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

ZBIGNIEW WOJTYŁ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

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

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

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

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

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

² Naill Sheridan in a letter to O'Keefe, 4th March 1960, O’Nolan Collection.
³ Ibid.
the nouvelle-roman writers and the harbinger of postmodernism in America. The new novel, with the strategic employment of irony, pronounced its task to 'unmask' the inadequacy of the onedimensional man of the genre as to the endeavor of describing and reporting multidimensional reality. The "comic", the "funny", the ironic became a mode of controlling the alleged expressive 'failures' of fiction; the manner of justifying authorial experiments with narrative inventions. By focusing reader's attention on the manipulations with the formal devices of the novel, the writers attempted at exposing a 'fabricated' quality of literary production. The new novels strategies were waged, in the first place, against imitative techniques. Instead of presenting what was labeled an 'authoritative' vision of reality, the writer's manifested task became to provide the reader with an ostentatious personified 'construct', an artifact, woven of the material of imagination, limited only by the explorable possibilities of language, and voidly pronouncing its independence from the 'external world'.

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

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

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

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

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

The stylistic irony corresponds with the content of this declaration. The dismissal of the 'outer world', or, in other words, the rejection of the 'well' tested manners of picturing and reporting reality in favor of the incursions "into the privacy of mind", is consequently reinforced by the substance of apparently ironic and, as the novel unfolds, significantly less and less frequent, "biographical reminiscences" of the narrator. Although their credibility, in the light of the traditional conventions, is purposefully undermined by metatextual comments, they provide an apt background for O'Brien's solipsism. The narrator leads "a life of a dull but not uncomfortable character" (O'Brien 1971: 119). Although a student, he hardly leaves his uncle's house to attend university lectures:

At all events I recall that I hardly left my room for the first three months of the winter...

The weather in the following March was cold... I kept to the house as much as possible...

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

A contemplative life has always been suitable for my disposition. I was accustomed to stretch myself for many hours upon my bed, thinking and smoking there, I rarely undressed...

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

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

(O'Brien 1971: 20)
In psychological aspect, the incursions into the material of dreams and imaginative visions happen on the verge of inevitable conflict with the certainty of recognition based on sensual data regulated by activity of ordering intellect. In other words, dreams by their nature distort the rationally-ordered image of reality. The surrealists assumed that a mutual interplay of dream and awakening which takes place within the self leads to their fusion in one “hyper-reality”. In cognitive terms, the “hyper-reality” can be defined as a mode of a more conscious self, reluctant to give priority either to the certainty of the intellectual ordering of reality or to the fabulation of dreams.

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

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

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

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

(O'Brien 1971: 217-8)

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

**II**

The novel is constructed on two polarized planes: student — narrator's "biographical reminiscences" and Trellis's hallucinatory visions. The former is an ostensible report of events of life, aspiring as if it were to conform to the principle of imitation. The latter seeks its referential points not in reality but in literature by parodying myths and legends from the antique Irish lore as well as motifs borrowed from modern popular genres. The two planes illustrate two modes of creation: mimesis and poesia, or "writing" and "making". In O'Brien's metaphors mimesis corresponds to "awakening", the narcissistic attitude towards life as expressed in the creative process. Its "direct certainty" underlies Trellis's intended but never even started novel, just as it underlies the endeavours of the nineteenth-century realists with their "serious fiction, an intent verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social context" (Alter 1976: ix). On the other hand, student — narrator's bedroom is an enclave in the world of "activity", and the state of "repose" a metaphor of unbound inventiveness.

Characteristically, at the central point of *At Swim...*, the student-narrator's solipsistic stance is favourably contrasted with that of Cryans, probably another author-student. In an ironic presentation, Cryan appears to be a young, "active" man, whose attitude towards the creative process corresponds to Trellis's commentary on his own novel. In a "scholarly disputation" Cryan's literary efforts are instanced in a contemptuous manner. Byrne, "a man of diverse intellectual attainments", derivatively refers to them as to the "complete proseworks"; scorns their author as a man "addicted to mental ludo"; and explains further:

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

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

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

One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the presence of the author, of for that matter one hundred times as many endings

(O'Brien 1971: 9).

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

... lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be
outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the two
tunes of illusory characters. ... The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer
could be despotic. ... A satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the
reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel
characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed
a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for
self-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 the discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only
when they fail to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely
a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before —
usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint
the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate
tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts,
thimblecrafters and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contem-
porary literature.

(O’Brien 1971: 25)

These declarations refer to a deeper, linguistic level: to the processes which es-

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

III

The student-narrator’s task has a twofold aspect. In the first place, he

attempts to expose a dominating role of language in literary creation. His
manipulations with generic formities as well as the intertextual game are based
on the assumption that language is an inexhaustible source of literary inspira-
tion. The plot, for example, is reduced to minimum, or, to put it otherwise,
it is substituted by “talks”, “conversations”, “comments”, “reflections”,
“interrogations”, “inquiries”, “explanations”, “interjections”, “ejaculations”,
“arguments”, “discourses”, “lays”, “reitals”, “sayings”, “proverbs” as well as
“letters”, “extracts”, and “dictionary entries”.

