

"Treating the Literary Literally:"  
The Reflexive Structure of  
Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*

A Thesis submitted to the College  
of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

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## ABSTRACT

Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a complex reflexive novel that explores the creation of fiction. O'Brien's layered narrative includes several author/characters, each with his own literary theory. This discussion traces O'Brien's reflexive structure's development and demonstrates its repercussions on the characters within the novel, and the novel as a whole. Beginning by placing O'Brien's novel within a critical framework, this study examines each of the four narrative levels and the uses of reflexivity in each. O'Brien builds and dismantles several structures within his narrative levels, and this thesis shows that the basic reflexive structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the only remaining structure at the novel's end.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I wish to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Peter Hynes for his reliable advice throughout this project, on topics related and unrelated to literature. I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Kathleen James-Cavan, Graduate Committee Chair, and all of the faculty members and fellow graduate students at the Department of English who have provided encouragement and support. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the College of Graduate Studies and the Department of English that helped to make this project possible.

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## Chapter One Introduction

Flann O'Brien has always been recognized as a major Irish writer, and his work has attracted much commentary. A student of novels such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *The Third Policeman*, however, will find that a disproportionate amount of the critical writing devoted to O'Brien deals more with James Joyce than with O'Brien himself.<sup>1</sup> After perfunctory observations concerning the author's life and times -- he was born Brian O'Nolan, and became well-known under the journalistic pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen -- the typical critic launches upon a comparison of some aspect or other of O'Brien's work to an illustrious precedent in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegan's Wake*, or some other Joycean piece.

Such comparisons range from the incisive and illuminating to the dismissive and demeaning. Joseph Browne, for example, concludes "Flann O'Brien: *Post Joyce* or *Propter Joyce*" by reducing O'Brien's career to an "attack, trying to fly beyond his imagined, ineluctable Joycean nets [with] his heart going like mad saying yes I said yes I will yes" (157). O'Brien is one of Joyce's characters, a combination of Stephen Dedalus and Molly Bloom. Articles that appear focused on O'Brien alone, such as John Wain's "To Write for my own Race," refer to Joyce. Wain names Joyce O'Brien's "ultimate master" (85) in conclusion to a survey of O'Brien's work. Joseph C. Voelker decides in his "Doublends Jined: The Fiction of Flann O'Brien," a study of the twinning of contrasts throughout O'Brien's work, that "O'Brien must have thought of Joyce as his inescapable brother" (94). One is forced to sift through such pronouncements in most O'Brien criticism.

Joyce's prominence in the world of Irish literature is one reason behind the combined study of O'Brien and Joyce. Niall Sheridan, O'Brien's friend and classmate, explains that at university Joyce "was in the very air we breathed" (quoted in Browne 151). O'Brien's comic perspective on similar scenes and locales as Joyce's *Ulysses* creates an inviting target for scholars eager to hold up Joyce against another of his nation's authors. O'Brien's protagonist is an easy character to discuss in line with Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. Both are university students in Dublin within thirty five years of each other. Joyce's novel is set on June 16, 1904 and O'Brien's contemporary narrative occurs over the course of an undated academic year, but published in 1939. Del Ivan Janik's "Flann O'Brien: The Novelist as Critic" is an excellent analysis of the connections between O'Brien's work and Joyce's. His treatment of O'Brien is respectful; Janik is careful to remind his readers that O'Brien is more than just a critic of Joyce. Kelly Anspaugh studies betrayal in O'Brien's work in "Flann O'Brien: Postmodern Judas," suggesting that O'Brien's work be seen as an act of revenge on Joyce for the constant critical comparison of their early work. Gilbert Sorrentino's "Fictional Infinities" discusses infinity in O'Brien's first two novels in connection to Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. However illuminating these comparisons are, there is a gap in O'Brien criticism focused solely on *At Swim-Two-Birds'* narrative structure. By the most conservative estimate, there are as many differences between O'Brien's work and Joyce's as similarities. O'Brien's work has been considered worthy of study for those similarities, and it deserves attention in areas where it differs.

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<sup>1</sup> Anspaugh, Asbee, Browne, Clissman, Cohen, Conte, Cronin, Donovan, Esty, Gallagher, Henry, Janik, Jones, Lee, Mackenzie, Mays, O'Grady, Orvell, Peterson, Petro, Shea, Sorrentino, and Voelker cannot discuss O'Brien without Joyce. apRoberts, Del Rio Alvaro, Lanthers, O'Hara, and Pratt are the only critics in the below bibliography to resist the comparison.

Critics who have focused on O'Brien usually include several of his works in efforts to glean some hidden cause. Miles Orvell's "Entirely Fictitious: The Fiction of Flann O'Brien" looks at O'Brien's work for these trends and concludes by holding O'Brien in as much esteem as Orvell does Joyce; this is appreciated by O'Brien's fans, but is still an unnecessary comparison to Joyce concerning Orvell's opinion of quality rather than his subject. Ian Mackenzie's "Who's Afraid of James Joyce? Or Flann O'Brien's Retreat From Modernism" follows O'Brien's career from the point of view that after "the publication of *Finnegan's Wake* O'Brien rejected Joyce's narrative form ... and abandoned his own experimental methods" (66-7). O'Brien's career is portrayed here as a reaction to his "ultimate master" (Wain 85). Jose Laners presents a fine study of reality and the author's role in "Fiction Within Fiction: The Role of the Author in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*." This study is limited to *At Swim-Two-Birds*' outermost layer in order to balance the discussion with *The Third Policeman*, which has only one author character. Leighton Pratt, in "The Nature of Comedy in the Novels of Flann O'Brien," touches on *At Swim-Two-Birds* even more cursorily than Laners, only using it to introduce *The Third Policeman*. Pratt is more interested in amusing his readers, attempting to transcribe the Dublin insults he believes O'Brien would have hurled in his direction, than studying *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The desire to look at O'Brien's work for themes that carry through more than one novel limits any discussion of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. By examining other novels with *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one is forced to cut short or avoid a discussion of its narrative structure, as it is so different from any other works by O'Brien or Joyce.

There are some studies devoted to O'Brien's first novel: David Cohen's "An Atomy of the Novel: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*" is an excellent study of the novel's fictional authors' artistic influences. Cohen's mention of Joyce is useful, noting the respect given to Joyce's first novel while O'Brien's is usually considered to be commenting on Joyce's. Constanza Del Rio Alvaro discusses the novel's place in the fantasy genre. Patricia O'Hara, in "Finn MacCool and the Bard's Lament in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*," examines O'Brien's use of Finn, a traditional Irish character. Ruth apRoberts, in "*At Swim-Two-Birds* and the Novel as Self-evident Sham," gives a thematic survey of the novel, discussing O'Brien's comments on genre creation and the honesty of fiction. The novel's structure is touched on, but apRoberts' study leaves the laying bare of what she terms the narrative "labyrinth" (77) to others, however, as her focus is the fictional authors' work within it.

In this study I propose to break with the dominant trend in O'Brien criticism by leaving aside Joyce to focus on the technical description of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Reflexivity is at the core of this complex narrative structure. This novel's structure deserves to be the focus of an entire work; it is an imposing piece of the novel as enticing to the reader as any character within the novel, including O'Brien's protagonist. The narrative is always under O'Brien's control, but this control is at times handed over to the various author-characters who inhabit the structure itself. O'Brien's narrative form is as important to the humour and the work's intended effect as any character is. It is through the use of recognized narrative forms that much of the humour is made. Throughout the novel, O'Brien's characters present literary theories and systems of logic that are broken down and proved inaccurate. The reflexive structure is the sole remaining structure at the novel's end, and is reinforced by a conclusion that appears to break even this structure down.

*At Swim-Two-Birds* is the tale of a young author who considers the world of letters and devises a revolutionary theory concerning composition. His theory is explored through a layered narrative that includes several reflexive planes, all of which include numerous author-characters. Cohen describes *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a highly complex narrative that weaves parody into its reflexive structure to make "art expose its own artifice. The novel is an anatomy of itself, and

stands as a record of its own composition" (228). The following study considers the novel divided into four narrative layers; each layer includes an author constructing a new written narrative. The frame narrative includes what O'Brien's narrator terms his "biographical reminiscences." The next lower narrative is the narrator's manuscript concerning a fictional author: Dermot Trellis. The third narrative plane includes Dermot Trellis' novel-in-progress, and the lives of his characters. The fourth and final narrative plane consists of a revenge plot by Trellis' bastard son, Orlick, written in order to punish Dermot for his tyrannical authorship and mistreatment of Orlick's mother, a character in Dermot's novel.

This study's terminology comes from many critics. Several nearly interchangeable terms have been applied to the technique that I call "reflexive." The recent history of such literary terminology can be said to begin at the end of the nineteenth century with André Gide's *mise en abyme*. Lucien Dallenbach's book-length study of Gide's idea, *The Mirror in the Text*, gives a compact description of Gide's term: "a *mise en abyme* is any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it" (8). This explanation's circularity hints at the device's complex nature. Dallenbach states that the "essential property [of the *mise en abyme*] is that it brings out the meaning and form of the work" (8). As Michael Boyd simply puts it in *The Reflexive Novel*, when "a novel pauses to look at itself, to consider itself as a novel, it strikes ... a reflexive attitude" (15). The implications of this authorial stance are many:

The characters in a novel will seem "unreal."... The readers of such fiction ... will be encouraged to become critically detached from the action. At the same time they will find it necessary to take on a more active role, to become involved at the level of artistic process rather than passively receiving the artistic product.... The reflexive novelist will use nonnovelistic material, space-time dislocations, collage, alternative endings, and parody to remind the reader that a novel is something made. (Boyd 28-9)

In much the same manner, Robert Alter devotes his *Partial Magic* to a discussion of what he terms "self-conscious" fiction. Alter claims an "appreciation for the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness, that is acutely aware of itself as a mere structure of words even as it tries to discover new ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate" (ix). Alter offers his own definition: "a self-conscious novel ... is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and ... by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality" (x). Alter proposes a very neat metaphor for the reflexive genre, that of a "mirror held to the mirror of art held to nature [that proves] not merely an ingenious trick but a necessary operation for a sceptical culture nevertheless addicted, as all cultures have been, to the pleasures and discoveries of fabulation" (245). This is a sort of evolution of artistic form resulting from a scientifically-minded society. Authors desire to discover how the relationship between art and the world operates.

Patricia Waugh gives a similar explanation for what she terms "metafiction":

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship of fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

There are many different writing styles that can be subsumed by this label, according to Waugh,



but a common tie is that "they all explore a *theory* of fiction through the practise of fiction" (2). While this exploring of theories is found throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien does not consider the fictionality of the world outside of his novel. While this idea does apply in O'Brien's later works, he appears to impress the opposite point of view on the reader in this first novel. O'Brien's narrator considers writing a "recreative activity" (32). The abrupt ending to the fourth narrative plane, to be discussed below, is also evidence of this fact. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, by simply destroying a manuscript, all ideas contained within it vanish. Waugh's use of the term is too encompassing for this study.

Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative* offers a definitive explanation of metafiction, which she describes as the "kind of fiction that began to run rampant in the 1960s" (1). Obviously, O'Brien's 1939 *At Swim-Two-Birds* predates Hutcheon's examples, and is another reason I will not apply the term to O'Brien's novel. However, Hutcheon's descriptions of metafiction reveal a great similarity to, and an overlapping of the earlier critical terminology and the more recent. Her work provides a chronological account of the genre's development, with O'Brien as one of its predecessors. Hutcheon's excellent work has proved a substantial resource for my study of O'Brien. Hutcheon states that "metafiction is largely ... a mimesis of process" (5), and that it "constitutes its own first critical commentary" (6). In any metafiction, "realistic story trappings are finally reduced to an allegory of the functioning of the narration" (12). Hutcheon also explains that metafiction focuses on its own linguistic and narrative structures as well as the reader's role. The metafictional novel's critique points in two directions at the same time, toward both the author and the audience. Metafictional narrative "is process made visible" (6): "Overtly narcissistic novels place fictionality, structure, or language at their content's core. They play with different ways of ordering, and allow (or force) the reader to learn how he makes sense of this literary world" (Hutcheon 29). In a similar vein, the novel "no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction" (Hutcheon 39).

The above critics employ different terms for sometimes very similar ideas. My use of "reflexive" is based on the following considerations. The term *mise en abyme* is not translated, and difficult to justify when there are English terms with nearly identical definitions. Rather than incorporate a foreign term, my use of "reflexive" is intended to offer the reader clarity. More importantly, Gide's term is too narrowly focused to apply to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. While the term can be applied correctly, the number of occurrences throughout the novel become overwhelming and the term falls short of covering the novel's entire structure. "Metafiction" is a relatively new term with associations of much more recent work than O'Brien's. Hutcheon herself separates O'Brien from the school of metafiction and more contemporary authors: "In the earlier texts, [Hutcheon points to Gide, Huxley, and O'Brien] the main interest is in the *writing* process and its product. The focus today [1980] broadens to include a parallel process of equal importance to the 'concretizing' of the text--that of reading" (Hutcheon 154). Metafiction is too wide-ranging a label for this novel. Although the reader is forced by O'Brien to consider his/her role through *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the novel's focus is on the act of writing. "Self-conscious" connotes a thinking, or aware text. A novel's self-awareness is added by its author, making the label inaccurate. Physics has also influenced my choice, as the linear relation between a real object and its reflected image suits *At Swim-Two-Birds* well. Each narrative layer can be viewed as a distorted mirror image of the layer above. For these reasons, "reflexive" will be used in the following study.

This study's chapters trace the development of O'Brien's layered narrative structure and his use of reflexive elements within each layer. An examination of the characters within each

layer, how they are affected by the structure and their effect on it, is also included. I treat each layer separately, with a chapter devoted to each of the four layers. This study's aim is to go beyond what many critics have already; while they have touched on different structural elements and the uses of characters by both O'Brien and his author characters, I am not aware of any study devoted solely to this subject, nor of one that follows the structure through the novel from the frame narrative to the final narrative. Cohen's study is the fullest to date of the intricacies of O'Brien's reflexivity; his work, however, can certainly be extended in a number of directions. Cohen's interests are external to the novel. His is a fine analysis of the relationship between O'Brien and the novel, clearly demonstrating aspects of O'Brien's life as the narrator's source material. The examination of the other author characters is limited, however, and the reflexive elements mentioned are only those that connect to O'Brien.

