyper-reality" can be defined as a mode of a more conscious self, reluctant to give priority either to the certainty of the intellectual ordering of reality or to the fabulation of dreams.

In his essay "Le conscient et l'inconscient",[5] Paul Ricoeur refers the analysis between consciousness and dreams to the model of Hegelian dialectics. The sense of reality utilized in the process of acting or "being awake" was recognized as "direct consciousness' by Hegel. 'Given' to each human being, it constitutes as if it were a starting point for the development of the self. Ricoeur, however, regards direct consciousness to be a speculative contrivance. In his opinion, direct consciousness is perpetually annihilated in confrontation with the reality of dreams. If dreams are indeed the "illustrative representations" of the unconscious, as Freud would have it, the dialectical development of the self can be viewed as an interaction between the conscious and the unconscious which, by means of self-reflection, results in a new, superior consciousness. The first self-reflection is the first step towards Hegelian "absolute knowledge", the infinite consciousness not only informing the universe but also absolutely self-aware and self-critical.

I will presently try to point out that Ricoeur's model of the development of consciousness can be applied to interpretation of *At Swim...* as an underlying principle. Moreover, the model of dialectical reasoning seems to have been suggested implicitly in the novel. "All things fleet and they yield each other's place", the motto of *At Swim*, opens a perspective of never-ending dialectics (cf. Wappling 1984: 81). The motif of the number of three (or of triad, to put it otherwise) recurs in the course of the novel persistently. The section pertaining to Trellis's hallucinations has three separate openings. O'Brien invents three authors, each of them being at the same time a character in someone else's novel. *At Swim...* has likewise three endings: the first closes "biographical reminiscences"; the second pertains to Trellis's awakening; and the third can be viewed as a ciphered philosophical comment on the nature of the novel. By a similar game of numbers, Trellis's proud literary endeavour turns into a mere burlesque. "A philosopher and a moralist" who intended to write "the book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as clarion-call to torn humanity" (O'Brien 1971: 35), Trellis discovers the guiding theme of his novel as a manipulation with numbers in his dream vi-

[5] In the discussion I followed the Polish translation.

sions. "Evil is even and truth is an odd number" (O'Brien 1971: 107), proclaims the Pooka, "a species of human Irrish devil endowed with magical powers" (O'Brien 1971: 61), who thereby reduces the sublime conflict between good and evil to a question of the appropriate number of tails (which he, as an evil being is obliged to expose in odd number). However, the most pointedly pronounced allusion to Hegel's dialectics is located significantly in the closing paragraph of the novel. O'Brien, warning ironically against a-too-simple interpretation of *At Swim...*, refers to the multitude of critical stances (and hence to relativism and arbitrariness of each of them), and adds:

> Numbers, however, will account for the great proportion of the unbalanced and suffering humanity... Well known, alas, is the case of the poor German who was very fond of three and who made each aspect of his life a thing of triads. He went home one evening and drank three cups of tea with three lumps of sugar in each, cut his jugular with the razor three times and scrawled with the dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 217—8)

Anticipating the charge of attaching importance to these remarks despite their flauntingly ironic character, I venture to suggest that their content does not undermine the very idea of the triad; instead, it is waged against the danger of submitting one's mind to one system of reference. Moreover, I believe that the fact of locating them at the very end of the novel points explicitly to their relevance in an interpretation of *At Swim...*.

II

The novel is constructed on two polarized planes: student — narrator's "biographical reminiscences" and Trellis's hallucinatory visions. The former is an ostensible report of events of life, aspiring as if it were to conform to the principle of imitation. The latter seeks its referential points not in reality but in literature by parodying myths and legends from the antique Irish lore as well as motifs borrowed from modern popular genres. The two planes illustrate two modes of creation: mimesis and poesis, or "writing" and "making". In O'Brien's metaphors mimesis corresponds to "awakening", the narcissistic attitude towards life as expressed in the creative process. Its 'direct certainty' underlied Trellis's intended but never even started novel, just as it underlied the endeavours of the nineteenth-century realists with their "serious fiction, an intent verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social context" (Alter 1975: ix). On the other hand, student — narrator's bedroom is an enclave in the world of 'activity', and the state of "repose" is a metaphor of unbound inventiveness.