Similarly, Trellis’s protagonists, borrowed from various literary sources,
are sketched by means of clichés parading a stylistic manner of respective
texts. Even while Trellis is asleep they continue to use a limited set of state-
ments belonging to a given literary tradition. Interestingly, most of them are
unaware of the flaunting artificiality of the stylistic modes in which they are
described. Their status of literary figures is confirmed, nevertheless, in the cul-
minating moment of Trellis’s nightmare when Teresa shuffles the manuscript
of his ‘dream’ novel into fire. For the most part of the book they regard Trellis
as their employer and the owner of the inn, as if abusively alluding to Field-
ing’s Tom Jones. In anticipation of a charge of endowing his characters with
no identity whatsoever, the student-narrator presents willingly “memorandum
of respective diacritical tastes of Messrs. Fusselkey, Lamont and Shanahan”.
However, the “memorandum”, which proves to be a sheer jugglersy with speci-
sified terms, fails to perform this task.

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

Only Finn Mac Cool, “the legendary hero of Old Ireland” (O’Brien 1971: 9),
recognizes fully his status of a purely linguistic contrivance. Even now, how-
ever, he still cannot resist the stylistic convention which fashioned him:

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

Significantly, at the end of his complaint Finn Mac Cool indulges in a bubble-
talk of the parodied poetry of the old Irish lore. Eva Wüppling in her study of
a use of the legendary figures in At Swim... points out to the changing treat-
ment of the figure of Finn Mac Cool in the Irish tradition. (cf. Wüppling 1984:
34ff.) It is not surprising, then, that O’Brien chose to ascribe the discovery of
self-artificiality to this particular character. However, after the recital of
lays on “the madness of King Sweeney” and ... a madman’s flight through
the length of Erin” (O’Brien 1971: 83), Finn Mac Cool disappears from the novel
as if he were annihilated by the student-narrator (the characters’ self-consci-
usness might, in fact, impede the progress of the book, and returns only in one of the last scenes to participate in Trellis’s trial. Nevertheless, in the light of the strategic mode of the novel, Finn and his “sweet worded sweet-toothed” companions (O’Brien 1971: 16) seem to be the figures ideally suiting O’Brien’s manipulations for their love of “sweet poetry” and “melodious Irish”. At the beginning of *At Swim...* Finn Mac Cool delivers a lengthy catalogue of “music he has found the sweetest”, “descriptive of himself and his people” (O’Brien 1971: 13). The catalogue defines metaphorically their status as figures belonging merely to the realm of “voices” and “sounds”:

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

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

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

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

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

When Finn ends his tale it becomes obvious that the first task, that of “accomplish [ing] twelve books of poetry”, is in fact the only one; and that the remaining duties are merely quasi-poetical epitomes of particular books. The candidate’s work is thus reduced to the “constant recital of sweet poetry and melodious Irish”. Word becomes the only reality; the flux of words — in no matter how absurd contexts — the only driving force of the text.

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

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

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

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

The malediction was the beginning of King Sweeney’s end. “On the morning of a certain day” Ronan, who acted as a “weaver of oconeord” and a hostage in a conflict between two Celtic pretenders to the throne (cf. Wäppling 1984: 53), sprinkled Sweeney’s head with holy water. This enraged Sweeney who

redden his spear in the white side of the psalmist and broke Ronan’s bell whereupon the cleric uttered this melodious lay:

My course on Sweeney!
His guilt against me is immense,
he pierced with his long swift javelin
my holy bell.
The holy bell that thou hast outraged
will punish thee to the branches
it will put thee on a par with fowls —
the saint bell of saints with sainty-saints.

Just as it went prestissimo
the spear-shaft skyward,
you too, Sweeney, go madly mad-gone skyward.

Brenann of Conn tried to hold him
by a hold of his snork
and though I bless her therefore,
my curse on Sweeney. (O’Brien 1971:66)

As a consequence, “when the hosts dashed and bellowed like stag-herds and gave three audible world-wide shouts till Sweeney heard them and their hollow reverberation in the sky vault, he was besiegured by an anger and fury and fits and frenzy and fright-fraught fear, and he was filled with a restless tottering unquiet and with a disgust for the places that he knew and with a desire to be where he never was, so that he was palsied of hand and foot and eye-mad and heart-quick and went from the curse of Ronan bird-quick in crazo and madness from the battle” (O’Brien 1971: 84—86 passim).