I intend to complement Cohen's remarks by remaining inside the novel, exposing the connections between each author character's narrative. By not limiting my discussion to the instances in which O'Brien is involved, the gaps in Cohen's study may be filled. My division of the narrative structure coincides with Cohen's, but my treatment of the connections between the manuscripts and author characters is more thorough. Cohen's focus is on the creation of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, attempting to find source material for various characters and scenes. I focus on these same connections, but not only those between O'Brien and *At Swim-Two-Birds'* characters. Cohen keeps pulling his examination back outside the novel to focus on O'Brien, but my study remains within the structure, attempting to display the extent of these connections. This is an endeavour yet to be undertaken, to my knowledge. It may serve as a useful reference for those who appreciate O'Brien's command over a novel that appears so haphazard in its construction, elaborating, finally, a comprehensive account of *At Swim-Two-Birds'* reflexive structure. apRoberts asserts that one "needs a good grip on the framework of the structure of *Swim* to steady oneself through the labyrinth" (77). This is intended to provide that "good grip" for anyone attempting to fully understand *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

## Chapter Two

*At Swim-Two-Birds*' outer layer, or *frame* narrative, is deceptively complex. While it is the narrative layer that is most written about, scholars often gloss over the difficulty caused by O'Brien's relationship with his narrator. This relationship is complex because O'Brien is the narrator's mirror-image in many ways. O'Brien ingeniously confuses his own personality, creative methods, and biography with his fictional narrator's, while at the same time distancing himself from this character. The similarities between the two cause many to miss the essential and critical distance that O'Brien imposes through his narrative structure. O'Brien is often chastised by critics for what is actually the work of his narrator, for material presented for parody rather than genuine analysis. Biographical knowledge of O'Brien only serves the text's reflexivity, and a knowledge of O'Brien's construction of *At Swim-Two-Birds* often causes readers to confuse O'Brien's aims for the novel with his narrator's literary theory. Questions arise as to what can be attributed to O'Brien and what must be called the narrator's creation. Therefore, O'Brien's reflexive technique confuses what is fiction with what is reality. The reader has a difficult time deciding which author, real or fictional, is responsible for the different aspects of the novel.

An often overlooked aspect of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the relationship between O'Brien and the novel as a whole. Regardless of the fictional identity and perhaps fictional persona of Flann O'Brien when compared to the historical Brian O'Nolan, it is obvious that a tangible author wrote this novel. I refer to "O'Brien" simply because it is the name on the book's cover and there can be no proof that O'Brien is a different person than O'Nolan, or any of his other pseudonyms. This is an important question yet to be addressed fully. O'Nolan wrote under more than six pseudonyms, depending on the circumstances; he obviously adored hiding behind fictional personae. It is difficult to not use both the names O'Brien and O'Nolan when writing about both the fiction and the biography of this writer; for the remainder of this study, Brian O'Nolan will only be referred to when mentioning biographical information separate from the world of literature.

Regardless of this question of authority, what is important when discussing the author's connection to this work is that Flann O'Brien distances himself from *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He is not the same person as his narrator. The reader is continuously forced to make a distinction between what O'Brien can be held responsible for and what his near-twin has written. The quality of writing in the novel cannot be held as an example of O'Brien's skill; it is the narrator's. Hutcheon describes this as common to reflexive fiction: the "parody and self-reflection of [reflexive] narrative work to prevent the reader's identification with any character and to force a new, more active, thinking relationship upon him" (49). In this novel's case, the reflexive structure prevents the reader's easy identification of the character. After examining the frame narrative closely, I agree with David Cohen that O'Brien's treatment of his narrator is as "detached as the narrator's own view of the literature he parodies ... the final object of parody is the narrator himself" (224).

O'Brien's contributions to the novel as a whole can be considered as a subtext of the frame narrative. An opening leaf for the Longman's, Green and Company edition carries a disclaimer stating that the characters in the book, "including the first person singular," are entirely fictitious. Once aware of this note, the reader pays more attention to the narrator's mention of "Mr. Joyce" and "Mr. A. Huxley" on page twelve, as well as the later discussion of "the high-class work of another writer, Mr. Pound, an American gentleman" (62). O'Brien's grand control of the novel is used to confuse things for the sole purpose, seemingly, of

playfulness. Real people are supposedly fictitious and coincidentally named within the novel. This confusing of fiction with reality is further demonstrated by the narrator, whom O'Brien has specifically stated in his disclaimer to be fictional. The narrator writes his own reflexive novel which includes mythical characters that exist in O'Brien's real world, beyond the scope of the narrator's fictional environment. O'Brien later writes *The Dalkey Archive*, which includes a character named James Joyce. This Joyce, however, denies any participation in the creation of *Ulysses*, calling it a "dirty book," and makes a living darning wool underclothes for the local Jesuits. O'Brien plays with the reader's expectation of characters through this highly effective parodic method. No character, not even those that appear historical and recognizable, can be identified easily.

Besides the disclaimer, O'Brien uses simple devices that give this novel the appearance of an average, straight-forward book. The novel begins with an expected heading: Chapter I. This is the only chapter heading in the novel, however, as the rest is divided into sections by the narrator's italicized sub-headings. A quotation from Euripides' *Hercules Furens* is included as an epigraph, and has been translated in several different forms. Bernard Benstock claims the epigraph reads "For all proper things do stand out distinct from one another" (19), while Anthony Cronin reads it as "For all things go out and give place to one another" (85). The one thing that can be agreed on, although some critics are missing this piece of information, is that the epigraph was never chosen by O'Brien. It was, in fact, selected by John Garvin, Brian O'Nolan's superior in the Civil Service who fancied himself as somewhat of a scholar (Cronin 85). Placing an emphasis on this epigraph, or believing it to be a clue from O'Brien as to the grand meaning of the novel, is a mistake. The epigraph's importance is not in its meaning, but in its origin; it was simply added in the hopes of Brian O'Nolan advancing in favour with his boss. Because of this, the epigraph does indeed fulfill its duty and set the tone of this unusual novel, which was also handed over to O'Brien's friend, Niall Sheridan, for a drastic editing job which cut the manuscript by one-fifth (quoted in Cohen 209). O'Brien's rather care-free methods of construction will later be emulated by his narrator.

O'Brien has structured the novel so that the narrator is the author of the entire complex narrative. This can be confusing even without contemplating the interior narrative levels. O'Brien is entirely removed from the text of this novel. What the audience is confronted with and has to sift through is actually the work of O'Brien's fictional narrator: *At Swim-Two-Birds*' sole author. The only questionable narrative voice within the novel is the final one, to be discussed in my conclusion. This final voice, which relates a new anecdote unrelated to the rest of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, cannot be attributed to any character present in the novel, but many critics argue that it could be O'Brien's narrator reflecting on his youth from the future. If this is true, the entire novel then shifts in time and becomes a fond recollection of the past, but the narrative structure does not change. Regardless of the narrative's historical date, the narrator is presenting to the reader a novel about his novel-writing experience. To put this more simply, he is presenting two novels: one is a memoir of his life during the composition of a manuscript, and the other is the manuscript itself. With this, one begins to get an idea of the complexity of O'Brien's work; this multi-layered novel's frame narrative has separate sub-levels of its own.

O'Brien parodies his narrator more than any other character or idea in the novel. Authorial narration, a common aspect of more orthodox or traditional novels, is a useful device in a reflexive narrative. The presence of an authorial narrator forces the reader to recognize a separation between the reader and the novel's fictional world. The narrator, who is the mediator between these two worlds, becomes Hutcheon's "centre of internal reference" (51), the primary target of satire in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The narrator, however, is closely related to O'Brien, and

therefore O'Brien points a satirical finger at himself. O'Brien's and his narrator's similar aspirations to authorial success and critical acclaim are a main target. It is O'Brien's willingness to expose these traits that separates him from his satirical targets. Cohen states that "Self-parody becomes the outer skin of O'Brien's parody of overt novelistic self-consciousness" (226); O'Brien uses reflexivity in order to satirize himself, implicating his own writing in the parody of his narrator's amateur attempts at ground-breaking fiction.

Both of these would-be authors, O'Brien and his narrator, attend University College, Dublin. One can call O'Brien a "would-be" because *At Swim-Two-Birds* was begun while he was an unknown student-author, just like his narrator. Both are far-from-model students, treating exams as more of a necessary nuisance than as a way of proving knowledge and gaining credit with their instructors. O'Brien passed his BA exams in 1932 with second-class honours, a surprise to those who were familiar with his well-established reputation for not doing any work. O'Brien's narrator passes his "final examination with a creditable margin of honour" (301), proving his not entirely modest skill in scholarship to his overbearing uncle with whom he resides. Besides both authors' desire for fame, both are interested in traditional Irish poetry. O'Brien's narrator includes many sections of Irish poetry and mythology in his manuscript, and O'Brien wrote his MA thesis on the uses of nature in Irish poetry. An interest in University College's Literary and Historical Society is another similarity between the narrator and O'Brien. Anthony Cronin, O'Brien's friend and biographer, describes how the author terrorized this society with his satiric wit during his university career, and soon found himself a hero of the unruly mob gathered at the door of these meetings while his narrator "affects to regard [the society] as an almost meaningless spectacle of disorder" (44). This difference in character is a subtle form of distancing O'Brien from his narrator, a separation that proves very important in O'Brien's use of parody in the frame narrative.

Cohen states that "O'Brien's approach to textual production ... prefigures the strategies of postmodernism" (225). Thomas Shea echoes Cohen: O'Brien "goes out of his way to transgress the boundaries usually thought to delineate the territory of the novel" (53). O'Brien's use of an epigraph and disclaimer displays the differences between his novel and those that the reader is accustomed to. Hutcheon regards this style of writing as commonplace in reflexive fiction, assigning it the Russian Formalists' term "defamiliarization." O'Brien draws the reader's attention to common literary devices that are usually ignored due to their being formalized through extensive use. Demands of attentiveness and active involvement are placed on the reader, who cannot take any of these established elements of literature for granted. By Hutcheon's reckoning, O'Brien is writing metafiction decades before it is commonplace, and foreshadowing postmodern fiction. Just as his narrator will do, O'Brien uses common novelistic elements for new means to disrupt the comfortable patterns of the reader's literary consumption.

The frame narrative's most important part is the narrator's theory of literature. *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins with the narrator contemplating his literary theory over a mouthful of bread:

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, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings. (9)

After retiring to his bed, on or in which he spends most of his time when away from the pubs, the narrator again concludes that "One book, one opening, was a principle with which I did not find it possible to concur" (15).

The narrator and his friend, Brinsley, involve themselves in an in-depth and very snobbish

examination of literature, dropping "the names of great Russian masters ... with fastidious intonation" (32), and using "Witticisms ... depending for their utility on a knowledge of the French language as it was spoken in the medieval times" (32). "Psychoanalysis was mentioned--with, however, a somewhat light touch" (32), presumably because this is an area of weakness in their otherwise fine educations. The narrator "tender[s] an explanation spontaneous and unsolicited concerning [his] own work" (32), beginning a long dissertation which states

that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it 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 fortunes of illusory characters. The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses of public resort; the novel was self-administered in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. (32)

The novel should admit that it is a "self-evident sham." The narrator believes that a "good" novel will be as transparent as drama. An audience is forced to view drama in obviously artificial circumstances: in chairs set aside from the world and people of the play. This arrangement must stand, even in *avant garde* drama in which the barriers between the audience and the actors are broken down. While this creates tension for the audience, the tension is created solely because of the vague barrier between the real world and the fictional world of the play. A dramatic parallel in line with the narrator's idea occurs in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. Before any words are spoken, the lone character peels a banana, dropping the peel to the stage: "*He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over the edge of the stage into pit*" (Beckett 11). Krapp is aware of the stage; he uses its edge to dispose of his trash, but he does not transgress this boundary. O'Brien's narrator's characters will be like Beckett's old man; the audience is made aware of the fictional universe that the characters belong to, but this knowledge can never bridge the gap between reader and content. O'Brien's narrator is determined to expose this barrier between the "real" world and the fictional world of his manuscript, but one must remember that the narrator is just as fictitious as any other character in the novel.

The narrator continues his exposition, explaining that "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" (33). Robert Alter directly opposes the narrator on this point. Alter points out that while this at first sounds like an appealing definition for reflexive narrative,

the reader regulating his credulity at will is to reverse the whole process of the self-conscious novel, where it is the writer who tries to regulate the reader's credulity, challenging him to active participation in pondering the status of fictional things, forcing him as he reads on to examine again and again the validity of his ordinary discriminations between art and life and how they interact. (224)

It would appear that the narrator's theory is not as thorough as he believes; Alter has punched a significant hole in it before the narrator is half-way through his lecture on the novel. While the narrator's theory is very much in line with this study's sources in many ways, the theory is inconsistent. O'Brien's narrator has not worked out the flaws of his new theory; this problem of ill-planning is found in his manuscript as well, as discussed in my later chapters.

Besides the fraud involved in presenting an audience with cathartic characters, the

narrator expounds that it is

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-respect, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed 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. (32-3)

The narrator and Brinsley at one point decide that "There are two ways to make big money, ... to write a book or to make a book" (32). While referring directly to betting on horses, the latter statement is a pun. This statement proves important in its distinction between two different methods of composition. In the world of scholarship, this is not so much a theory of composition as it is a truth. One can write an original work of literature or criticism, or one can compile other scholars' work and claim the title of editor. The narrator, however, applies this method to the composition of fiction. Hutcheon suggests that the techniques of what she terms "*littérature citationnelle*" can be viewed as "parodic and generative":

Quotations from one text, when inserted in the context of another, are the same and yet new and different, a microcosmic version of T.S. Eliot's concept of 'tradition' in literature. The parodic creation of new fiction through the rewriting of old is itself the narcissistic subject of metafictional parody. (24-5)

One can see that the narrator's idea of *composition* does not always mean *writing*; in many instances it means *compiling*.

John Barth's entertaining essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," sheds an interesting light on the idea of "compiling" a work of art from extant sources. Barth discusses the re-use of an artistic tradition for the same purposes that O'Brien's narrator re-uses literature in order to create a new work of art. If

Beethoven's Sixth were composed today, it would be an embarrassment; but clearly it wouldn't be, necessarily, if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we've been and where we are. It would have then potentially, for better or worse, the kind of significance of Warhol's Campbell's Soup ads, the difference being that in the former case a work of art is being produced instead of a work of non-art, and the ironic comment would therefore be more directly on the genre and history of the art than the state of the culture. (165-6)

Borrowed fiction adds a sort of textual authority to the narrator's writing. He believes that previously created characters are more readily understood and probably written far better than any original character that he could invent. The narrator, however, is not hoping to help his readership through the re-use of familiar characters, but rather make his work more exclusive while at the same time taking credit for writing far better than he is capable of producing:

A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (32-3)

If the narrator traded his snobbish attitude for Barth's more accepting one he might produce a work as parodic as the novel he is a character in.

The narrator's long-winded explanation of his plans for composition echoes Alter's description of reflexive narrative discussed in my preface; O'Brien's narrator will constantly remind his readers that his manuscript is something made. "By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations" (Hutcheon 139), forcing a recognition of the reader's own role in creating the "universe of fiction." O'Brien, through the theory of his ambitious narrator, has pre-figured Boyd's definitive discussion of this type of novel, also found in my preface; *At Swim-Two-Birds* sets out the rules for the reflexive genre nearly fifty years before Boyd's study. Patricia Waugh's idea that all metafictional narratives "explore a theory of fiction through the practise" (40) of that theory is spelled out by the narrator exactly, regardless of the soundness of the narrator's theory. It is through the narrator's attempt at writing and the reader's subsequent interaction with this text that the reader discovers his theory's flaws.