Characteristically, at the central point of *At Swim...*, the student-narrator's solipsistic stance is favourably contrasted with that of Cryans, probably another

author-student. In an ironic presentation, Cryan appears to be a young, 'active' man, whose attitude towards the creative process corresponds to Trellis's commentary on his own novel. In a "scholarly disputation" Cryan's literary efforts are instanced in a contemptuous manner. Byrne, "a man of diverse intellectual attainments", derisively refers to them as to the "complete proseworks"; scorns their author as a man "addicted to mental ludo"; and explains further:

> What is wrong with Cryan and other people... is that they do not spend sufficient time in bed. When a man sleeps, he is steeped and lost in a limp toneless happiness: awake he is restless, tortured by his body and the illusions of existence. Why have men spent centuries trying to overcome the awakened body? Put it to sleep, that is the better way... We must invert our conception of repose and activity... We should not sleep to recover the energy expanded when awake, but rather wake occasionally to defecate the unwanted energy that sleep engenders. This might be done quickly — a five mile race at full tilt around the town and then back to bed and the kingdom of the shadows (O'Brien 1971: 96—8).

Himself an active man, Cryan must be an advocate of activity in his implied proseworks. The character of this fiction is, I guess, inevitably mimetic. Incapable of reflection in a perpetual state of 'awakening', Cryan has credulously accepted a set of seemingly rational norms which now order the world in his fiction. In Byrne's opinion, however, these norms resemble the rules in the game of ludo: their simplicity and transparency is but arbitrary. Reality ("the awakened body") has evaded imitative conventions despite centuries-long attempts at authoritative controlling it through language. It is better, then, to "put it to sleep" and give free rein to imaginative inventiveness.

Byrne's ironic remarks disclose explicitly what seems to be an underlying principle of *At Swim...*: the interaction between the polarized modes of narration, the realistic and the visionary. The metaphorical labels of "awakening" and "repose", which refer to these modes, bear a striking resemblance to the notions applied by Ricoeur in his model of maturing consciousness. In the light of this model, the implied interplay between the two fashions of fiction-writing results in a new, self-conscious mode of creation. Consequently, in the first paragraph of the novel the student establishes his position of the self-conscious narrator:

> One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, of for that matter one hundred times as many endings
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 9).

This first assault on reader's expectations, followed by a long series of other provocative devices, flaunts an arbitrary character of long-established norms. O'Brien's intentions, however, are not only these of shocking the reader. A few pages later the student explains the foundations of his work and

criticizes the traditional novel which

> ... lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the for, tunes of illusory characters... The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer could be despotic... A satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-resepct, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which the discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they fail to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before — usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instanteneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature
>
> (O'Brien 1971: 25)

These declarations refer to a deeper, linguistic level: to the processes which establish relations between non-verbal phenomena and their verbal reflections in literary text. Language, it is implied, is an instrument with which writer models his world and endows it with meaning. Language creates therefore an illusion of reality, and, from a reader's viewpoint, of participation in real events. However, as the student-narrator emphasises, the literary text regarded as a self-dependent unity produces a set of idiosyncratic meanings referential not to reality but to a unique system of reference implied by the text alone. The meanings are not 'ready-made', just as they do not refer to 'ready-made' concepts. Thus, the self-conscious narrator of *At Swim...* chooses to concentrate on the relations between his text and other texts (other verbal contrivances) rather than to seek its doubtful connection with reality. An intertextual game can be carried out on purely linguistic level with no reference to entities 'outside' literature. As a result, *At Swim...* starts to explore its essentially rhetoric nature and gives up 'despotic' aspirations of the traditional novel.

III

The student-narrator's task has a twofold aspect. In the first place, he attempts to expose a dominating role of language in literary creation. His manipulations with generic formalities as well as the intertextual game are based on the assumption that language is an inexhaustible source of literary inspiration. The plot, for example, is reduced to minimum, or, to put it otherwise,

it is substituted by "talks", "conversations", "comments", "reflections", "interrogations", "inquiries", "explanations", "interjections", "ejaculations", "arguments", "discourses", "lays", "recitals", "sayings", "proverbs" as well as "letters", "extracts", and "dictionary entries".

