

*Postmodern and/or Postcolonial?:
The Politics of At Swim-Two-Birds*

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Published in 1939, only two years after the Irish Free State had declared its complete sovereignty and independence from Great Britain, Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* can claim to be one of the first important texts to have been produced in a truly postcolonial Ireland. On the other hand, Declan Kiberd argues, in his far-ranging study of modern Irish literature, that postcolonial writing begins not when independence is achieved, but "when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance" to colonial rule (6). Kiberd's study thus considers virtually all modern Irish literature as postcolonial to some extent, and his emphasis is part of a growing trend in Irish studies, whereby readings of such Irish writers as William Butler Yeats and James Joyce have gained new energy from an appreciation of their postcoloniality. Kiberd, however, hardly mentions *At Swim*, merely referring to it a couple of times in passing as a "masterpiece of Irish modernism."

Kiberd's lack of interest in *At Swim* is not surprising. The text has quite often been regarded as an important example of modernist or (perhaps even more often) postmodernist textual play, but few critics have taken it seriously as a political novel of the kind we have come to expect from postcolonial writers. After all, if there is a political message in the novel, it would seem to reside most obviously in the text's apparent repudiation of certain literary tendencies of the anticolonial tradition of Irish nationalism, a repudiation that does not necessarily disqualify the book as a postcolonial novel, but that certainly makes its postcoloniality problematic. In this essay, I want to conduct a serious examination of *At Swim* as a postcolonial text and to interrogate its potential political ramifications as a contribution to the construction of a genuinely postcolonial Irish cultural identity that escapes the domination of the colonial past. I conclude that the text does address a number of important political issues, but that the complex structure and ironic tone of the book make it impossible finally to determine the text's own position with regard to these issues. Moreover, I conclude that the structure and tone of the book are consonant with the logic of late capitalism, thus reinforcing the notion that *At Swim* is a postmodernist novel, but making it less effective as a postcolonial novel.

There have, it seems to me, been three basic kinds of attempts to argue the political engagement of *At Swim*. One type, exemplified by a 1995 article by Joshua D. Esty, argues that the postmodern experimentalism of *At Swim* stands as a postcolonial challenge to the ideology embodied in the English realist tradition because it openly mocks the conventions of that tradition. A second type, represented in a 1993 article by Kim McMullen and in my own 1995 book on O'Brien, draws upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to argue the potential political power of the densely dialogic mixture of

discourses that O'Brien uses in the construction of *At Swim*. The third approach is represented by Joseph Devlin's 1992 article, which takes seriously the actual *content* of *At Swim* in search of a potential political message, focusing in particular on the centrality of the theme of revolution to the text. I want to examine each of these approaches in turn.

Esty's article follows very much in the tradition of critics such as Linda Hutcheon, who see the postmodernist mockery of literary tradition as a potential subversion of traditional authority as a whole. To the extent that postmodernity has centrally involved the emergence of previously excluded minorities onto the historical, cultural, and theoretical stage, this view is surely correct as far as it goes. How far that is is another matter. Hutcheon's argument relies on a vision of postmodernism as inherently subversive that can trace its intellectual heritage back to Jean-François Lyotard's famous characterization of postmodernism's central impulse as the repudiation of "totalizing metanarratives. I do not have the space here to address the broad and very fundamental question of the inherent nature of postmodernism, other than to voice my suspicions that this rejection of metanarratives is largely a legacy of the cold war dismissal of socialism. Perry Anderson, for example, notes that what Lyotard really seems to have in mind when he mentions metanarratives is only one metanarrative, that being Marxism, a specter haunting Lyotard from his own intellectual and political past, but also the most effective critique ever mounted of the much more totalizing metanarrative of capitalism, with which Lyotard seems to have little problem (29). Thus Anderson locates postmodernism safely within the liberal humanist tradition of capitalism (and imperialism), which makes it highly suspect as a subversive enterprise in the twentieth-century era of capitalist triumph.