O'Brien's narrator is a bad author; he actually violates the primary point of his theory: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with" (9). *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins with a single opening; the narrator describes himself placing in his mouth "sufficient bread for three minutes chewing ... and retir[ing] into the privacy of [his] mind" (9), allowing him to mull over his ingenious literary technique. He is at once the object of satire. Cohen emphasizes that regardless of the narrator's bold claims about the novel's structure, "he does not find himself under any obligation to show how to place [these ideas] in a text, nor does he begin his own text with more than the single opening introducing his thoughts on openings" (224). Besides this fundamental error, it is impossible, due to the linear nature of the written word in English, to have any more than one beginning. The possibility of achieving a simultaneously three-directional narrative structure is best left to twenty-first century hypertext scholars. On paper, in a printed novel, it is impossible. Disregarding the frame narrative's primary biographical element, whatever beginning that the narrator chooses to display first will be his manuscript's beginning. One cannot escape this chronological appearance in the novel, and therefore, the narrator's manuscript will consist of one beginning followed by the two starts to two different narratives. While Furriskey's story may in fact be the start of a second narrative, it is nonetheless not another "beginning" of the narrator's novel.

O'Brien's narrator creates his novel in the same, unorthodox manner that O'Brien formulates *At Swim-Two-Birds*. This is a little confusing, as one must see O'Brien as the true author of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but also the narrator as the author of the same text because of O'Brien's clever structure. As early as page fourteen, the reader encounters a transcribed letter that the narrator has received from his bookie. This could have been explained with far less disturbance to the narrative than printing the letter in its entirety. The narrator records as closely as he can the experiences of his life: "I lit my cigarette and then took my letter from my pocket, opened it and read it" (14). The letter is then presented for the reader's examination.

Disjointed narrative appears the style of choice for the narrator. Descriptions are separated from the narrative; the narrator attempts to transcribe an instantaneous thought in a separate, stop-time moment. Confronted numerous times throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds* by his uncle, the narrator denies his sloth and describes his accuser in less-than-flattering ways. These events are



always shown through the use of italicized interjections of instantaneous scenes: "*nature of denial*" and "*description of my uncle*" being common. Alter states that reflexive works attempt to discover "new ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate" (ix). While the narrative's linear progress is disrupted, O'Brien's narrator uses an established tradition to disrupt it. The reader identifies an italicized sub-heading as separate from the surrounding text, and likely reads it in a different inner 'voice' without realizing it. The narrator uses a conventional sign to the reader for a new purpose: to describe emotion or attitude. Laying bare the techniques of fiction writing is a common aspect of the novelist's role. What is interesting in reflexive fiction's case, however, is that by using conventional devices that are usually employed to establish the fictionality of the universe of a text, the narrator achieves the opposite result. Because the narrator's voice is that of a character rather than an exterior, authorial one, the narrator validates his fictional universe and his position within it (Hutcheon 63). Just as O'Brien uses conventional signs for unconventional purposes, so does his narrator. It is this willingness to experiment with something that is thought to be established and static that sets reflexive narrative apart from more traditional narrative techniques.

Besides the sub-headings' temporal disruptions, the reader's search for narrative structure is counter-acted by the narrator placing sections of his manuscript for the reader's perusal in a sometimes unorthodox order. Shea maintains that the narrator seeks to challenge "the conventional systems of coherence dominated by temporality as he accentuates discontinuity and distorts textual superimpositions made possible through memory" (53). Hutcheon explains that in "narcissistic texts the teaching is done by disruption and discontinuity, by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading" (139). Long before the reader of *At Swim-Two-Birds* can know what will take place within the narrator's novel, the narrator presents a piece of writing as an example of his theory of creation within literature. The narrator introduces a "*Shorthand Note of a cross-examination of Mr. Trellis at a later date on the occasion of his being on trial for his life, the birth of Furriskey being the subject of the examination referred to*" (57).

The narrator will at a later point in the novel forego actually writing his entire manuscript, offering only scenes of particular action held together by synopses. After discovering that he has lost four important pages of his manuscript, the narrator is scared into "glancing through [his manuscript] in a critical if precipitate manner" (84). This is unusual; while the narrator greatly enjoys his "spare-time compositions," he finds them "tedious of subsequent perusal" (84):

This sense of tedium is so deeply seated in the texture of my mind that I can rarely suffer myself to endure the pain of it. One result is that many of my shorter works, even those made the subject of extremely flattering *encomia* on the part of friends and acquaintances, I have never myself read. (84)

The narrator is shocked to discover an "inexplicable chasm in the pagination, four pages of unascertained content being wanting" (84), an omission of a significant aspect of the plot, "together with an absence of structural cohesion and a general feebleness of literary style" (84). After considering his options, the narrator decides

--foolishly perhaps--to delete the entire narrative and present in its place a brief resume (or summary) of the events which it contained, a device frequently employed by newspapers to avoid the trouble and expense of reprinting past portions of their serial stories. (84-5)

This displays both an extraordinary method of literary production and the laziness of the narrator; he dislikes the tedium of editing and refuses to bother with it, preferring instead to destroy anything that is truly awful rather than re-work it. Bernard Benstock points out that no reader should have expected that the

anonymous student-author would produce a literary masterpiece. In effect, his 'novel' disintegrates before the reader's eyes: portions are lost, gaps have to be repeatedly summarized, serious flaws emerge and are pinpointed (much to the author's chagrin) ... it is *talking about* his novel that proves far more successful than committing it to paper. (21)

Synopses in the manner that O'Brien's narrator produces, according to W.J. Harvey,

may look simple minded [but are] sophisticated and designed to produce quite complicated effects upon the reader. At first sight they might seem to be conventional devices artificially delimiting the area of the novel. But they have the opposite effect, raising the novel to the magnitude of life itself and giving the fictional world a wonderful openness which is then played off against the formal intricacy of the plot. (34)

While Harvey perhaps takes these synopses too seriously, and they may not produce a living, breathing text, they do help to destroy the linear aspect of conventional narrative structure. The narrator at one point refers the reader back to an old synopsis by page number, rather than even writing a new synopsis for the benefit of new readers: "*Note to Reader before proceeding further: Before proceeding further, the Reader is respectfully advised to refer to the Synopsis or Summary of the Argument on Page 85*" (145). The narrator, in a sense, has prepared his novel for readers who do not read in a linear manner, but who might pick up a book at any page and begin reading toward the end. Reading consecutive pages is disrupted as the reader is encouraged, or forced in a way, to jump back several pages to review or discover for the first time the preceding events. Even if one remembers the text perfectly up to this point, there is an unconquerable urge to at least check that the page number given is correct.

*At Swim-Two-Birds*'s frame narrative is likely the novel's most complicated plane. The relationship between O'Brien and his world is hard to separate from the narrator and the fictionalized Dublin that he exists in. The narrator is an incredibly reflexive character; not only are his life and aspirations virtually identical to O'Brien's, his method of creation is also very similar. O'Brien manages to parody himself and his contemporaries at the same time, while feeling less of the brunt of his satire. No one can successfully attack O'Brien because he has already revealed all of his flaws through his narrator. The important difference between these two is the narrator's literary theory, which O'Brien cannot be held responsible for. This theory will be the basis of reflexivity for the interior narrative planes; these layers will all include authors or story-tellers in various forms and all explore the narrator's theory. While O'Brien is the narrator's near twin, it is the narrator that is the novel's focus and its reflexive examination of fiction making.

### Chapter Three

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* second narrative plane opens up the novel's subject matter a great deal further than the frame narrative. While the outer layer's reflexivity and satire are tightly focused, the lower-order narrative planes generate several different narrative lines. These new storylines are created by a variety of characters existing within the narrator's imaginative manuscript, some of whom act as oral story-tellers while others are authors, creating new, lower-order planes of fiction. The narrator's manuscript is a cleverly structured parallel of the material discussed above in chapter one. O'Brien's narrator creates a novel that acts as an examination of his own literary theory through its application. The narrator's outer narrative level structures his entire manuscript; it functions as the narrator's frame narrative, after all, and includes a reflexive author, a physical representation of the manuscript and a highly problematic mythical figure who transgresses the boundaries that the narrator attempts to set within his work.

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* second narrative plane is essentially an acting out of the narrator's theory, both for O'Brien's comic purposes as well as for the narrator's desire to prove his theory right. Dermot Trellis, the narrator's author-character, is the narrator's invention. One assumes that the author is unfamiliar with any existing character suitable for this role in his novel, based on the narrator's belief in borrowing characters *versus* creating them. Trellis is a rather disagreeable character, and the narrator desires him to be particularly ruthless in his position as author. However, while Trellis is an original invention, the narrator displays the ease of creating a new character when following his theory's use of source material. The narrator proves an even more reflexive character when one realizes that his method of creation is similar to O'Brien's.

Just as the narrator possesses a biography similar to O'Brien's, Dermot Trellis shares many interests with his creator. Besides being a popular author, something the narrator aspires to, Trellis lives in his bed and has done so for twenty years. The narrator's "biographical reminiscences" display his fondness for his bed; the narrator uses its comforts for relaxing smokes with Brinsley, intense creative sessions, and as a place of concealment for drink-induced embarrassments, whether these are hang-overs lasting several days or the vomit-stained suit worn during one such binge. The local publican/literary guru, Michael Byrne, is an influential supporter of the narrator's admitted love for his bed. Byrne claims that "What is wrong with ... most people ... is that they do not spend sufficient time in bed" (137). Byrne has an idea for humanity that is as revolutionary as the narrator's theory for literature: Byrne believes that the sleeping body is in a much purer state than the waking body, and that its only use should be "to turn the sleeping soul over, to change the blood-stream and thus make possible a deeper and more refined sleep" (137). The narrator agrees entirely with Byrne's explanation, and even goes so far as to claim that

We must invert our conception of repose and activity ... We should not sleep to recover the energy expended 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 shadows. (138)

This guru's influence over the narrator is obvious; Trellis rises from bed only to supervise his laundry being washed and his food prepared. The narrator has not only followed Byrne's example in his own life, but also incorporated Byrne's wild idea in his manuscript. The narrator tries out Byrne's theory, just as he tests his own concerning literature.

Trellis is an object of satire, as his creator is in the frame narrative. Trellis has his own

literary theory; he feels that only books with green covers are safe to read because

All colours except green he regarded as symbols of evil ... Although a man of wide learning and culture, this arbitrary rule caused serious chasms in his erudition. The Bible, for instance, was unknown to him and much of the knowledge of the great mysteries of religion and the origin of man was acquired from servants and public-house acquaintances and was on that account imperfect and in some respects ludicrously garbled. It is for this reason that his well-known work, *Evidences of Christian Religion*, contains the seeds of serious heresy. (139-40)

Trellis considers himself a well-read scholar, but his strange theory regarding books has an obvious and very serious flaw; the shadow of O'Brien's satire of the narrator is unmistakable here. Both the narrator and Trellis believe that they are more knowledgeable than they are. Trellis' belief is a perfect example within *At Swim-Two-Birds* of wordplay becoming an event: Trellis actually judges books by their covers. The narrator is undoubtedly proud of his literary skill here. The narrator himself points out to his fellow drinkers at Byrne's pub that this is an important point in the his novel; he makes this silly belief a metaphorical parallel to the world outside his manuscript. The narrator is pointing his satire at the Gaelic League, and similar organizations, who attempt to purify Irish culture in the hopes of saving it from destruction by outside influences. These pro-Irish groups praise any patriotic work, regardless of its literary merit; a work's subject matter is more important than the quality of its composition.

What is truly interesting about the narrator's comment on these groups of Irish patriots is that they exist in the world outside his novel. O'Brien has confused his novel's structure by allowing his fictional narrator to satirize the same targets that he enjoys attacking. The Gaelic League exists in the world that O'Brien lives in, two narrative planes above Dermot Trellis. The narrator brings satirical references into his work that exist in the real world. The narrator includes parodic parallels between Trellis' fictional world and his own, just as O'Brien uses the narrator's fictional Dublin to satirize his own society.

The similarities between the second narrative level and the frame narrative invite the question as to whether the narrator is actually engaging in the same sort of self-satire that O'Brien uses the narrator for. O'Brien aims a critical glance at his own writing by comparing it to his narrator's in an attempt to pre-empt any criticisms from his readership; one wonders if the narrator is attempting the same with Trellis. This aspect of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is special because it involves O'Brien satirizing the same targets as his fictional characters. O'Brien's control over the novel is apparent here for these similar targets, and also for the fact that most of these satiric attacks are aimed in multiple directions. When the narrator satirizes something, there is usually an aspect of his criticism that reflects on himself without his knowledge. Trellis' strange addiction to green is a parallel to the narrator's standard of education for the literary world. Trellis is not as well read as his creator, and one can see the structural parallel to the way O'Brien makes his narrator a less competent author than himself. The narrator's separation from Trellis through this satire is comparable to the distance that O'Brien creates between himself and his narrator.

Michael Byrne, being an adviser on all things literary, is intensely interested in the narrator's manuscript because of its "several planes and dimensions" (142). The narrator praises himself while O'Brien acknowledges the interest that his work will excite among the *literati* of his time. The standard of education required of any potential reader of contemporary literature by the narrator's theory is brought to the reader's mind with this publican's literary interests.

Michael Byrne is shown to be an amateur scholar at best; his influence on the students who patronize his pub comes more from name-dropping and free cigarettes than from statements about literature. It is strange that the narrator respects the opinion of a man who, according to the narrator's literary theory, should not have an understanding of contemporary literature.

Even though the narrator attempts to satirize himself in the same manner that O'Brien does, a light acknowledgment of his imperfections as an author in the hopes of beating his readership "to the punch," the narrator is simply too confident in his abilities for this to be effective. The audience already knows his opinions before he begins displaying examples of his manuscript, and his attempts at harmless self-deprecation seem superficial; the reader gets the impression that he only points out Trellis' flaws in order to make his own writing more impressive. The reader's extra knowledge given by O'Brien in the frame narrative makes these attempts by the narrator futile.

Dermot Trellis' sloth reminds one of the narrator, but there is also a separation between the two that is necessary for the narrator's manuscript. This brings to mind the careful distance that O'Brien places between himself and his narrator. Dermot Trellis is not a savoury character; he is the physical representation of the despotic author mentioned in the narrator's literary theory. While this tyrannical authorship will be addressed in my third chapter, it is important to this discussion of the narrator's distance from Trellis to show the parallel between Trellis and the narrator's uncle. The uncle is the focus of the narrator's contempt throughout the frame narrative, and the narrator attempts a sort of revenge that would be highly effective if the frame narrative was governed by the same rules as his manuscript. A few narrative planes lower, as I will discuss in chapter four, the narrator's manuscript includes a literary revenge against Trellis that produces physical harm by simply describing horrible punishments on a page.