Similarly, Trellis's protagonists, borrowed from various literary sources, are sketched by means of clichés parodying a stylistic manner of respective texts. Even while Trellis is asleep they continue to use a limited set of statements belonging to a given literary tradition. Interestingly, most of them are unaware of the flaunting artificiality of the stylistic modes in which they are described. Their status of literary figures is confirmed, nevertheless, in the culminating moment of Trellis's nightmare when Teresa shuffles the manuscript of his 'dream' novel into fire. For the most part of the book they regard Trellis as their employer and the owner of the inn, as if abusively alluding to Fielding's *Tom Jones*. In anticipation of a charge of endowing his characters with no identity whatsoever, the student-narrator presents willingly "memorandum of respective diacritical traits of Messrs Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan". However, the "memorandum", which proves to be a sheer jugglery with specialized terms, fails to perform this task:

> Head: brachycephalic; bullet; prognathic; Vision: tendencies toward myopia; wall-eye; nyctalopia; Configuration of nose: Roman; snub; mastoid; Unimportant physical afflictions: palpebral ptosis; indigestion; German itch ... (O'Brien 1971: 161)

Only Finn Mac Cool, "the legendary hero of Old Ireland" (O'Brien 1971: 9), recognizes fully his status of a purely linguistic contrivanc.e Even now, however, he still cannot resist the stylistic convention which fashioned him:

> Small wonder, said Finn, that Finn is without honour in a breast of a sea-blue book, Finn that is twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web. Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of gap-worded story? ... Who but a story-teller? Indeed, it is true that there has been ill-suage to the men of Erin from the book-poets of the world and dishonour to Finn, with no knowing the nearness of disgrace or the sorrow of death, or the hour when they may swim for swans or trot for ponies or bell for stags or croak for frogs or fester the wounds on a man's back. (O'Brien 1971: 19—20)

Significantly, at the end of his complaint Finn Mac Cool indulges in a bubble-talk of the parodied poetry of the old Irish lore. Eva Wäppling in her study of a use of the legendary figures in *At Swim...* points out to the changing treatment of the figure of Finn Mac Cool in the Irish tradition. (cf. Wäppling 1984: 34ff). It is not surprising, then, that O'Brien chose to ascribe the discovery of self-artificiality to this particular character. However, after the recital of lays on "the madness of King Sweeny and ... a madman's flight throught the length of Erin" (O'Brien 1971: 63), Finn Mac Cool disappears from the novel as if he were annihilated by the student-narrator (the characters' self-conscio-

usness might, in fact, impede the progress of the book), and returns only in one of the last scenes to participate in Trellis's trial. Nevertheless, in the light of the strategic mode of the novel, Finn and his "sweet worded sweet-toothed" companions (O'Brien 1971: 16) seem to be the figuers ideally suiting O'Brien's manipulations for their love of "sweet poetry" and "melodious Irish". At the beginning of *At Swim...* Finn Mac Cool delivers a lengthy catalogue of "musics he has found the sweetest", "descriptive of himself and his people" (O'Brien 1971: 13). The catalogue defines metaphorically their status as figures belonging merely to the realm of 'voices' and 'sounds':

> When the seven companies of my warriors are gathered together on the one plain and the truant clean-cold wind goes through them, too sweet to me is that. Echo-blow of a goblet-base against the tables of the palace, sweet to me is that. I like gull cries and the twittering together of fine cranes. I like the surf-roar at Tralea, the songs of the three sons of Meadhra and the whistle of Mag Lughaidh. These also please me, man shouts at a parting, cuckoo-call in May... (O'Brien 1971: 13—14)

Finn Mac Cool's place as an imaginative contrivance assumes a still more definite shape a few pages later. "Relat [ing] the attributes that are to Finn's people" (O'Brien 1971: 16—17), Finn enumerates the tasks which have to be completed by a candidate before he is allowed to join his band:

> Till a man has accomplished twelve books of poetry the same is not taken for want of poerty but is forced away. No man is taken till a black hole is hollowed in the depth of his two oxters and he put into it to gaze from it with his lonely head and nothing to him but his shield and a stitch of hazel. Then must nine warriors fly their spear at him, one with the other and together. If he be spear-holed past his shield, or spear-killed, he is not taken for want of shield-skill... (O'Brien 1971:17)