In any case, that *At Swim* is a postmodernist text is quite generally accepted these days; thus Robert Alter long ago called *At Swim* "one of the earliest postmodern novels" (223), while Brian McHale, in his broad-ranging survey of postmodernist fiction, cites O'Brien's novel several times as exemplary of the phenomenon. After all, *At Swim* exemplifies McHale's notion that the transgression of ontological boundaries is central to postmodernism. Esty, however, adds a postcolonial dimension by arguing that *At Swim* is one of the founding texts of "postcolonial postmodernism" and sees the experimental nature of the text as a potential postcolonial challenge to "the conventions of the English novel, particularly the realist aesthetic of Leavis's Great Tradition" (24, 32). This strikes me as a weak argument, if not an inherently contradictory one. For one thing, by the time of the publication of *At Swim* in 1939, the conventions of realism had already been challenged by a generation of modernists, including English ones. For another thing, Esty is surely giving English realism (and perhaps Leavis) too much credit when he locates the English novel at the center of the realist tradition. Realism was hardly an exclusively, or even mainly, English province; in fact, when viewed through other than Anglocentric eyes, the English Great Tradition appears quite paltry when compared, say, to the novels produced by nineteenth-century French realists such as Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert. Moreover, as McMullen notes, *At Swim* can actually be read as a challenge to the emerging *Irish* realist tradition, in which writers such as Seán O'Faoláin, Frank O'Connor, and Liam O'Flaherty became prominent in the 1930s and 1940s (67).

Of course, the very notion of a "postcolonial postmodernism" is highly problematic and possibly oxymoronic. Thus Ziauddin Sardar has recently argued, convincingly I think, the close complicity between postmodernism and the continuing neocolonial domination of the rest of the globe by the capitalist West. Along these same lines, I myself have argued that the work of Salman Rushdie, which comes under particular criticism by Sardar, is so postmodernist that it is not really postcolonial at all ("*Midnight's Children*"). Fredric Jameson, meanwhile, has in several places identified postcolonial literature as among the "marginal" cultural forces that still stand in opposition to the global hegemony of postmodernism. Drawing upon Jameson's important theorization of postmodernism as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism, Anderson notes that postcolonial literature frequently functions as an alternative to this cultural logic. By this view, postmodernism is associated with the metropolitan center, and particularly the United States, while postcolonial writers oppose the neocolonial domination of global capital by either drawing upon their own alternative indigenous aesthetic models or returning to realism, which is "proscribed by postmodern conventions" (118). One could thus argue that *At Swim* fails as a postcolonial text because it adopts the cultural logic of postmodernism (and thus of late capitalism), though this reading is surely complicated by the fact that the book was published in 1939, well before postmodernism, as the cultural logic of late consumer capitalism, had become a cultural dominant in the U.S. Still, it is certainly the case that O'Brien's novel, with its free intermixture of materials from disparate sources, enacts a collapse of boundaries that is typical of the commodity structure of modern capitalism, since, in the kingdom of exchange value, all commodities are interchangeable, regardless of their use value.

The ironic structure of *At Swim* also resembles the logic of capitalism, which, Marx recognized long ago, can only be approached via dialectical analysis because it is so inherently complex and contradictory. Pick anything that is a potentially true statement about capitalism, and the opposite is probably potentially true as well, at least to some extent. The most exhilarating and dynamic system ever produced by human civilization, capitalism leads to mind-numbing rationalization and bone-wearying routine. Built on an individualist ethic unmatched in human history, capitalism leads to a commodification of human beings that destroys true individualism. Fiercely secular, scientific, and forward-looking, capitalism consistently appeals to religion, superstition, and nostalgia as crucial ideological props for its economic activities.

At Swim is similarly contradictory. For example, while it may be a postmodernist novel that flouts the conventions of realism, it also makes postmodernist novels look ridiculous, and thus can conceivably be taken as a call for a return to realism, which, in fact, O'Brien himself gradually did in his later work. One can never really decide between such alternative positions in *At Swim*, partly because of the rhetorical structure of the book, which is narrated by a student who is himself writing a book about the writing of a book by fictional author Dermot Trellis, who is in turn assaulted by his own characters in a book written by his son, Orlick Trellis. This proliferation of author figures leaves the reader no appeal to any reliable authoritative positions, especially as none of the various authors who appear in the text seem to be presented to us as exemplary figures of authorship.

In any case, it seems clear to me that a novel (or any other cultural artifact) does not automatically have subversive political power simply because it defeats conventional expectations to the point that no one can figure out what it means. There is, surely, some potential power in avant garde artistic techniques. For example, while the radical reflexivity of *At Swim* threatens to divorce the book from material reality, one could also argue that this very reflexivity calls attention to the status of the book as an object made by human hands, thus resisting its own reification and even potentially restoring our ability to detect the traces of human labor in all manufactured products. Note, for example, Jameson's argument that Joyce's *Ulysses* resists reification through its various modernist techniques ("*Ulysses* in History"). One could, in fact, even see this process as the true source of the enjoyment and even exhilaration many readers feel when confronted with such reflexive texts, along the lines of Marx's suggestion, in *Capital*, that the detection of traces of human labor is the true source of the thrill of the commodity fetish.