After an excruciating conversation between Brinsley, the narrator and his uncle, Brinsley chides the narrator: "I hope, said Brinsley, that Trellis is not a replica of the uncle" (40). Brinsley's query is quite astute; he is teasing the narrator slightly, and cautioning him to be lenient towards the uncle. Brinsley realizes the negative sentiment felt for the uncle by the narrator, and also knows from his experience with the manuscript that the narrator includes real-life occurrences in his characters' actions. The narrator

did not answer but reached a hand to the mantelpiece and took down the twenty-first volume of my *Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences*. Opening it, I read a passage which I subsequently embodied in my manuscript as being suitable for my purpose. The passage had in fact reference to Doctor Beatty (now with God) but boldly I took it for my own. (40)

The narrator displays his rather free-wheeling use of outside sources in this quotation. His choice of description appears to be an immediate and unplanned response to Brinsley's exposure of the source for his despicable protagonist. The passage is not added to his manuscript until after this conversation with Brinsley, which seems a rash and unconventional decision.

What is perplexing about the narrator's use of this plagiarized source is that it helps very little in describing Dermot Trellis. What the narrator heads as an "*Extract from 'A Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences,' being a further description of Trellis' person, and with a reference to a failing*" (40) is only a physical description of Doctor Beatty. The one nugget that the narrator finds in this biography is that its subject is noted as having "towards the end of life ... indulged to excess in the use of wine" (41). Unfortunately, the glee induced in the narrator by attaching insinuations of alcoholism to a character obviously connected to his uncle must be lost

once the narrator realizes that this portion of the biography is unusable. Trellis is a middle-aged writer very much alive within the narrator's manuscript and this *post-mortem* report does not fit his novel. Of course, considering the narrator's lack of editing, this mistake may never be caught. Besides the mention of drinking, all that this biographical section gives is a physical description of Beatty, with such vague facts as "In person he was of the middle size, of a broad square make" (40).

The borrowed description of Trellis is also redundant when compared to an earlier one given by the narrator to Brinsley:

Dermot Trellis was a man of average stature but his own person was flabby and unattractive, partly a result of his having remained in bed for a period of twenty years. He was voluntarily bed-ridden and suffered from no organic or other illness.... His legs were puffed and affected with a prickly heat, a result of wearing his woollen undertrunks in bed. (34-5)

This passage gives an adequate description of Trellis' appearance; the narrator's borrowed description is in line with attributes already ascribed to him, but these two separate descriptions are still essentially useless in advancing the narrator's story.

The narrator creates an environment for Trellis to work in: the Red Swan hotel. This home has advantages over the narrator's realistic Dublin; through the acting out of the narrator's theory, Trellis' characters are actually physically present and employed to fulfill the plot of Trellis' novel. In the bizarre world of the narrator's manuscript, they must be housed somewhere, as they are Trellis' responsibility while he requires them for his text. The Red Swan is important because the narrator uses it as a physical representation of his manuscript as a whole. At the same time, *At Swim-Two-Birds*' structure is also displayed by this hotel's shape. This is an example of the novel's reflexivity; an object within the narrator's text unwittingly helps to explain or diagram the entire novel that surrounds it.

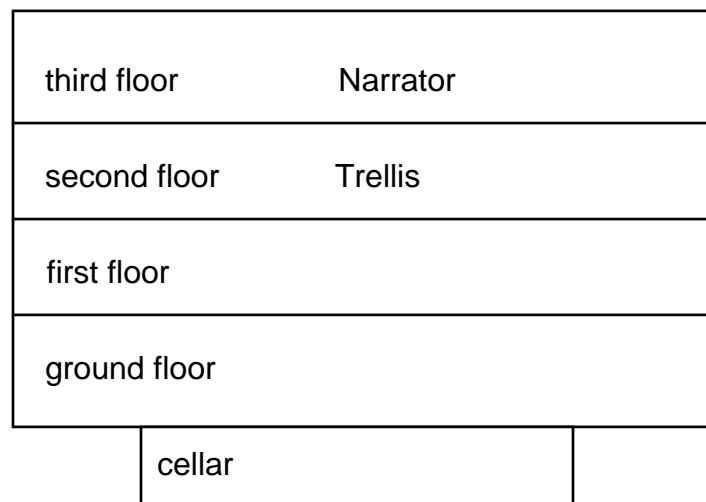


figure 1: diagram of the Red Swan Inn

The Red Swan is "a large building of four stories" (34); even if one ignores this pun, one remembers that *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a novel with four narrative planes. What is only quickly mentioned, though, is an important notice that there is also a "cellar ... full of leprechauns" (47).

The basement's existence enables the lowest-order characters to create their own narratives. The cellar quite fittingly houses the remnants of their stories, as these are mostly rather vulgar tales. The Red Swan has a great deal of horizontal space and four vertical layers, like *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Each of the novel's narrative planes has a broad scope of satiric targets, or several characters resulting in multiple narrative directions.

The audience is made to piece together the structure of the Red Swan from clues in the narrator's manuscript: "Trellis stirred feebly in his room in the stillness of the second floor" (41-2). The Irish method of counting stories is different from the North American one. This foreign method includes a ground floor, and then what we in Canada would normally call the second floor is, for the Irish, the first. By this division of space, Trellis exists on the third of the four floors of the hotel, corresponding to his position in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The narrator uses this metaphorical hotel exactly as O'Brien wishes to use it. The narrator has even allowed himself space within the Red Swan, fictionalizing himself. As stated in chapter one, the narrator presents two narratives that can be considered separately from one another. There are both the "biographical reminiscences" and the manuscript which include the Red Swan. These two are presented together as *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but it is this biographical narrative that exists on the top floor of the Red Swan, as the other narrative layers are accounted for in the lower floors of the hotel.

To further discuss the Red Swan's structure requires more knowledge of this second narrative level. Although the narrator's original explanation of his theory of beginnings, that a novel could easily have three or more, focuses on the Puck-like Pooka MacPhellimey, Mr. John Furriskey, and a legendary hero of Ireland, Finn Mac Cool, these are not all included in the same narrative layer. A small note must be made here as to the discrepancy in the spellings of Mac Cool in the following. The narrator is intensely interested in different narrative voices and styles of writing throughout his manuscript, and this is the cause of the different spellings of Finn's surname. In a heading in his manuscript, the narrator writes in a different tone from that of his characters, and this results in Finn being named *Mac Cool*; after this, he is referred to as Finn *McCool*. I will use the spelling that the narrator does at each point that I discuss Finn. Both the Pooka and Furriskey are Trellis' creations, and the subject of my third chapter. Finn, however, acts as a counterpart to Trellis. In the Red Swan, "There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr. McCool, a hero of old Ireland, is on the floor above" (47). Ambiguity creates a problem for the reader at this point. Room 13 may be on either the ground floor or the first floor of the hotel, depending only on how many rooms are located on the ground floor. This means that Finn may have been assigned a room by Trellis on the same floor as Trellis, as all of these characters have been hired and are provided for by Trellis until his novel's completion. This ambiguity is acceptable, because one soon realizes that Finn is not rooted to any particular narrative level.

While Trellis is an original character composed of various outside influences on the narrator, Finn is a great legendary figure. Lady Gregory records a traditional biography:

he was a king and a seer and a poet; a Druid and a knowledgeable man; and everything he said was sweet-sounding to his people. And a better fighting man than Finn never struck his hand into a king's hand, and whatever anyone said of him, he was three times better. And of his justice it used to be said, that if his enemy and his son had come before him to be judged, it is a fair judgment he would have given between them. And to his generosity it used to be said, he never denied any man as long as he had a mouth to eat with, and legs to bring away what he gave him; and he left no woman without her bride-price, and no man without his pay; and he never promised at night what he would not

fulfill on the morrow, and he never promised in the day what he would not fulfill at night, and he never forsook his right-hand friend. And if he was quiet in peace he was angry in battle. (Gregory 170)

Finn also manages to acquire great knowledge through the ingestion of a magical fish and the water from a famous well (Gregory 162-7). Finn represents the oral tradition of Irish literature; he is a direct link to an artistic history. He recites tales of folklore in the manner of an ancient bard. The narrator, following his theory, appropriates Finn for his own use. Finn's attributes will be widely recognized by the narrator's hoped-for readership, and this facilitates Finn's use as a supporter of the narrator's literary theory as well as the narrator's comments on the state of Ireland's literary tradition.

Deciding which narrative plane to place Finn in is a deceptively difficult task. Inside *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Finn acts as a character in the narrator's novel, as well as a story-teller. The narrator borrows Finn from Irish mythology, and he exists inside of Trellis' novel, the narrator's manuscript, the narrator's fictionalized Dublin and the real world of O'Brien. Besides these troublesome overlaps, Finn is also appropriated by a character who is created by Trellis for a new narrative in the lowest level of the narrative structure. Finn exists on every narrative plane present in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. To add another confusing element to this stack, Finn is fictional on every level, including O'Brien's. Finn may at one point in history have been based on a real person, but his status as a giant and a magical hero, which changes from tale to tale, is obviously impossible.

While reading *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one realizes that the sections involving Finn actually take over the narrative in places, regardless of which narrative plane Finn is situated in at the time. Finn seems to be difficult to control; Trellis has even less power over Finn than he does over his other rebellious characters, whom I will discuss in detail later. One can see that the narrator has very little control over Finn as well, as Finn tells many stories within the narrator's manuscript that have nothing to do with the narrator's literary theory, and therefore appear as digressions of the narrator. Finn's oral propensity causes him to gab. On an even larger scale, O'Brien himself has little control over this mythological character. The narrator includes what many readers will consider far too much of Finn's tales, but O'Brien must be remembered as the grand control of the novel as a whole. Niall Sheridan's editing work, mentioned in chapter one in order to explain the unconventional method of *At Swim-Two-Birds*' composition, focused mainly on Finn's narrative. Sheridan felt that O'Brien was "carried away" by the fun that he was having using these Irish legends in his novel. Sheridan states in a 1973 remembrance of O'Brien that "I told him [*At Swim-Two-Birds*] was too long. He had got such fun out of sending up the Fenian cycle that he over-indulged himself and the weight of this material seriously unbalanced the latter half of the book" (quoted in Cohen 209).

Finn's importance to the structure of the novel is possibly greatest on this second level with O'Brien. While O'Brien has structured the novel to include Finn at a lower level than the narrator, Finn's status in the real world allows him more freedom within *At Swim-Two-Birds* than O'Brien's narrator. Noting O'Brien's attachment to Finn's narrative line and its excess within the novel, one can see Finn as transcending and subverting the narrator's position as protagonist in the novel. Finn does not serve the same purpose as the narrator at any point of the novel, but this subversion occurs because Finn's traditional oral techniques are treated by O'Brien just as Finn claims they should be. They are greater than the written word, according to Finn, and O'Brien is carried away by them.

Finn's status in the novel is as a transcendent character that can appear in any narrative plane. Finn is also a famous story-teller who is capable of moving upwards in the layout of the



novel, moving beyond Trellis' use for him, and even the narrator's. What is surprising about Finn is that he can even move outside the narrative altogether and cause O'Brien problems in the work's actual composition. Finn can move upwards through the narrative structure, unlike any other character. Even when other characters become authors or story-tellers, they remain rooted in their narrative caste. All except Finn have a ceiling in the novel; they can move downwards, but never above their original placing in the diagram of the Red Swan.

The narrator uses Finn to support aspects of the narrator's literary theory; the narrator opposes traditional uses of characters, as does this famous hero. Finn sounds a long complaint about these literary employments. One must remember, though, that the narrator is despotically putting this speech into Finn's mouth. We are shown the negative side, although in a comical form, of the use of characters in Ireland's literary tradition. Finn is a mythical character, and has been used repeatedly after his original creation for stories of fantastic adventures, resulting in his suffering numerous hardships and injuries. Because of his designation as a hunter and warrior, he has lived a much harder life than some other characters with more cushy literary roles.

The narrator presents the readers of *At Swim-Two-Birds* with a group of Finn's clan, the Fianna, asking Finn to "relate" various tales of their ancestors. The narrator wishes to play with the Irish tradition, and produces a section headed "*Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn Mac Cool and his people, being a humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology*" (16). For several pages following, the narrator gives the reader a long list of men asking for specific stories which Finn decides whether or not to "relate," including several examples of his poetic skill along with these tales. This parody of traditional entertainment includes a different spelling of McCool, in order for the narrator to use a different, more learned tone of voice from the vulgar characters that Finn lives with in the Red Swan hotel. Finn is a rather grumpy hero in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and is presented as an ancient bore to those around him once he is an inhabitant of the Red Swan hotel. One sees a larger comment on the state of Ireland's literary tradition in these scenes; the characters who are interested in the popular fiction of Trellis' contemporaries are aggravated by Finn and treat him with disrespect.

When the narrator first presents Finn, Finn laments to his Fianna the ills done to the heroes of Ireland by Christian authors:

Small wonder, said Finn, that Finn is without honour in the 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 a gap-worded story? (24)

The narrator again engages in some self-satire here while having Finn state his case for more respectful treatment by authors. Finn shows a disregard for written language, noting the spaces between words on a page in contrast to the "discoursing [of] melodious Irish" (25).

Finn's expresses his status as a mythological hero pre-dating Christianity throughout his speech. He notes that he is "God-big" and is sure to denigrate a character he terms a "Lent-gaunt cleric" (25). His poetry states that he is capable of anything, that he is ancient and undying: "I am every hero from the crack of time" (24). Finn's poetry will be discussed later, however, as the present chapter must focus on Finn's attack on authors. Besides injustices such as transforming "the children of a king into white swans with the loss of their own bodies, to be swimming the two seas of Erin in snow and ice-cold rain without bards or chess-boards" (25), Finn discusses what will later be a separate narrative direction for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a tale that Finn will tell. Finn will contribute to the narrator's final narrative plane, telling the tale of the madness of

Sweeney. In this early stage of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Finn only mentions the artificiality of the tale and exposes its origin:

Who could put a terrible madness on the head of Sweeney for the slaughter of a single Lent-gaunt cleric, to make him live in tree-tops and roost in the middle of a yew, not a wattle to the shielding of his mad head in the middle of the wet winter, perished to the marrow without company of women or strains of harp-pluck, with no feeding but stag-food and the branches? Who but a story-teller? Indeed, it is true that there has been ill-usage 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 for the wounds on a man's back. (25)

Finn makes a powerful case for the characters of any narrative. An author does not feel the results of his or her characters' actions, and there is no consideration for the pain inflicted or the embarrassment caused to the character. Finn's rallying speech can be seen as a parallel to the narrator's literary theory. Finn opposes his and his fellow mythological characters' misuse in past narratives, shouting down the state of popular fiction. It is because of the Christian masses that his ancient contemporaries have been treated with so little respect.

The narrator's concern for the dangers of "self-administered" novels comes up in Finn's speech. Poets of the oral tradition tell their tales in what the narrator considers the wholesome public sphere; bards are not mentioned in Finn's rant, only the "book-poets." While "story-teller" is used, there is the specific mention of the "story-teller's book-web," obviously referring to written works, and separating Finn's narrative style from what he claims to be harmful. Finn's speech is in line with the narrator's theory, but for different reasons; he is directly affected by the whims of authors. Finn believes that all tale-tellers, whether they are authors or composers of oral poetry, should be held responsible for their characters. This includes both physical harm and defamation of their characters. Finn mentions that Sweeney is punished horribly for a deed he was forced by a story-teller to do. Sweeney's blasphemous act should not even matter to the heroes of Ireland, as they pre-date Christian clerics. Sweeney's punishment is unavoidable, however, as his controlling author is a devout Christian bent on making an example of him.