At first O'Brien translates the Irish legend word by word, but after several sentences he abandons the original (cf. Wäppling 1984: 44). The tasks become more and more improbable, the substance gets lost in the profusion of refined epithets and noun compounds, and the legend inescapably drifts towards burlesque. As a result, reader's attention is focused on the form of the text rather than on its conent:

> ... No man is taken till he is run by warriors through the woods of Erin with his hair bunched-loose about him for bough-tangle and briar twitch. Should branches disturb his hair or pull it forth like sheep-wool on a hawthorn, he is not taken but is caught and gashed. Weapon-quivering hand or twig-crackling foot at full run, neither is taken. Neck-high sticks he must pass by vaulting, knee-high sticks by stooping. With the eyelids to him stitched to the fringe of the eye-bags, he must be run by Finn's people through the bogs and the marsh-swamps of Erin with two odorous prickle-backed hogs ham-tied and asleep in the seat of his hempen drawers... (O'Brien 1971: 17)

When Finn ends his tale it becomes obvious that the first task, that of "accomplish [ing] twelve books of poetry", is in fact the only one; and that the re-

maining duties are merely quasi-poetical epitomes of particular books. The candidate's work is thus reduced to the "constant recital of sweet poetry and melodius Irish". Word becomes the only reality; the flux of words — in no matter how absurd contexts — the only driving force of the text.

After having defined the nature of generic formalities of the novel in terms of purely linguistics contivances, *At Swim...* proceeds to examine processes of meaning production in literary text. The fragmentation of the novel serves the purposes of this undertaking. The student-narrator borrows literary motifs from diverse sources and locates them in new, unexpected contexts. As a result, the original fragment assumes a new meaning subordinate to the function of new environment. This ironic strategy, which extends from single semantic constituents of the text to an overall structure of *At Swim*, undermines the very credibility of language. As Hayden White put it, "the trope of Irony provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language" (Wilde 1981: 5).[6]

Finn Mac Cool's tale on the madness of King Sweeny may serve as a good illustration of O'Brien's linguistic tricks. In a broader sense, it offers, among other things, a metaphorical commentary on O'Brien's novel, or even on the nature of fiction in general. The old legend is a narrative of the conflict between the Celtic ruler and Ronan, one of the first missionaries in Erin. From a stylistic point of view, O'Brien's translation is almost exact. (cf. Wäppling 1984: 52—68). Nevertheless, it is reduced to these sections which expose a magical role assigned ot language by tradition.

> Now Sweeny was King of Dal Araidha and a man that was easily moved to the tides of anger. Near his house was the cave of a saint called Ronan — a shield against evil was this gentle generous friendly active man, who was out in the matin hours taping out the wall-steads of a sun-bright church and ringing his bell in the morning (O' Brien 1971: 64).

The bell-ringing turned Sweeny out of his sleep. "His brain and his spleen and his gut... exercised by turn and together with the fever of a flaming anger", the King burst into the cleric's cave; snatched "the beauteous light-lined psalter"; threw it into the lake and was hindered from "placing the cleric by the side of his psalter" only by "the big storm-voiced hoarse shout calling him to the profession of arms at the battle of Magh Rath". Although the psalter was returned to the cleric by "an otter from the murk of the lake... its lines and its letters unblemished", Ronan put "a malediction on Sweeny by "the uttering of a lay of eleven melodious stanzas".

[6] Hayden White 1973. ***Metahistory**: **The historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe***. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 37—8.