In a similar manner, one might see the juxtaposition of seemingly incommensurate materials (such as Irish myth and American Westerns) in *At Swim* as a continuation of the collage techniques used by earlier avant-garde artists, such as the surrealists, which were presumably designed to achieve subversive shock effects through radical defamiliarization. However, as Franco Moretti points out, it is not at all clear that these effects are really that subversive, especially by now, when they have become standard devices of modern advertising (340). Indeed, it may be that the principal effect of such juxtapositions is to strip objects of their use value and thus to reinforce the inexorable commodifying logic of capitalism.

One might, of course, argue that *At Swim* was more subversive in 1939 than it is now, because advertising had yet to colonize the realm of avant-garde artistic technique. However, the collage effects of *At Swim* are more amusing than shocking to begin with. Moreover, to be politically effective, surprising artistic techniques need to be used to carry specific (even if complex) political messages. Form must be supplemented by content, a lesson that is, I think, well conveyed in Dana Polan's nice demonstration that the plays of Bertolt Brecht employ much the same aesthetic strategies as Daffy Duck cartoons, but have a far different significance because of their overtly political content. Polan, in particular, concludes that contemporary postmodern culture has no trouble accommodating "formally subversive art," because "as long as such art does not connect its formal subversion to an analysis of social situations, it becomes little more than a further example of the disturbances that go on as we live through a day. And a work of art that defeats formal expectations does not lead to protest against a culture that itself deals continually in defeating expectations" (351).

This is not to say that *At Swim* does not involve an analysis of social situations, but only that we should look for that analysis. For example, if its antirealism and refusal of definitive interpretation do not automatically make *At Swim* subversive, then perhaps there is political power in the Bakhtinian dialogism of the text. Among other things, Esty rightly acknowledges the relevance to O'Brien's book of Bakhtin's vision that the novel as a genre generates much of its power by enacting dialogic confrontations among different

styles, genres, and modes that represent different sociopolitical points of view in the world at large. Thus critics such as McMullen and a younger, more politically naïve version of myself (in my book-length study of O'Brien) have also invoked Bakhtin to explain the significance of O'Brien's many-tongued novel. McMullen anticipates Esty by calling *At Swim* a "pioneering postmodern postcolonial text" (62). Her reading then focuses, in good postmodern fashion, on the way in which O'Brien's dialogic mixture of different voices leads to an indeterminacy in the meaning interpretation of the novel; the reading is thus only weakly political, and then only in the sense that it identifies O'Brien's dialogism as a critique of the monologism of the Irish nationalist literary tradition. My own earlier Bakhtinian reading of *At Swim* focuses on the way in which the dialogism of the novel leads to an unstable mode of "sliding signification" that presumably (it sounded to me like a good argument at the time) poses a threat to established political authority by its refusal to succumb to authoritative readings.

One might certainly argue that *At Swim* refuses to endorse any single position as authoritative, but instead insists on the availability of multiple positions. Bakhtin's own strongest example of this phenomenon is the challenge posed by the carnivalesque writing of Rabelais to the stern monologism of the medieval Catholic Church. On this reading, *At Swim* might oppose Catholic authority as well, a possibility of high relevance to O'Brien's situation in Ireland, where, in 1939, the Catholic Church probably still had more power than international capital, though that situation is rapidly changing as we enter the twenty-first century.

There is certainly some potential in this reading, but we should also be careful to assume that plurality and multiplicity are inherently liberating in a political sense. For example, while pluralism and dialogism may pose inherent challenges to the monologism of the Catholic Church, they do not necessarily produce preferable alternatives. And they are almost entirely ineffective as critiques of capitalism, which takes its life's blood from multiplicity. As Eagleton reminds us, "capitalism is the most pluralistic order history has ever known, restlessly transgressing boundaries and dismantling oppositions, pitching together diverse life-forms and continually overflowing the measure" (133).

That Eagleton's characterization of capitalism could apply equally well to *At Swim* should give us pause. In addition, the collapse of all political positions into an irreducible multiplicity potentially leaves postcolonial Ireland no stable and unified base from which to attempt the development of a viable cultural identity that can challenge the legacy of the colonial past. Thus Tony Crowley, discussing the relevance of Bakhtin's work to the Irish situation, concludes that Joycean dialogic multiplicity, once powerful (in the colonial era) as a form of opposition to the monological power of the British Empire, loses its potency in the postcolonial era, in which the project of cultural construction requires "a language which has a certain level of stability and confident unity" (88).