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* second layer of narrative is yet another layer with more boundary-setting than action. Like the frame narrative, the second layer necessarily builds up certain structural rules, only this time these are the narrator's rules rather than O'Brien's. The second layer is very much a bizarre version of the frame narrative, including an author-character, Trellis, instead of a narrator and a physical representation of the manuscript, the Red Swan hotel, instead of a literary theory. Trellis displays many of the uncle's and narrator's attributes, making him a reflexive character, but not nearly as complex as the narrator is in the frame narrative. A character who is very complex, however, is Trellis' neighbour in the Red Swan, Finn McCool. Because this second narrative level is governed by the narrator's literary theory, all the characters have a history and are knowledgeable about that history. Finn is the most historical of the bunch, and his status as a bard is problematic for Trellis. The narrator can not house him in the bowels of the Red Swan because he is equal, if not superior, in status to any Irish author. Finn can actually move upwards through the narrative levels of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a unique quality. O'Brien himself is the only other persona of whom traces can be found on all layers. Finn breaks down, or at least confuses, the new set of boundaries that arise in the second narrative level, and their representation, the Red Swan. The next lower level sets off a multitude of narrative lines in

several different voices, which include a number of authors and story-tellers. It is this third plane of fiction, involving the ground floor inhabitants of the Red Swan, that displays the narrator's theory's results through their treatment by, and reaction to, Dermot Trellis.

## Chapter Four

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* third narrative layer, Dermot Trellis' novel, is packed with characters and includes several different narrative lines. What makes this level even more busy is that the narrator attempts to display all of his concerns about writing fiction through Trellis' novel and Trellis' process of creation. Just as Finn is used to support the narrator's theory through his speech against abusive authors, the entire third narrative plane is used to physically illustrate the narrator's theory. Besides Trellis' writing and use of characters, there is the equally important response to Trellis from his characters. Trellis' characters are all as sentient as Finn is, and the reader is confronted by their work as literary characters in this third narrative layer.

Once again, the reader is shown a reflexive author creating a work of fiction quite similar to the text that this author is a character in. Trellis has many similarities to his creator, as has been explained above, but Trellis also reflects the narrator's goals for his literary experiments. The narrator explains to Brinsley the position that Trellis takes on the state of society, and how Trellis' novel will address this:

Trellis ... is writing a book on sin and the wages attaching thereto. He is a philosopher and a moralist. He is appalled by the spate of sexual and other crimes recorded in recent times in the newspapers--particularly in those published on Saturday night. (47)

Obviously, Trellis hopes to write a socially-conscious report on society as he sees it. There is, however, one concern brought up by Brinsley: "Nobody will read the like of that" (47); this has been anticipated by the narrator, and a solution has been provided for Trellis' circulation woes:

Trellis wants this salutary book to be read by all. He realizes that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Therefore he is putting plenty of smut into his book. There will be no less than seven indecent assaults on young girls and any amount of bad language. (47)

The narrator is setting Trellis up for a fall that will prove the narrator's views on the use of characters in the modern novel. This judgment of society, displayed by the fact that no readership could be found for a moral essay in the narrator's Dublin, is a further point of satire; the narrator uses Trellis' subject matter to satirize the narrator's own world.

Following the narrator's literary theory, Trellis collects his characters from an assortment of sources: "Most of them are characters used in other books, chiefly the works of another great writer called Tracy" (47). William Tracy is a famous contemporary of Trellis. What is interesting to point out is that not only is Tracy a fictional author created by O'Brien within the grand scheme of the novel, but that Tracy is actually the narrator's creation. The narrator hopes to illustrate his theory of borrowing characters within his manuscript, but then invents the author that is being borrowed from. While Trellis' traits are in many instances taken from the narrator's life and his *Conspectus*, Tracy is entirely fictional. No source is shown for the narrator's invention of him, most likely because he is a non-character of sorts. Tracy only appears in second-hand terms, during conversations between his former characters. Tracy is also dead before the events of Trellis' book take place. It would have been just as easy for the narrator to use one of the real authors that he has already mentioned, as Tracy's characters could be replaced with any mundane and vulgar group, but the possibility of legal action must deter him. This is another flaw in the narrator's theory; one requires permission in both the narrator's and O'Brien's

worlds to use the intellectual inventions of another person. Copyright laws preclude the narrator from acting out his theory directly. This may be at the core of the narrator's reasons for writing his manuscript, rather than simply a work with borrowed characters. The narrator is able to hide behind his complex narrative structure, just as O'Brien does, to avoid retaliation from his targets of satire. In addition, the bizarre coming to life of literary conventions, a major part of the narrator's work, would be impossible if the narrator's manuscript was grounded in reality and not fantasy.

As I discussed above in chapter two, Trellis forces "all his characters to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them" (47). All characters are, according to the narrator's theory, akin to actors. If one remembers the narrator's theory, it is the stage that is the most "wholesome" form of story-telling, and the narrator hopes to incorporate its conventions into his writing. Within the Red Swan, all characters have a literary career that they remember, or are confused by the lack of one due to their recent creation; even non-literary characters from visual art have a life. During Trellis' introduction to the reader, he is on a tour of the Red Swan to ensure that his creative surroundings are in order, when, "Fearing his bed would cool, he hastened past the emptiness of the hall, where a handsome girl stood poised without her clothes on the brink of a blue river. Napoleon peered at her in a wanton fashion from the dark of the other wall" (44). Even characters from paintings have life in them. The description of the interaction between these two paintings gives the impression that the two are models continuously posing for their portraits, like live manikins. Napoleon is yet another example of a historical figure who appears deep inside a fictional world, just as Huxley, Joyce and Pound are mentioned in the first narrative plane. This description of visual art gives the impression that all art within the narrator's manuscript involves the use of sentient characters. All artists have an obligation to their subjects, not only those who work with language as their medium.

Dermot Trellis exposes all sides of this creation debate in his work. Following the narrator's theory, Trellis borrows all of the characters that he can readily appropriate, only creating those who cannot be found. This gives the narrator's audience a chance to view the consequences of both styles of character development. A new character's creation in the narrator's fictional universe is somewhat more complicated than one might expect, as characters can exist outside of literature when they are unemployed by an author. A discussion takes place between Trellis and a friend that reminds the reader of the narrator's talk with Brinsley, documented in an "*Extract from Manuscript where Trellis is explaining to an unnamed listener the character of his projected labour*" (48). Trellis explains that "It appeared to him that a great and a daring book--a green book--was the crying need of the hour--a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion call for torn humanity" (48). In order for this moral tale to be popular and interest its intended audience, as the narrator has explained, there will have to be "plenty of smut" and outrageous moral offences. The narrator claims that Trellis' "book will be so bad that there will be no hero, nothing but villains. The central villain will be a man of unexampled depravity, so bad that he must be created *ab ovo et initio*. A small dark man called Furriskey" (48).

Although Trellis creates John Furriskey himself, Trellis cannot simply bring this villain into the novel without explanation. In fact, in a highly reflexive manner, Trellis uses an "*Extract from Press regarding Furriskey's birth*" (54) to announce and explain this new creation. Even Trellis uses techniques of narrative disruption to explain his novel. Furriskey has indeed been created as an adult character, lacking a childhood and parents, among countless other tiny aspects of a long maturity into adulthood. Trellis announces and explains the technical aspects of Furriskey's creation in this newspaper report on the extraordinary invention of Furriskey:

We are in a position to announce that a happy event has taken place at the Red Swan Hotel, where the proprietor, Mr. Dermot Trellis, has succeeded in encompassing the birth of a man called Furriskey. Stated to be doing "very nicely", the new arrival is about five feet eight inches in height, well-built, dark, and clean-shaven. The eyes are blue and the teeth well-formed and good, though stained somewhat by tobacco; there are two fillings in the molars of the left upperside and a cavity threatened in the left canine. (54)

This is only a taste of the information given by this birth announcement, which also includes Furriskey's hairstyle of choice, his rather good but incomplete education in the sciences of Physics and Chemistry, his obvious smoking habit, and that "He is apparently not a virgin, although it is admittedly difficult to establish this attribute with certainty in the male" (55).

In order for this newspaper's readership to understand the fantastic events surrounding such an unusual birth, the reporter has employed the paper's medical correspondent, who explains Trellis' "international repute in connection with his researches into the theory of aestho-autogamy" (55). The structure of Trellis' novel at this point should be looked at closely; Trellis is actually quoting himself in an interview. It can be presumed that Trellis has invented this newspaper reporter and the medical correspondent along with Furriskey in order to explain his appearance in the novel in an easier manner. Here, Trellis' readers are confronted by a fictional interviewer quoting from a conversation had with his own creator; Trellis is a highly competent author, it would seem, when considering the technical aspects of his writing. This interview adds scientific validity to Trellis' fiction writing. Trellis' medical correspondent writes that

Aestho-autogamy with one unknown quantity on the male side ... has long been a commonplace. For fully five centuries in all parts of the world epileptic slaves have been pleading it in extenuation for uncalled-for fecundity. It is a very familiar phenomenon in literature. The elimination of conception, and pregnancy, however, or the reduction of these processes to the same mysterious abstraction as that of the paternal factor in the commonplace case of unexplained maternity, has been the dream of every practising psycho-eugenicist the world over. I am very happy to bring a century of ceaseless experiment and endeavour to a triumphant conclusion. (55)

Trellis graciously acknowledges assistance in the field of aestho-autogamy to his long-time friend and colleague, the late William Tracy, from whose last novel, a western, most of Trellis' novel's characters have been borrowed.

It is obvious that it requires much more effort to actually create an original character than to borrow one in a world where an author is held responsible for his or her characters' well-being. One must not only create a physical being, but also supply them with the necessary background, including their education, in order for them to fulfill their intended roles within a literary work. An unfinished, or imperfect character can react to new surroundings with surprising results, as one sees with Trellis' villain, Furriskey. This is only one of the reasons creating characters is problematic. Trellis will soon discover another that results in threats to his own life.

Furriskey is problematic for Trellis in a rather ironic way; he is a very nice man. Trellis has created him, one remembers, to be a vile and destructive character. It is Furriskey who is supposed to commit the several offences to female chastity and honour within Trellis' novel. Unfortunately for Trellis, however, Furriskey has no evil inclinations. As mentioned earlier, Trellis has no power over his characters, hired or created, once he is asleep. While Trellis is

asleep, they are free to live as they choose; all of the borrowed characters remain under the control of their own previously established personalities, not those prescribed by Trellis. Trellis, because of his created characters' actions after he falls asleep, seems not as competent a creator as he claimed in the interview following Furriskey's birth. It is unlikely that he has perfected the invention of characters, because the characters that he creates act in opposition to their intended roles within the novel. The narrator's highly useful synopsis explains what was intended by Trellis, and what has actually occurred with Furriskey's character:

JOHN FURRISKEY, a depraved character, whose task it is to attack women and behave at all times in an indecent manner. By magic he is instructed by Trellis to go one day to Donnybrook where he will by arrangement meet and betray

PEGGY, a domestic servant. He meets her and is much surprised when she confides in him that Trellis has fallen asleep ... Peggy and Furriskey then have a long discussion on the roadside in which she explains to him that Trellis' powers are suspended when he falls asleep ... and they discover after a short time that they have fallen in love with each other at first sight. They arrange to lead virtuous lives, to simulate the immoral actions, thought and words which Trellis demands of them on pain of the severest penalties. They also arrange that the first of them who shall be free shall wait for the other with a view to marriage at the earliest opportunity. (85-86)

Once Furriskey is aware of his and his fellow characters' capacity for freedom, however limited, he acts on his own emotions, and proves to be a scrupulous and loving man.

Trellis is drugged by his own villain, and sleeps nearly all day, awaking "only at predeterminable hours, when everything would be temporarily in order" (141). With Trellis asleep, Furriskey and Peggy are free, "and opened a sweet-shop and lived there happily for about twenty hours out of twenty-four" (141). Furriskey has created a nearly static world for him and his fellow characters to live in. With Trellis only conscious for four hours a day, including the time spent at meals and other mundane activities essential to life, writing a novel must be slow work. Since the characters have been hired on for an entire novel, if the novel is never completed, it seems that they will live like this forever. All of the characters have gained freedom in a sort of fairytale manner: the evil master is asleep, so they can do whatever they like until he wakes up, and he will not discover their secret.

Besides Furriskey not fulfilling Trellis' hopes for lechery, Trellis exposes another problem caused by creating characters. This results in his near-death through familial revenge. "In order to show how an evil man can debase the highest and the lowest in the same story" (86), Trellis creates another woman for Furriskey to attack in his evil way. Sheila Lamont is created to be a "very beautiful and refined girl" (86), whose brother is to be Anthony Lamont, another character

already hired so that there will be somebody to demand satisfaction off John Furriskey for betraying her--all this being provided for in the plot. Trellis creates Miss Lamont in his own bedroom and he is so blinded by her beauty (which is naturally the type of beauty nearest to his heart), that he so far forgets himself as to assault her himself. (86)

Besides his characters not living out his expectations, Trellis finds himself debased by his own plans. Paralleling both the narrator and O'Brien, Trellis writes his novel with personal experience

being a factor in its creation. Trellis is highly attracted to his created beauty, who is literally the woman of his dreams, and the evil intentions that Trellis hoped Furriskey would act out appear in his own personality.

Trellis has now crossed into uncharted territory; in his literary experience it seems that this type of behaviour is unrecorded, or at least never admitted to by other authors. Trellis has had sex with one of his own creations, a strange form of incest. What complicates the matter even further for Trellis, and will eventually result in his near-death, is that Sheila Lamont is impregnated through this attack. Now Trellis is faced with the birth of what turns out to be a son who is half fiction and half reality. Trellis' son is made of the stuff of two different narrative planes. Even though the characters from these different narrative levels can coexist at this lower level of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, cross-breeding between creator and character is truly problematic for the narrator, who must find a way to describe the outcome of this pregnancy, and very troublesome for Trellis, who has now become a character in his own fiction. Trellis has taken over the villain's role in his own novel. While Furriskey is too honourable to commit any of the offences demanded of him by Trellis, simply telling him that his duties as villain have been carried out, Trellis has unexpectedly performed Furriskey's role for a short time. This is something that will be impossible to hide within the world of his novel, as the characters are sentient beings within the Red Swan and surrounding areas. While Trellis is asleep, the other characters will be free to discuss this surprising offence by their author without repercussions. The result will be a highly vengeful son who will write a revenge plot in the next lower narrative level.