The malediction was the beginning of King Sweeny's end. "On the morning of a certain day" Ronan, who acted as a "weaver of concord" and a hostage in a conflict between two Celtic pretenders to the throne (cf. Wäppling 984: 53), sprinkled Sweeny's head with holy water. This enraged Sweeny who

> reddened his spear in the white side of the psalmist and broke Ronan's bell whereupon the cleric uttered this melodious lay:
>
> My course on Sweeny!
> His guilt against me is immense,
> he pierced with his long swift javelin
> my holy bell.
>
> The holy bell that thou hast outraged
> will punish thee to the branches
> it will put thee on a par with fowls —
> the saint bell of saints with sainty-saints.
>
> Just as it went prestissimo
> the spear-shaft skyward,
> you too, Sweeny, go madly mad-gone
> skyward.
>
> Eorann of Conn tried to hold him
> by a hold of his smock
> and though I bless her therefore,
> my curse on Sweeny. (O'Brien 1971:65)

As a consequence, "when the hosts clashed and bellowed like stag-herds and gave three audible world-wide shouts till Sweeny heard them and their hollow reverberation in the sky vault, he was beleagured by an anger and fury and fits and frenzy and fright-fraught fear, and he was filled with a restless tottering unquiet and with a disgust for the places that he knew and with a desire to be where he never was, so that he was palsied of hand and foot and eye-mad and heart-quick and went from the curse of Ronan bird-quick in craze and madness from the battle" (O'Brien 1971: 64—66 passim).

The plot of the legend, as O'Brien renders it, is triggered by subsequent symbolic/magical signs/texts ("the bell-ringing", "the psalter", "the shout", "the malediction", "sprinkling of holy water", etc.). In other words, in this story suiting perfectly Todorov's model of mythological tale (1971: 62—87), each trope is given a rank of narrative clause. Consequently, the succeeding symbols form inevitably a 'higher-order' narrative sequence with intinsic involutions and retardations. In this self-imposing structure, the routine processes of symbolization and also, partially, of signification are necessarily distorted. The speedy tempo of narration makes the particular tropes function only as narrated events: one 'magical' sign immedietely generates another within the logical ordering of the story. By the same token, an act of symbol-decoding becomes nearly eliminated. Viewed by Todorov as a transfer from signified to signified (1984: 21—32), it is superseded by a regular signification: a movement where signifying "bell-ringing" or "sprinkling of holy water" refer exclusively to signified activities, the motives of Sweeny's range, and lose their secondary implications. The process of signification, however, is also partially violated by profusion of absurd alliterated clusters (eg. "go madly mad-gone") or by ironic insertion of Italian "prestissimo". In the first place, these tricks send to narrator's "grandiloquence" and only then to the substance of the legend. Hence, the syntagmatic relations between the units (both narrative and lexical) gain priority over the semantic aspect of the legend as rendered in Finn Mac Cool's version. In the process of reception, the reader is puzzled to observe a flaunting indeterminacy of meanings. The story comes to evolce out of itself: traditionally symbolic and meaningful, it is reduced now to a chain of signifiers, related to one another by the dictates of rhetoric.

Similarly, the next parts of the legend, in which "the mad king" is doomed to travel all over Erin, are structured as an alliterated and punned catalogue. It names "the places Sweeny knew and where he never was" and reports the lays on the theme of his calamity. Significantly, Sweeny's mad air-journey was interrupted once by the "tidings" brought by his foster-brother Linchehaun. The news was tragic, but it was immedietely neutralized by Sweeny's echoing answers, a parade of cliches:

> Cease now, Linchehaun, said Sweeny, and give me tidings.
> Your father is dead, said Linchehaun.
> That has seized me with a blind agony, said Sweeny.
> Your mother is likewise dead.
> Now all the pity in me is at an end.
> Dead is your brother.
> Gaping open is my side on account of that.
> She has died too your sister.
> A needle for the heart is an only sister.
> Ah, dumb dead is the little son that called you pop.
> Truly, said Sweeny, that is the last blow that brings the man to the ground (O'Brien 1971:70).

Characteristically, the last expression abandons its seemingly fixed metaphorical meaning and returns to unexpected literal one, directly propelling the plot. Sweeny was indeed "brought to the ground" from the tree and recovered from his frenzy for a while. However, the challenge raised by "the old mill-hag" (O'Brien 1971: 70) as to who of them can "leap" a longer "leap" brings him again to madnes ssince

> Hony Ronan in his cell was acquinted by angels of the intention of Sweeny and prayed God that he should never be loosed from his frenzy until his soul had been first loosed from his body (O'Brien 1971: 88).