The plot of the legend, as O’Brien renders it, is triggered by subsequent symbolic/magical signs/texts (“the bell-ringing”, “the psalter”, “the shout”, “the malediction”, “sprinkling of holy water”, etc.). In other words, in this story suitting perfectly Todorov’s model of mythological tale (1971: 62—87), each trope is given a rank of narrative clause. Consequently, the succeeding symbols form inevitably a “lighter-order” narrative sequence with intrinsic involutions and retardations. In this self-imposing structure, the routine processes of symbolization and also, partially, of signification are necessarily distorted. The speedy tempo of narration makes the particular tropes function only as narrated events: one ‘magical’ sign immediately generates another within the logical ordering of the story. By the same token, an act of symbol-encoding becomes nearly eliminated. Viewed by Todorov as a transfer from signified to signified (1984: 21—32), it is superseded by a regular signification: a move-

ment where signifying “bell-ringing” or “sprinkling of holy water” refer exclusively to signified activities, the motives of Sweeney’s range, and lose their secondary implications. The process of signification, however, is also partially violated by profusion of absurd alliterated clusters (eg. “go madly mad-gone”) or by ironic insertion of Italian “prestissimo”. In the first place, these tricks send to narrator’s “grandiloquence” and only then to the substance of the legend. Hence, the syntagmatic relations between the units (both narrative and lexical) gain priority over the semantic aspect of the legend as rendered in Finn Mac Cool’s version. In the process of reception, the reader is puzzled to observe a flaunting indeterminacy of meanings. The story comes to evolve out of itself: traditionally symbolic and meaningful, it is reduced now to a chain of signifiers, related to one another by the dictates of rhetoric.

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

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

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

Henry Ronan in his cell was acquainted by angels of the intention of Sweeney and prayed God that he should never be loosed from his frenzy until his soul had been first loosed from his body (O’Brien 1971: 88).

Finally, Sweeney reached “the place where the head-saint Moling was”. The missionary was awaiting him for it [was] destined that [Sweeney] should end [his] life here and leave the story of [his] history here and be buried in the church
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- yard beyant" (O'Brien 1971: 89). After the writing of the story had been accomplished Sweeney was "accused of an act of adultery" by one of the serving-women. As a result of this "dishonourable lie", her brother wounded him mortally with a spear.

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

The voice was the first... The human voice. The voice was Number One. Anything that came after was only an imitation of the voice (O'Brien 1971: 160).

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

IV

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

I surveyed my uncle in a sullen manner. He speared a portion of cooked rashers against

a crust on the prongs of his fork and poised the whole at the opening of his mouth in a token of continued interrogation (O'Brien 1971: 10).

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

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

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

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

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

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

or provided with an 'indispensable' dictionary entry:

The craft of billiards was unfamiliar to me but in politeness I watched the quiet darting of the balls, endeavouring to deduce from the results of a stroke an intention which preceded it.

Gob, there's a kiss, said Brinsley.

Extract from Concise Oxford Dictionary: Kiss, n.

Curves given with lips; (Billiards) impact between moving balls; kind of sugar plum (O'Brien 1971: 51).

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

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

Name of figure of speech: Litotes or Meiosis (O'Brien 1971: 20).

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

All the characters represented in this book including the first person singular are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead
can be read as another commentary on the philosophy of the novel. Like in Trellis's section, an underlying principle of the characters' mode of "existence" is to be found in a language they are endowed with. The Good Fairy did not even have a body — he was only a voice; this, however, did not hinder him from playing an effective role in *At Swim...* By the same token, student-narrator's uncle is "fabricated" exclusively of linguistic clichés, stereotypes and typical Irish expressions. He 'materializes' only in dialogues and conversations; throughout the whole novel he uses a limited set of statements duplicated in one manner before his interlocutors. The absence of reflection toward his words and passionately pronounced activity and vividness underlies his conflict with the nephew. The worn-out Irish idiom corresponds with his simplistic way of thinking: the uncle often gives rein to his suspicions about the student-narrator's eccentric way of life;

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

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

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

Nature of interrogation: Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whereby we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air?

The mode of presentation of this experience is a neat illustration of the student-narrator's way of telling. He does not comment on a 'real' outcome of the event; instead, he provides a lengthy extract against the abuse of alcohol.
"I was talking to a friend of yours last night... I mean Trellis", the student-narrator informs his friend Brinsley, bringing to a common level the characters from different places and likewise reducing his own existence to the realm of fiction. At another point, when he explains the structure of his novel to Byrne and other acquaintances, he becomes, like the Good Fairy in Trellis's dreams, only a "voice":

Byrne made a noise in the darkness of a kind associated with the forcible opening of the lid of a tin container. He then moved about the room, a cigarette for each voice in his enterprising hand. Kerrigan declined and remained unseen, the rest of us revealed at intervals, red pale faces with puckered cheeks at the roar of the glow: points

Perhaps this transformation might also be a solution to the dilemmas of the novel which has discovered indeterminacy of its material and conventions: *At Swim* might, too, define itself in terms of a voice. The voice can be misunderstood, but which continues to speak; despite an anxiety that it speaks "the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself" (de Man 1988: 479) — the language of literature.

REFERENCES