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* narrator has his creativity stretched to the limit by the need to reconcile Trellis' half-caste son with his manuscript's structure. The difficulties that arise from Trellis's actions prove too much for even the self-assured narrator. In a "*Note on Constructional or Argumentative Difficulty*" (206), the narrator explains that

The task of rendering and describing the birth of Mr. Trellis's illegitimate offspring I found one fraught with obstacles and difficulties of a technical, constructional, or literary character--so much so, in fact, that I found it entirely beyond my powers. This latter statement follows my decision to abandon a passage extending over eleven pages touching on the arrival of the son and his sad dialogue with his wan mother on the subject of his father, the passage being, by general agreement, a piece of undoubted mediocrity. (206)

The narrator is baffled by how to present this strange turn of events. While discussing it afterwards with friends, they seem to have ideas that could have cleared up the problem, but the narrator is already far beyond that point in his manuscript. They suggest that Sheila might take her own life, thereby foregoing any problems of the physical result of Trellis' and Sheila's encounter. The narrator uses a rather dull excuse, that Trellis was by this time so entirely under the influence of Furriskey's drugging that he "was paying less and less attention to his literary work" (207). This answer, the narrator was "glad to say, gave instant satisfaction and was represented as ingenious by at least one of the inquirers concerned" (207). This also allows the narrator's wild tale to continue, as the lowest order narrative is dominated by Trellis' offspring and proves an example of the worst results of ignoring the narrator's belief in authorial responsibility.

The narrator freely admits his problems in describing the physical attributes of Orlick, as this is one of the most basic questions one will have after an union between real and fictional



people:

I had carefully considered giving an outward indication of the son's semi-humanity by furnishing him with only the half of a body. Here encountered further difficulties. If given the upper half only, it would be necessary to provide a sedan-chair or litter with at least two runners or scullion-boys to operate it. The obtrusion of two further characters would lead to complications, the extent of which could not be foreseen. On the other hand, to provide merely the lower half ... the legs and lumbar region, would be to narrow unduly the validity of the son and confine his activities virtually to walking, running, kneeling and kicking football. For that reason I decided ultimately to make no outward distinction and thus avoided any charge that my work was somewhat far-fetched. (207)

One sees the narrator's incredibly literal thoughts here, as in other places where literary techniques become literal occurrences. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a whole, the problem of describing Orlick as a half-caste character is solved by O'Brien's structure. O'Brien does not have to reconcile Orlick's fictional mother and real father because it is not O'Brien's mistake. Once again, the narrator's writing is at fault, not O'Brien's. At the narrator's level, all of these characters are fictional and have no real problem cross-breeding. The mistakes that the narrator makes are simply more fuel for the satire of the narrator, who is the central target for satire throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Just as O'Brien and the narrator do on the outer levels of *At Swim-Two-Birds*' narrative, Trellis attempts to set firm boundaries and barriers that are broken down by various means. Finn has already proved troublesome for even O'Brien, and the narrator has had numerous holes punched in his literary theory; Trellis can never hope to be as successful as the narrator, as he is used by the narrator to prove the narrator's theory correct. Trellis is automatically one step further from being a good writer because the narrator hopes to make himself look good in comparison to Trellis. O'Brien has already done this with the narrator in the frame narrative, and therefore Trellis is two full steps away from the quality of writing that O'Brien is capable of. Trellis quickly loses control of his characters; even his minor characters are hard to handle. Trellis has created the Pooka and a Good Fairy to battle over Orlick's soul, to determine his personality. The Pooka is a "member of the devil class," but is a very sensitive and polite person. The Good Fairy cheats at cards and has a highly volatile temper; he is so tiny that he is invisible, but takes offence when people forget to acknowledge his presence. The Good Fairy is always willing to gamble, but never carries money with him; besides the physical impossibility of this due to his minute size, he never needs any because he always cheats and wins. Against the Pooka, however, he loses a hand and must forfeit Orlick in order to save face in front of some of Trellis' other characters, the vulgar cowboys of the Red Swan's ground floor. The Pooka is gracious enough to not expose the Good Fairy's dishonesty, but demands that the Good Fairy relinquish his claim to Orlick. Because of Trellis' ill-planning when creating the Good Fairy, Orlick is influenced by the Pooka, and learns the vengeful tactics he later employs against Trellis while boarding with the Pooka.

To back away now from the discussion of Trellis and his novel, one must also look to Finn McCool and his narrative. Finn's narrative is entirely separate from Trellis', and is told to Trellis' rough characters while sitting around a fireplace in the Red Swan. Finn is placed in a parodic conversation here; this meeting's structure reminds the reader of Finn's introduction, in which he sits around a fire with his Fianna, and they ask for various stories from him. In the Red Swan, the nineteenth century cowboys Trellis has hired from Tracy ask Finn to stop telling

stories. They are annoyed by Finn, whom they consider an old bore, rather than a respected part of Irish culture. These cowboys are a reference to the popularity of trashy fiction; American-style cowboys are Tracy's most famous subject matter, and they are obviously out of place in this fictional Dublin. Tracy is noted as having destroyed acres of Dublin's housing to build a ranch in the Ringsend district, and in a narrative line that one of the cowboys himself tells, to be discussed below in chapter four, Tracy has camped a large group of stereotypical "red Indians" in a Dublin park, wearing full war-paint and buckskin.

As stated in the previous chapter, Finn's narrative is expansive and overpowering in comparison to the other minor narrative lines. It is during this meeting with Trellis' cowboys that Finn discourses at length about Sweeney, reminiscing in a sense about ancient times, while keeping up his fight against the injustices done to mythical figures by authors. Finn tells the long tale of Sweeney and his madness, an ailment Finn has earlier proclaimed a great injustice to this important figure of Irish history. Finn becomes an important story-teller based simply on how much of the novel is devoted to his tale, regardless of its content. While it does not really have any great effect on the grand structure or goals of O'Brien's or the narrator's work, and is entirely separate from Trellis', it is interesting because of Finn's personal feelings regarding authors. Finn sets out what can be considered his own personal literary theory. He opposes the ill-use of mythical figures by authors, arguing that these ancient characters deserve more respect because of their place in history and culture. Finn argues for a sort of seniority for these ancient characters, as he does not seem concerned with the more modern characters surrounding him in the Red Swan. What is truly interesting about Finn's objections to characters' treatment is that he is a story-teller himself and uses Sweeney, Finn's primary example for the misuse of respected characters, as his protagonist.

One must question Finn's tale telling; are these oral tales the same as the written ones he has already complained about? There is no clear answer for this query, but there are a few pieces of evidence to support Finn's telling of this tale. Because Finn's justification of the oral tradition in Irish literature is so strong, this recital in front of his fellow characters in the Red Swan appears to be acceptable. Finn had earlier claimed that the "book-poets" were lacking the melodious Irish language in their work; this appears to taint any new versions of traditional stories by translating and losing the original meaning behind the words. However, it is clear that Finn is not telling the Sweeney's tale in Irish; none of the cowboys in Trellis' novel ever show any inkling of the Irish language. In fact, it can be inferred through their characters that they have no knowledge of Irish traditions at all. They are styled after the American cowboys of western novels and movies, not any part of Irish culture. While Finn's relating of this tale is sympathetic to Sweeney, the tale still involves much suffering. Finn can only escape being one of the story-tellers that he complains about if one thing is true: re-told stories do not involve their original characters being forced to act out the tale again. This would appear to be obviously true, as one does not need to employ all the characters of Tracy's last western to read the novel; they are free to be hired out to other writers after its completion. However, novels are written works, not oral compositions which change every time they are told, especially when told by an ancient man who falls asleep in the middle of conversations. All oral stories can be considered new every time they are repeated by a person in front of an audience.

Evidence that Finn cannot get away with repeating this tale is also shown in a previously discussed scene: the paintings on the walls of the Red Swan show their subjects as active, posing models. Trellis has adorned his home with these 'living' portraits in the same way that he has caused his characters to live in his home with him. Perhaps there are flaws in the process of oral literature that Finn has not realized. More evidence to support this possibility comes from *At*

*Swim-Two-Birds*' reflexive structure: every person who has stated a grand theory that they believe in strongly to this point has been shown to be wrong in one way or another. Finn may be just another bad author, or in his case, story-teller. Finn falls into the trap of relating Sweeney's tale in order to get his point about characters' misuse across, while at the same time becoming one of the composers he mistrusts. Once again, the narrator could be blamed for this mistake, as he attempts to control Finn's narrative. It is not the first mistake that the narrator has made; once again, what appears at first to be a solid barrier within his novel breaks under scrutiny. At first glance, one believes Finn that the written tradition is not as good or honourable as the oral tradition, but after examination of this argument under the narrator's theory's rules, which supposedly control his entire manuscript, this preference for oral literature is proved inadequate.

This third narrative plane presents the narrator's literary theory in its entirety. The audience is shown the benefits of borrowing previously invented characters; all the newly created characters, who have not been tried and tested through at least one literary work, fail to perform their duties properly. Trellis' authorial mishaps are a sort of warning that the narrator presents to his readership. The narrator exposes yet another bad author within *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Not only is Trellis bad at inventing characters, but he is also a bad person at heart; Trellis' evil impulses are exposed after creating what he considers a perfect woman, exposing the reflexive origins of Furriskey's character. Trellis' ill-planning is his downfall, as his own creations turn against him due to a lack of backgrounding; Furriskey is kind-hearted because Trellis does not place enough of his own predatory sexuality in his new character, and revenge will be had by Orlick after the Pooka's unplanned influence. Finn is also shown to be a less competent bard than he would like to believe, as his long-winded speeches to his fellow characters place him in the same position as Trellis and every other author that he complains about. Finn has built up expectations of a pure narrative form, but is then proved wrong by the subtle evidence that can be found in the surrounding narrative plane. O'Brien will next present his audience with the most common narrative form: conversation.

## Chapter Five

*At Swim-Two-Birds*' fourth and lowest narrative level provides the audience with a variety of composition. There are several examples of poetry, including Sweeney's recitals of ancient lays as well as those of a favourite poet of Trellis' cowboys, Jem Casey. O'Brien also presents the reader with a commonly neglected narrative form: conversation. O'Brien places a group of rather simple men in a comfortable setting and allows their conversation to flow in seemingly random directions. This presentation of anecdotal story-telling highlights conversation as the art form that it truly is. Besides these oral narratives, it is this final narrative layer that includes Orlick's revenge on his father, Dermot Trellis. Orlick avenges his mother's assault by becoming an author himself, writing a revenge plot to punish Trellis. This final narrative plane displays the most brutal consequences for Trellis' treatment of his characters, a harsh lesson for not following the narrator's literary theory.

As discussed in my third chapter, Finn's narrative line runs parallel with the narrator's and Trellis'. At this lowest level of the novel, Finn's Sweeney narrative must be addressed in the same separate manner. Finn does not fit in with Trellis' other characters, and his narrative is more a lecture than part of a colloquy between friends. Finn tells Sweeney's story in order to display the punishments Sweeney has endured from authors and inventors of myth. Sweeney is another difficult character to situate within the narrative structure, just as Finn is. Finn's relation of Sweeney's madness positions Sweeney in his traditional role in the ancient past, and not with the other characters of the Red Swan; however, there are sections of the narrator's manuscript which place all of the lower order characters together. The reader is confronted with Sweeney throughout the last one-third of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but the narrative level that he exists on changes from page to page. What is interesting to discuss about this fourth narrative level is Sweeney's discourse within Finn's tale. Sweeney is in many ways a reflexive character; he is Finn's story-telling protagonist, just as Trellis is the narrator's and the narrator is O'Brien's. Sweeney is said to run "with a wind-swift stride" (90) and is also described as "bird-quick." In an earlier extract from the narrator's manuscript on the subject of Finn, Finn describes himself as "wind-quick" (23). Sweeney possesses the elements outlined early in the narrator's manuscript that are required by the members of Finn's Fianna. Sweeney is shown as a capable warrior and poet during Finn's telling of Sweeney's curse. Finn is the archetype of these traits, as he sets the terms for membership in his clan. Because Sweeney possesses them, and is the protagonist in a tale told by Finn, one can conclude that Sweeney functions as another reflexive protagonist within *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Sweeney also recites poetry in the same manner as Finn. While Finn is not Sweeney's creator, he is in this authorial position while telling Sweeney's tale, which allows him to influence Sweeney's language. Even if the essence of the tale is mythologically correct and Finn is indeed not inventing any of the plot, the language that Sweeney uses is still decided by Finn. While Sweeney's poetry is not exactly like Finn's poetic descriptions of himself, there are definite similarities between the language used in each. Finn claims

I am a hound for thornypaws.  
I am a doe for swiftness.  
I am a tree for wind-siege.  
I am a windmill.  
I am a hole in a wall. (18)

During Sweeney's lament for his cursed life, he states

I am in summer with the herons of Cuailgne  
with wolves in winter,  
at other times I am hidden in a copse. (97)

It is not so much the self-description that both engage in but the pervading images of nature that make Finn's influence appear strongly in Sweeney's poetry. A reflexive protagonist does not have to produce works of literature perfectly similar to those of his or her creator. This difference has been essential for both O'Brien and the narrator to distance themselves from their protagonists throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*. What is more important is the biographical connection between Finn and Sweeney and their ability to produce any poetry at all. Each of these characters is a well-established piece of Irish legend, but when Finn begins telling this tale, he steps into the position of author and the similarities between Finn and Sweeney emulate the arrangement between creators and reflexive protagonists.

Sweeney is metaphorically significant to every level of the novel; even the title refers to the place where Sweeney delivers his most famous lay. However, even though a mythological character like Sweeney or Finn sets off every alarm the educated reader has, Sweeney's character has no grand effect on the novel's structure. Whereas Finn acts as a reflexive author, and can move through the levels of fiction unlike all others, Sweeney abides by the same rules as the other Red Swan inhabitants. The cowboys that inhabit the lowest level of the Red Swan can still trade tales because of the cellar space below them. Sweeney might deliver long pieces of poetry, but these are essentially just an unusual sort of conversation. When Sweeney meets the band of men on their way to Orlick's birth, he is accosted by the trigger-happy cowboys and forced to explain his hiding in a tree:

Sweeney the thin-groined it is  
in the middle of the yew;  
life is very bare here,  
piteous Christ it is cheerless.

Grey branches have hurt me  
they have pierced my calves,  
I hang here in the yew-tree above,  
without chessmen, no womantryst.

I can put no faith in humans  
in the place they are;  
watercress at evening is my lot,  
I will not come down. (177)

It is part of Sweeney's traditional character, created over centuries of myth-making, that he speaks in "melodious Irish" verse, even if it is in translation for the benefit of a vulgar audience. Sweeney's lays are all part of a poetic autobiography, and do not include other creative characters. This poetry does not form a new narrative level because it has the same elements as the fireside conversation between the cowboys in the Red Swan, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Sweeney's poetry is also interesting because it is another example of a legendary figure transgressing the boundaries placed by authors within *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Sweeney's poetry is provided in English for the reader, translated by Flann O'Brien. As mentioned earlier, O'Brien was an Irish scholar, and Sweeney's traditional Irish poetry is emulated and translated by the actual author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* for the reader's understanding. Because Sweeney is, in this novel, a character of O'Brien's, O'Brien is actually quoting his own scholarship through the mouth of a character on the lowest narrative level within his layered novel. This is a structural manoeuvre as subtle as it is complex. Both Finn and Sweeney are reflexive of O'Brien himself because they speak the words of O'Brien's translations within the confines of his novel. O'Brien makes previously existing characters reflexive through this process, just as Finn does with Sweeney. Because Sweeney's voice is heard through Finn's telling of a tale, Finn is also reflexive of O'Brien. Finn, who proves so difficult to hold to one level of narrative, again surprises the audience by relating the exact words of an author whom he must by his own rules despise, and who Finn has already managed to rebel against by rising through the narrative levels and in some places hijacking the novel from its real author.