Finally, Sweeny reached "the place where the head-saint Moling was". The missionary was awaiting him" for it [was] destined that [Sweeny] should end [his] life here and leave the story of [his] history here and be buried in the church

-yard beyant" (O'Brien 1971: 89). After the writing of the story had been accomplished Sweeny was "accused of an act of adultary" by one of the serving-women. As a result of this "dishonourable lie", her brother wounded him mortally with a spear.

Thus the legend, whose plot proceeds from catalogues to "lays" and from "curses" to "recitals" illustrates the mode of the whole novel; the novel intended as a flux of words, with no respect to credibility or probability. The reader participates in a puzzle of linguistic games and literary jokes. The sentences once uttered recur in new contexts, as if submissive to the logic of a dream vision. The conversation between the Pooka Mac Phillemy and the Good Fairy consists almost exclusively of the statements uttered before or later in *At Swim...* Moreover, the characters who were only mentioned in other protagonists' conversations consequently enter the plot, as if "brought to life" by the power of words, and take part in the scene of Trellis's trial. Not surprisingly, then,the reader recognizes a predictable parody of Saint John. Pronounced by a character from the novel, the words are modified fittingly to circumstances:

> The voice was the first... The human voice. The voice was Number One. Anything that came after was only an imitation of the voice (O'Brien 1971: 150).

The tale of King Sweeny performs another function in the structure of the novel. A first presented in a stylistically coherent version, it is later duplicated in a fully ironic manner as a section of Trellis's tortures. In Orlick's manuscript Pooka Mac Phillemy forced Trellis to a similar air-travel all over Ireland. Moreover, the second version is interwoven with the statements from the original. The implementation of this peculiar device (bringing associations with John Barth's 1967 manifesto "Literature of Exhaustion") allows O'Brien to show how one text may directly serve to stimulate another. O'Brien manages to transcend the tragic of the first version by ironic descriptions of the most incredible tortures applied one after another, by analogy undermining the significance of the legend and not allowing the reader "to be outwitted in a shabby fashion" or "experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters".

IV

In a similar way, the linguistic tricks disorganize the subject-matter of "biographical reminiscences". Judging by the title, "biographical reminiscences" should be designed in such a way as to report credibly the events from student-narrator's life. In fact, however, their narrative convention merely parodies an implied realistic mode. In descriptive parts, the student-narrator draws reader's attention to insignificant details, reporting verbosely item by item as if he were exploring the limits of a "camera-eye" technique:

> I surveyed my uncle in a sullen manner. He speared a portion of cooked rasher against a crust on the prongs of his fork and poised the whole at the opening of his mouth in a token of continued interrogation ('OBrien 1971: 10).

This itemized description corresponds with a frequent use of the passive voice:

> My dim room rang with the iron of fine words and the names of the great Russian masters were articulated with fastidious intonation. Witticisms were canvassed, depending for their utility on a knowledge of French language as spoken in the medieval times. Psychoanalysis was mentioned — with, however, a somewhat light touch (O' Brien 1971: 24);

and with commenting on technical items in an exhaustively pedantic fashion:

> The two of them bent together at the adjustment of the machine, extracting a collapaible extensible retractable rone-arm its interior with the aid of their four hands (O'Brien 1971: 94).

The student-narrator keeps to one, pseudo-objectified formal register osfcientific discourse, with no respect to the importance of particular details. As a consequence of this convention, the words or expressions which belong to a colloquial register, have to be marked out by inverted ocmmas:

> I struck a match and lit my "butt" and also another "butt", the property of Brinsley (O'Brien 1971: 34);

or provided with an 'indispensable' dictionary entry:

> Tha craft of billiards was unfamiliar to me but in politeness I watched the quick darting of the balls, endeavouring to deduce from the results of a stroke an intention which preceded it.
>
> Gob, *there's* a kiss, said Brinsley.
>
> *Extract from Concise Oxford Dictionary*: Kiss, n.
>
> Caress given with lips; (Billiards) impact between moving balls; kind of sugar plum (O'Brien 1971: 51).