In stark contrast to both Finn's and Sweeney's "melodious" and traditional poetry is the work of Jem Casey, "Poet of the Pick" (168). Casey is thrown into the mix of characters to display the contrast between what is deemed traditional and therefore proper literature by those who would support Finn's high ideals for mythic narrative and the popular fiction turned out by writers like Tracy and Trellis. Casey's entry into the novel is placed directly before the group's meeting with Sweeney. Sweeney is brought to the Red Swan with a group of Trellis' characters, all the while answering their questions in his ancient poetic style, and directly in contrast to Casey. Casey also has his own literary theory, in line with the other writers that the reader encounters throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*. When meeting the association of characters on their way to the Red Swan, Casey explains that the

stuff that I go in for ... is the real stuff. Oh, none of the fancy stuff for me.

He spat phlegm coarsely on the grass....

I'll always stand up for my own. It's about the Workin' Man that I was reciting my pome. (170-71)

Casey then proudly recites his work for his new cronies, "in a hard brassy voice, free from all inflexion" (172). The poem is a celebration of the working man, not surprisingly, in very simple rhyming stanzas of four lines, each finishing in a chant: "THE GIFT OF GOD IS THE WORKIN' MAN" (172).

Jem Casey parallels Sweeney's important metaphorical position in the novel; one can connect their relationship to that of the Pooka and the Good Fairy. It is no surprise that the two are introduced into the novel almost simultaneously. Both Sweeney and Casey are found in the forest; however, Sweeney is discovered in his traditional position as a feathered madman in a tree, and Casey is surprised by the group while defecating in some bushes. In his rough manner he describes his actions as "reciting a pome to a selection of my friends" (170). Casey's and Sweeney's metaphorical importance is reflected by their destination: the men are on their way to Orlick's birth, an artist's birth. Sweeney and Casey will, in a sense, battle for Orlick's creative soul just as the Pooka and Good Fairy will, presenting two forms of artistry to influence literature's newest Irish writer.

O'Brien highlights an overlooked narrative form in this lowest narrative plane:

conversation. Some of Trellis' characters enter into a rambling conversation while sitting around a fire with Finn; a contrast develops between the narrative form of Finn's quasi-heroic poetic narrative and the cowboys' mundane discourse about their lives. Trellis' cowboys and Furriskey are interrupted regularly by Finn, and are only able to fully involve themselves in their stories when Finn dozes. The others are also subject to interruptions from members of their own group; a highly comical conversation takes place between them that is all the more funnier for its reflection of real life.

Interruption is a technique of conversation just as much as it is a technique of composition throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*; O'Brien is perhaps showing his audience that his highly unorthodox fiction writing, or the disrupted plot that he presents, is not as unorthodox or confusing as one first thinks. Conversation, our main source of information and interaction with others, revolves around interruption and the ability to jump from one topic to another with little introduction. This technique occurs with even more regularity and less explanation between friends. The cowboys share winks and nods about Finn in order to chuckle at his relentless tale without speaking out against him. They attempt to treat this ancient man with respect, although some of the more vulgar characters are rather open with their criticisms of his stories' length.

Paul Shanahan relates the main section of the cowboys' narrative, telling of his previous experience as a literary character and giving *At Swim-Two-Birds*' readership a larger appreciation for the techniques of creation allowed in the narrator's created world. Shanahan remembers his work for William Tracy; this tale is a wild affair of cattle rustling and gunfighting. Shanahan tells of a behind-the-scenes bit of action that took place during the composition of one of Tracy's last novels. While acting as a character in Tracy's novel, Shanahan lived the lifestyle of the western cowboy:

Rounding up steers, you know, and branding, and breaking in colts in the corral with lassoes on our saddle-horns and pistols at our hips.... At night we would gather in the bunkhouse with our porter and all our orders, cigarettes and plenty there on the chiffonier to be taken and no questions asked, school-marms and saloon-girls and little black maids skivvying there in the galley. (74)

While playing a cowboy's role, Shanahan and his fellow characters are expected to be cowboys all of the time.

One morning, Shanahan and "a few of the boys" (75) receive a message to meet with Tracy; this is a clever ruse, however, perpetrated by a rival author "by the name of Henderson that was writing another book about cattle-dealers and jobbing and shipping bullocks to Liverpool" (75). Kiersay, Henderson's protagonist, and his gang have stolen not only Tracy's cattle, but his servants as well while Shanahan and his men are distracted by this false errand. Unfortunately for Shanahan and his fellow cowboys, they are caught by Kiersay while sneaking up on his bunk-house; Kiersay chases them away at gunpoint, forcing them to resort to their only other option: the police. Besides the police, Shanahan's friend points out that there are "Red Indians up in the Phoenix Park, squaws and wigwams and warpaint an' all" (79); these are characters from another book being written by Tracy concurrently, and can be had as mercenaries for the right price. This mix of Tracy's characters battle Kiersay's gang and win back their cattle and servants. The end result of this movie-style shootout is the Kiersay gang being charged with seven days hard labour, without the option of paying a fine.

Antony Lamont interrupts Finn's narrative after becoming confused and asks for a synopsis. Once again, the reader notes a synopsis for those who, like Lamont, perhaps have not

been paying attention. Shanahan explains to Lamont the current focus of Finn's tale, as Lamont's attention is enticed by the mention of Sweeney's incredible leaps from tree to tree:

The story, said learned Shanahan in a learned explanatory manner, is about this fellow Sweeney that argued the toss with the clergy and came off second-best at the wind-up. There was a curse--a malediction--put down in the book against him. The upshot is that your man becomes a bloody bird. (118)

Lamont is attracted to Shanahan's mention of jumps because it allows him to tell an anecdote about "Sergeant Craddock, the first man in Ireland at the long jump in the time that's gone" (119). Lamont proceeds to relate a tale of a day of "Gaelic League Sports or whatever it was that was being held" (119). After a manly challenge from a loud-mouthed gamer, this Sergeant confronts the current long-jumping champion and beats him, with a miraculous leap of "twenty-four feet six" (122). Lamont's friends are highly impressed by this tale of athletic prowess, but their discussion of the Irish sporting capacity is cut short by Finn, who simply continues where he left off, interrupting his interrupter.

Leaving this directionless fireside conversation, we must now turn to the main part of this lowest narrative level, the revenge narrative written by Orlick against Trellis. Orlick literally *plots* revenge, and hopes to *sentence* his father to death by torture. This is yet another example of wordplay becoming literal occurrences. The narrator provides the reader with another short synopsis to set the scene of Orlick's revenge:

ORLICK TRELLIS, having concluded his course of study at the residence of the Pooka MacPhellimey, now takes his place in civil life, living as a lodger in the house of FURRISKEY, whose domestic life is about to be blessed by the advent of a little stranger. (235)

Orlick, one remembers, left the Red Swan with the Pooka after his birth; Orlick now lodges with the "evil" Furriskey, who has built up a very innocent family life and is expecting a baby. The narrator's synopsis also explains that Shanahan and Lamont have come to Furriskey with fears that Trellis may become immune to the drugs he is constantly given, and are afraid of the punishment that will surely ensue if Trellis should regain his tyranny over their lives. Luckily for the characters,

One day in Furriskey's sitting-room they discover what appear to be some pages of manuscript of a high-class story in which the names of painters and French wines are used with knowledge and authority. On investigation they find that Orlick has inherited his father's gift for literary composition. Greatly excited, they suggest that he utilize his gift to turn the tables (as it were) and compose a story on the subject of Trellis, a fitting punishment indeed for the usage he has given others. Smouldering with resentment at the stigma of his own bastardy, the dishonour and death of his mother, and incited by the subversive teachings of the Pooka, he agrees. (236)

Orlick is the final reflexive author found in the pages of *At Swim-Two-Birds*; as with the other authors, Orlick shares physical attributes and stylistic qualities with his creator. In Orlick's instance, his creator is literally that; Trellis is his father, rather than simply an author that invents a character. By reminding oneself of the possible problems that ensue from simply inventing a



fictional character, witnessed in my previous chapter, Trellis must be bound for trouble by this strange turn of events. The shared physical qualities of Trellis and Orlick are fitting, as they are biological relatives. Orlick shares his father's acne problem, and his physical description. When first emerging from his delivery room, Orlick displays a "stout form," and appears a "stocky young man" (207). In addition to these visible qualities, "an air of slowness and weariness and infinite sleep hung about him like a cloak" (208). While this is likely a remnant of his recent creation/birth, it reminds the reader of Trellis' incredible capacity for sleep.

Orlick's skill as a writer is hereditary, according to his fellow characters. It is certainly not planned by Trellis; Orlick is the only character in the Red Swan that Trellis has had no input into his personality or skills, which is all the more surprising considering his parentage. Trellis' other cast members have been created or hired for specific traits. Orlick is a surprise to everyone, including Trellis. His literary skills are discovered by accident by his friends, and it is Shanahan and Lamont that come up with a plan for revenge on Trellis. Orlick's task would appear simple to almost anyone, but his genetic disposition for fiction-writing hampers this revenge process. Orlick is caught in a descriptive mode that annoys his fellow conspirators. The narrative begins with a wandering opening paragraph:

Tuesday had come down through Dunderum and Foster Avenue, brine-fresh from sea-travel, a corn-yellow sun-drench that called forth the bees at an incustomary hour to their day of bumbling. Small house-flies performed brightly in the embrasures of the windows, whirling without fear on imaginary trapezes in the lime-light of the sun-slats. (236)

One suspects soon into Orlick's revenge narrative that Orlick is another example of a bad author. He is perhaps only half as capable as his father is, a man who has already lost control of his narrative to such a degree that his own characters are attempting to torture him to death.

One remembers that the narrator's manuscript is headed with "Chapter one," and then never broken into subsequent chapters; Orlick's narrative is headed by the narrator's italicized introduction: "*Extract from Manuscript by O. Trellis. Part One. Chapter One*" (236). This narrative is also never broken into further chapters, let alone "parts." There are obviously aspects of the narrator's style that are visible in Orlick's work. Orlick has also relocated his father, for purely decorative purposes. Rather than living in the Red Swan, Trellis is now sleeping "in his bed" (237) on Foster avenue; it has already been mentioned that the Red Swan is positioned on "Lower Leeson Street" (34). Orlick describes this residence in even more detail in the second of his three beginnings: "His home was by the banks of the Grand Canal, a magnificent building resembling a palace, with seventeen windows to the front and maybe twice that number to the rear" (244). The Red Swan is never described as a palace, nor is its location noted as canal-side anywhere in the narrator's description of it. This move is entirely unnecessary, like the flowery descriptions of nature that pervade Orlick's narrative's opening.

An entire page of Orlick's manuscript is devoted to the description of a cleric who breaks into Trellis' bedroom through the window, but nothing of this visit's nature is discovered until Trellis and this man chat for a time. Interesting aspects of the cleric's character appear, if one remembers some very minor points in the novel. First, this cleric is named Moling, the same priest that delivers Sweeney's death lay in Finn's narrative. Second, and much more subtle, is the Pooka's influence on this revenge narrative. The extremely polite and sociable Pooka has had Orlick "to his hut in the fir-wood ... to live there as a P.G. (Paying Guest), for a period not exceeding six months, sowing in his heart throughout that time the seeds of evil, revolt, and non-serviam" (214). The overly-polite conversation concerning sinister acts of torture between

Moling and Trellis within Orlick's narrative is reminiscent of the Pooka's conversations earlier in the novel. This subtle attribute of Orlick's manuscript is easily overlooked because the Pooka himself joins the cast of the narrative, dealing out Trellis' punishment to him in person.

Orlick's artistic attempts are lost on his immediate audience, however, as Shanahan loses patience quickly and suggests that "this is a bit too high up for us. This delay, I mean to say. The fancy stuff, couldn't you leave it out or make it short, Sir?" (239). Shanahan decides that a varicose vein in Trellis' heart would work much better than the line of fiction that Orlick has engaged on; Shanahan is the person, after all, who champions Jem Casey's poetry above all others. Orlick claims "You overlook my artistry" (240), showing a great pride in his craft. A discussion concerning the best punishment for Trellis begins, with cartoonish suggestions from all sides. Agreement is made on tossing Trellis into a cement mixer, and then crushing the resulting concrete with a steamroller, but including an eerie finale: "*They couldn't crush his heart!*" (241). This satisfies Orlick's desire for "artistry." Shanahan once again interposes a logical concern: "Steam-rollers are expensive machines ... what about a needle in the knee?" (241). It would seem that even Orlick and his cronies must account for the use of characters and props within their manuscript, just as Trellis does on the narrative plane above them. The narrator perhaps includes this scene deep within his narrative as a satire of his friends. One is reminded of the narrator's friends suggesting various reactions from Sheila Lamont as a result of Trellis' attack on her to solve the narrator's difficulties with realism.

The discussion over quickening the narrative pace being concluded, Orlick once again begins his manuscript; this, however, begins in exactly the same manner as his first attempt. The opening paragraph is a copy, and the only noticeable change is that instead of Moling appearing at the beginning, Orlick includes an alphabetized catalogue of Trellis' irreverent attitudes towards life. This narrative line is also not approved of by Orlick's listeners because Trellis is eventually forced to physically assault a young priest, and "You won't get very far by attacking the church" (247), Furriskey warns. After this second delay, Orlick admits his defeat and suggests that "we might requisition the services of the Pooka MacPhellimey" (247).

The third attempt at the revenge narrative still includes the original two paragraphs of needless decoration before introducing the Pooka. Orlick cannot write a straight-forward narrative; he feels bound by his designation as an author to introduce his narrative in a decorative way, regardless of the strong suggestions from his supporters. The Pooka is highly successful at his work, and everyone involved seems pleased. One final restart is necessary, however, as Shanahan decides that Trellis must have his bedroom ceiling fall on his head, regardless of any objections from Orlick. Orlick refuses to restart his narrative; due to the fact that the Pooka is present and capable of magical feats, Orlick simply has the Pooka remember this oversight within the narrative itself and re-enter the house from the street: "It is essential, explained the Pooka, that we return to your room the way we may perfect these diversions upon which the pair of us were engaged" (256-7). Orlick is quickly learning to write around his literary difficulties, just as the narrator deals with his own.

Orlick's narrative is even more thoroughly controlled by his advisers; it is hijacked by his listeners while he visits Furriskey's washroom. While Orlick is absent, Shanahan grows concerned that they are "taking all the good out of [Trellis' torture] by giving him a rest, we're letting him get his wind. Now that's a mistake" (260). Shanahan then interposes a paragraph of his own, and the results of his literary enterprise prove that even Orlick is highly skilled in comparison. The narrative tone is exactly that of the cowboys' speech. Shanahan notes that, while flying, "The Pooka himself stopped where he was, never mind how it was done. The other fell down about a half a mile to the ground on the top of his snot and broke his two legs in halves and

fractured his fourteen ribs, a terrible fall altogether" (261). Furriskey also takes a turn as author, with many of the same results. Lamont, on hearing the return of Orlick, "handled what promised to be an awkward situation with coolness and cunning" (263-4), quickly composing a sentence that succeeds in hiding their theft of Orlick's narrative:

And the short of it is this, he said, that the Pooka worked more magic till himself and Trellis found themselves again in the air in their own bodies just as they had been a quarter of an hour before that, none the worse for their trying ordeals. (264)

While in the washroom, Orlick realizes an impressive plot for his narrative to follow; his friends will become characters and be celebrated for their personal attributes. Orlick realizes the opportunity for compensation for his friends after their supposedly unfair treatment by Trellis. Orlick attempts to give them the benefits of luckier literary characters, such as fine minds and stature in a narrative, rather than the familiar blue-collar positions of ranch-hand or tram conductor. Shanahan, for example, is noted as being an "eminent philosopher, wit and raconteur" (268). Furriskey is given to spouting out scientific facts within Orlick's narrative, such as the specific gravity of different substances and remedies for ailments such as bleeding noses, besides an explanation (including diagrams) of how one can read his or her own gas meter. Trellis is eventually brought to trial within Orlick's narrative, and "J. Furriskey, T. Lamont, P. Shanahan, S. Andrews, S. Willard, Mr. Sweeney, J. Casey, R. Kiersay, M. Tracy, Mr. Lamphall, F. MacCool, Supt. Clohessy" (281) act as both a panel of judges and a jury. One notes that this list is not composed solely of literary characters, but even includes William Tracy, Trellis' deceased contemporary. Tracy is back from the dead to oversee plagiarism accusations against Trellis involving his own work.

This trial scene carries on for quite some time; it seems that once Orlick's audience has been rather flatteringly introduced into the narrative, Orlick is allowed to carry on in whatever manner he pleases. Orlick has had to learn how to please his audience in order to write his own narrative. One might also argue that Orlick is rid of his critics because he temporarily controls them as their despotic author; regardless of this possibility, Orlick keeps them satisfied with their involvement in the narrative in order to escape their interruptions of his work.

In this fourth narrative plane, several complex structural events occur simultaneously. Orlick essentially trades narrative levels, or positions, with Trellis; when Orlick begins his narrative, Trellis is dropped to a lower level and their intended roles are reversed. This is just the beginning of a great deal of movement between layers by several characters from Trellis' manuscript. The characters discover, with Orlick's help, a method of moving through the lower narrative levels; while they cannot move upwards as Finn and Sweeney do inside *At Swim-Two-Birds*, they can create their own lower-order fictitious worlds in which they decide their own reality. Trellis, by siring Orlick, has essentially destroyed the arrangement between authors and literary characters. Orlick's new technique is certain to spread throughout this fictional world like wildfire. Orlick acts as a catalyst for a sort of evolution of fiction writing because of his half-caste status, and the extinction of fiction writing as Trellis' world understands it is imminent; a revolution of the literary proletariat is just beginning.

## Chapter Six Conclusion

Just as O'Brien's narrator attempts to start his manuscript with three simultaneous beginnings, he offers his readers three endings. Concluding his biographical reminiscences, the narrator reports the success of his academic year and the subsequent "patching-up" of his and his uncle's differences. This is a conventional conclusion for a conventional narrative. *At Swim-Two-Birds'* remaining narrative levels, the reader expects, will be resolved in a far more interesting manner. However, after all of the complex narrative structures and strange rules of reality within the narrator's manuscript, he concludes in a highly suspect manner; the solution to Trellis' torture is troublingly simplistic. The narrator's "*Conclusion of the Book, penultimate*" (312) involves a jump back to Trellis' original narrative plane:

Teresa, a servant employed at the Red Swan Hotel, knocked at the master's door with the intention of taking away the tray but eliciting no response, she opened the door and found to her surprise that the room was empty. Assuming that the master had gone to a certain place, she placed the tray on the landing and returned to the room for the purpose of putting it to rights. She revived the fire and made a good blaze by putting into it several sheets of writing which were littered here and there about the floor (not improbably a result of the open window). By a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened that these same pages were those of the master's novel, the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends.... just at that moment, Teresa heard a knock at the hall-door away below. Going down she did her master the unexpected pleasure of admitting him to the house. (312-3)

Once again, the system of rules that has been built up within the manuscript is destroyed. Orlick's power to attack his own creator is dismissed, and the consequences of Trellis treating his characters poorly are lost. Trellis is granted a reprieve, something that surely would not be offered by his vengeful characters.

Sorrentino, in "Fictional Infinities," suggests that O'Brien was "unnerved" by his narrator's characters' power and "may have glimpsed ... the possibility of his own irreality, or to put it in a way that he himself would perhaps appreciate, he almost succeeded in erasing the line, thin at best, between what we call fiction and what we call reality" (147). It must be noted, however, that the manuscript's quick end and its consequences are the work of O'Brien's narrator, not O'Brien. The hurried finish reminds the reader of the cowboys' torture of Trellis while Orlick was indisposed, discussed above in chapter five; at the first sign of Orlick's return, Trellis is replaced in the earlier scene with a single sentence. In several instances, I have shown that the narrator is not a highly skilled writer, and his manuscript's conclusion again proves the fact. This study is less concerned with the meaning of passages than their structural effects on the novel, a point to be stressed when discussing the final and ultimate conclusion below. The narrator's penultimate conclusion is reflexive in its connection with the cowboys' finish to their brief authorial attempts. They share a stylistic problem with the narrator.

O'Brien does not make it easy for the reader to come to any definite conclusions about his novel; the "*Conclusion of the book, ultimate*" (314) is very nearly unrelated to the earlier narrative levels. This conclusion backs away from the novel's subject matter, forcing the reader to consider the whole of Ireland and the world in general. As there is debate about the reasons behind the penultimate conclusion, the author of this piece can also be discussed, with

speculation running amongst critics that the voice is anyone from that of the narrator looking back from a future date on his youthful writings to O'Brien himself. There is little evidence, however, to argue these points. The narrator has been shown capable of creating several author characters, each with a unique voice. While the ultimate conclusion is written in a tone unmatched in the rest of the novel, it reads much like Orlick's revenge plot's meandering introduction. The narrator's theory of three beginnings and endings further supports the argument that this is the narrator's writing, and negates the idea of a shift in time; it is unlikely that this confident narrator would choose to leave his manuscript unfinished for several years, just to add an already planned third conclusion. Just as the disappointing end to Orlick's writing is, this conclusion is the narrator's work, not O'Brien's.

The narrator has concluded his biographical section and his manuscript, and therefore has only to conclude *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the combination of all of his narrative lines arranged in a reflexive structure. This new voice intrudes on and disrupts the narrative; s/he cryptically tells of the general lessons to be learned in the previous pages, giving a short testament to the strange theories that some people have. Unusual theories abound within this novel, but few readers would consider them central to its understanding and expect them to be the subject matter of the *ultimate* conclusion. These theories turn out to be simply a starting point for a tale about a

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 cup, cut his jugular with a razor three times and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye. (316)

*At Swim-Two-Birds* ends with a disturbing scene only very tenuously connected to the novel through the superstitions of a few characters.

The reader has, by this point, struggled with the complex structure for hundreds of pages to grasp the one solid connection throughout -- the reflexive structure -- only to have O'Brien apparently snip this thread quickly and easily. This final move is as effective as it is simple; the reader is no closer to pulling the entire novel together than when s/he first opened the book. The suicide anecdote only fits into the book's pagination due to its irreconcilability, belonging because it has no place in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

*At Swim-Two-Birds'* ultimate conclusion appears random, but its purpose is not; the subject matter could have been anything except a narrative related to the content of the novel. One is reminded of *At Swim-Two-Birds'* epigraph; the phrase's interpretation is not as important as the more general effect its inclusion has on the novel as a whole. Both the epigraph and the suicide anecdote reinforce O'Brien's unorthodox construction. O'Brien's visage is seen throughout the narrative levels, but this last narrative voice is not consistent with any other in the novel. Its purpose, however, is quite powerful. We know nothing of this final narrator, but his/her intention of reducing the novel's last standing element to rubble must connect him/her ideologically with Flann O'Brien. This tenuous connection to O'Brien is important, because if this new narrative voice is even slightly reflexive, the novel's reflexive structure is reinforced. Reflexivity is the sole narrative structure remaining after *At Swim-Two-Birds'* ultimate conclusion.

Moving back outside *At Swim-Two-Birds'* text is useful at this point. After following this novel's structure from its superficial layer to its deepest and acknowledging the ties between them, one can now look at the bulk of scholarship focused on *At Swim-Two-Birds* in a new light. The insistence by many to use Joyce as measuring stick for O'Brien's work, at least at this point

of O'Brien's career, is shown to be misguided. O'Brien is an author more under Gide's influence than Joyce's.<sup>2</sup> This connection is tenuous, however, as O'Brien uses Gide's *mise en abyme* to such an extent that it is nearly unrecognizable. O'Brien has made this technique his own by demonstrating such control over it while using it with abandon. Layering Gide's technique on top of itself so many times results in a work more complex and intertwined than Gide seems to have imagined. Gide discusses the *mise en abyme*'s effect on a text, but O'Brien's text is the result of this technique, rather than an otherwise coherent text that includes it in specific instances. As discussed above, Dallenbach explains the technique's "essential property" as bringing out the meaning and form of the surrounding work. Because it is *At Swim-Two-Birds*' form, it must also be the novel's meaning. One can consider *At Swim-Two-Birds* a grand *mise en abyme* in the body of literature. What Gide's technique does for a single work, O'Brien's novel does for contemporary fiction. *At Swim-Two-Birds* draws its readers' attention to the conventions of fiction not only within its text but in all novels.

Leading from the insistence by critics on comparing O'Brien and Joyce is also the tendency, mentioned above, of some critics to search through O'Brien's career for some underlying theme. This theme inevitably has something to do with Joyce. I suggest that thematic study is useful, provided one is not looking at O'Brien in comparison to Joyce. One could examine the relationship between fictional authors and their work completely outside *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Again, this is a line of study that Cohen and others touch upon in search of biographical sources for the novel's contents. Examining the connections between Brian O'Nolan and his several literary personae could prove very interesting and further illuminate his ideas of fiction writing. To my knowledge, there is no thorough study of this subject. The seeds of this fascination with the real are found in Brian O'Nolan's university career, in which he wrote under several pseudonyms, as discussed above and by many scholars. This information is often used to begin a discussion of the narrator in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but one could perhaps backtrack through O'Nolan's career to find the beginnings of a literary philosophy. As Cohen and several other critics have shown, O'Brien's life in the real world enters *At Swim-Two-Birds* in several instances. This in itself is not impressive; however, when one remembers that Flann O'Brien is just one of Brian O'Nolan's many pseudonyms, this fact draws more attention. Looking more closely, Brian O'Nolan can be considered a pseudonym in itself, as this is the anglicized version of his Irish name. This is an author who consistently sparks discussion just about the spelling of his name and the spelling of his pseudonyms. There is ample opportunity to study O'Nolan's feelings on Irish nationalism and the place of the Irish language in contemporary Dublin, which may answer the questions regarding his several names.

Many questions arise as to the personalities behind these pen-names. These are not simply names used to avoid recognition of a private Dublin citizen or to separate Brian O'Nolan, respectable civil servant, from the world of letters. O'Nolan presented *At Swim-Two-Birds*' drafts to many people, including superiors at work. Any notion that Brian O'Nolan would hide behind a fictional name is therefore countered. What is Flann O'Brien's purpose? What are O'Nolan's motivations for complicating not only *At Swim-Two-Birds*' structure, but even his own relationship to the book? Perhaps, in keeping with the layered structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which the quality of the work decreases with every newly created author character, Brian O'Nolan leaves himself room for improvement. If the factual man behind the novel would write something, it would presumably have to be better fiction than any of his pseudonyms' work.

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<sup>2</sup> No evidence could be found, however, to confirm that O'Brien had read Gide and actively incorporated his ideas.

Perhaps more interesting, how are O’Nolan and O’Brien different from Myles na gCopaleen, Brian O’Nolan’s journalist persona. Just as O’Brien uses the distance between himself and *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ narrator to stave off any criticism of his prose, O’Nolan also has this distance between his life in Dublin and the persona of the novelist, or satirical journalist. The persistence of Brian O’Nolan in creating separate personae for his different styles of writing leads one to consider the reasons behind this. One might guess that O’Nolan was advancing a theory of the author’s position behind a literary work, but this has never been discussed. O’Nolan has rarely been treated as a serious author capable or interested in the artistry or philosophy of literature, unlike his fellow Irish authors Joyce and Beckett.

Sorrentino assumes in "Fictional Infinities" that O’Brien would be "unnerved [by confronting] the possibility of his own irreality" (147) at the barrier between the fictitious and the real. I reject the idea that O’Brien accidentally reached this "line, thin at best, between what we call fiction and what we call reality" (Sorrentino 147), and propose that O’Brien actively sought it out. If one reads the later work of O’Brien, this border between reality and fiction becomes increasingly blurred, and hardly by accident. His second novel, *The Third Policeman*, plays with its reader’s perception of the world. Its unwitting protagonist is actually dead, as are the supporting cast. Several rather drawn-out scenes show O’Brien’s interest in the concept of infinity: the point where science, steeped in fact and empirical evidence transforms into theory and possibly fiction. There are several scientific theories on display in O’Brien’s later works, rather than the literary theories present in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Although only published posthumously, but regurgitated in different plots during O’Brien’s career, *The Third Policeman* shows O’Brien’s increasing interest in reality’s and science’s relationship to fiction. Had it been accepted as first offered, O’Brien may have continued along this line of scientific parody to formulate a coherent theory. The disappointment of rejection after having his first novel published is easily imagined, perhaps changing the course of O’Brien’s career.

Flann O’Brien is an author worthy of recognition not because of the connections one can make between his writing and other authors’ works, but because of his fiction’s quality. Perhaps due to unfortunate timing or birthplace, O’Brien’s early work was subjected to extensive comparison to Joyce’s, and usually deemed not worthy of anything else. Later scholars have found it more useful to approach his work from the same perspective as their predecessors. While several critics have looked for trends in O’Brien’s body of work, none have suggested any coherent theory of fiction. These critics have searched for evidence to support their claims that O’Brien is simply a Joycean imitator. These are the critics who refuse to view O’Brien as anything outside the established view of his work, and only do him a disservice. My work has discussed only O’Brien’s structure in order to complete a discussion that many critics have glossed over. There are many gaps in O’Brien scholarship; I have attempted to fill one, and offer suggestions for further study of what I believe may be a far more artistic theory of literature than scholars usually give O’Brien credit for.

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