This provocatively artificial manner of narration induces the reader to give up any expectations as to the 'realistic' subject-matter of the section. In order to demonstrate further a conventionality of novelistic codes, the student-narnator interrupts occasionally his narration by ironic metatextual comments in an idiom of literary analysis:

> He suggested that we should drink a number of *jars* or pints of plain porter in Grogan's public house. I derived considerable pleasure from the casual quality of his suggestion and observed that it would probably do us no harm, thus expressing my whole-hearted concurrence by a figure of speech.
>
> *Name of figure of speech*: Litotes or Meiosis (O'Brien 1971: 20).

In the light of such devices, an identity and 'authenticity' of the characters from the student-narrator's world becomes also dubious. Correspondingly, the

standard reservation on the author's part that

> All the characters represented in this book including the first person singular are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead

can be read as another commentary on the philosophy of the novel. Like in Trellis's section, an underlying principle of the characters' mode of 'existence' is to be found in a language they are endowed with. The Good Fairy did not even have a body — he was only a voice; this, however, did not not hinder him from playing an effective role in *At Swim...* By the same token, student-nar rator's uncle is 'fabricated' exclusively of linguistic clichés, stereotypes and typical Irish expressions. He 'materializes' only in dialogues and conversations; thoroughout the whole novel he uses a limited set of statements duplicated in one manner before his interlocutors. The absence of reflection toward his words and passionately pronounced activity and vividness underlie his conflict with the nephew. The worn-out Irish idiom corresponds with his simplistic way of thinking: the uncle often gives rein to his suspicions about the student-narrator's eccentric 'way of life';

> A boy of your age, he said at last, who gives himself up to the sin of sloth — what in God's name is going to happen to him when he goes out to face the world? Boys but I often wonder what the world is coming to, I do indeed. Tell me this, do you ever open a book at all?
> I open several books every day, I answered.
> You open your granny, said my uncle. O I know the game you are at above in your bedroom. I am not as stupid as I look, I'll warrant you that (O'Brien 1971: 12).

Imprisoned in his fixed linguistic code, the uncle oversees an ambiguity of his nephew's reply; the student-narartor indeed has just produced "three separate openings" to his novel. "I hope ... that Trellis is not a replica of your uncle," comments one of the student-narrator's friends (O'Brien 1971: 30), as if short-circuiting the two planes. Indeed, the uncle and Trellis promote the same set of beliefs based on the dichotomic, stereotyped vision of the world. The student-narrator makes a further use of his uncle's linguistic code by putting his hardly-communicative clichés into the mouths of the three characters from Trellis's novel.

In a similar manner, the student-narrator avails himself of his friends' ways of speaking and repeatedly uses their statements and expressions. Like his uncle, he also proves to be a "cluster" of worn-out truisms which, however, belong to another, scholarly-sounding style. As the implied author he can nevertheless manipulate with his own and other characters' codes. Before his first experiences with "intoxicating beverages", the name suiting the 'scientific' mode of narration, the student narrator subjects himself to "an inward interrogation" and interrupts his studious narrative by a chain of cross-examining questions which ironically (after Keats) evoke a mood of the ancient elegies:3

> Nature of interrogation: Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air? What mad persuit? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (O'Brien 1971: 22)

The mode of presentation of this experience is a neat illustration of the student-narrator's way of telling. He does not comment on a 'real' outcome of the event; instead, he provides a lengthy extract against the abuse of alcohol.

"I was talking to a friend of yours last night... I mean Trellis", the student narrator informs his friend Brinsley, bringing to a common level the characters from different planes and likewise reducing his own existence to the realm of fiction. At another point, when he explains the structure of his novel to Byrne and other acquintances, he becomes, like the Good Fairy in Trellis's dreams, only a "voice":

> Byrne made a noise in the darkness of a kind associated with the focible opening of the lid of a tin container. He then moved about the room, a cigarette for each voice in his enterprising hand. Kerrigan declined and remained unseen, the rest of us revealed at intervals, red pale faces with pucker-cheeks at the rear of the glow - points. (O'Brien 1971: 102).

Perhaps this transformation might also be a solution to the dilemmas of the novel which has discovered indeterminancy of its material and conventions: *At Swim* might, too, define itself in terms of a voice. The voice can be misunderstood, but which continues to speak; despite an anxiety that it speaks "the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself" (de Man 1986: 479) — the language of literature.

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