Moreover, the dialogism of *At Swim* is especially problematic because O'Brien does not really incorporate various voices into his text in order to suggest the viability of various points of view. On the contrary, O'Brien seems to introduce one point of view after another, only to undercut them all and to identify them all as ridiculous. In this sense, *At*

Swim, despite its rowdy comedy, has less in common with *Ulysses* than with something like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which similarly introduces a wide variety of secular discourses, only to dismiss them all as inadequate to the modern predicament. Thus Calvin Bedient argues that *The Waste Land* is not carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense, but anticarnavalesque: "*The Waste Land* is never really, and is finally far from being, carnivalesque; instead, it arranges the *appearance* of a riot of tones and images and languages with the cold cunning of a Hieronymo and with no less an intention than to silence the pretensions of language and literature once and for all" (8).

In the same way, one might argue that the carnivalesque texture of *At Swim* is darkened by the abject violence that its characters practice upon one another, somewhat in the mode of Michael André Bernstein's warnings that Bakhtin seems to ignore such violence in his figuration of the positive potential of carnival. Of course, in the case of *At Swim*, it is actually the student narrator and Trellis who depict this violence, not O'Brien, just as it is actually they who follow Eliot by bringing discourses into their texts only to demonstrate their lack of potency; thus one might argue that *At Swim* makes a statement in favor of dialogism through its critical attitude toward Trellis and the narrator. But, in any case, Bedient's reading of *The Waste Land* clearly implies that it is not automatically subversive for a novel merely to incorporate a variety of styles and genres. What matters is the attitude toward those discourses, which, in the case of *At Swim* can be extremely difficult to determine because of the text's hype-ironic tone and nested structure, as a novel within a novel within a novel wrapped in a series of enigmas.

What also matters is the nature and content of the discourses being used. The first thing one notices in looking for political significance in the discourses imported into *At Swim* is that O'Brien draws so little from the high Western literary tradition of authors such as Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. In fact, O'Brien (via the narrator, via Trellis) turns his back on the mainstream bourgeois European literary tradition almost altogether, instead taking his material from a complex mixture of Irish myth, 1920s and 1930s proletarian literature, and American popular culture.

Looking for political significance, one could interpret this move as a literary declaration of independence from Ireland's colonial past, a turn away from the cultural domination of British and European literature. The only problem is that it is mainly Trellis who uses the cut-and-paste technique, and he is presented by O'Brien (or O'Brien's narrator) as a very bad artist and an even worse person. Among things, Trellis, who claims to read only books with "green covers," would seem himself to be an example of narrow-minded monological nationalism, again aligning him with Eliot rather than Joyce. To make matters worse (and more confusing), Trellis sometimes seems to be a hidebound realist novelist, but also seems largely to follow the narrator's postmodern lead in constructing his novel as a "work of reference" constructed from bits and pieces of other texts (33). To top it all off, O'Brien hardly presents the indolent narrator as an exemplary artist either, making it finally impossible to trust the narrator's critique of Trellis--or ever to derive a final, definitive reading of the political implications of the novel's intertextual strategies.

Of the specific discourses imported into *At Swim*, the most obvious is Irish myth, on which criticism of the novel has long focused. Indeed, as Eva Wäppling has shown in detail, O'Brien's representation of Irish myth is actually far more authentic than it might first appear. Still, through his irreverent treatment of legendary Irish figures such as Finn MacCool and Sweeny, and through his comic use of mythical characters such as the Pooka McPhellimey (an Irish devil) and the Good Fairy (presumably the Pooka's opposite number), O'Brien is often seen to be mounting a subversive critique of the focus on myth and legend in previous attempts to construct a viable Irish national cultural identity. On the other hand, one could equally well see the treatment of myth in *At Swim* in precisely the opposite way, as a critique of modern Ireland as fallen and debased relative to the greatness of the mythical past. In short, one again has a choice between reading O'Brien as if he were Eliot (and thus celebrating the greatness of a past tradition that is no longer functional because the modern world is too seedy and chaotic to support it) and reading O'Brien as if he were Joyce (importing mythical materials into a modern context to challenge their authority by suggesting that they were never what they were cracked up to be in the first place). We do not really have a basis on which to choose between these two readings within the text of *At Swim* itself, though there is other information that suggests O'Brien's impatience with the glorification of Irish myth in the Irish Cultural Revival and thus points toward the Joycean reading. For example, writing as Myles na gCopaleen, O'Brien stirred up considerable controversy, in his *Irish Times* column, by railing against the nationalist fascination with Irish myth and legend (see Costello and Van de Kamp 92–96).

It is also difficult to figure out just what to make of O'Brien's mixture of his Irish mythic materials with material from other sources. Particularly interesting here, I think, is the appearance in the text of the American cowboys Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews, who are borrowed from the Western novels of William Tracy (himself a fictional character) for use in Trellis's novel within the narrator's novel within O'Brien's novel. Andrews and Willard then interact with other Trellis characters (such as Paul Shanahan and Antony Lamont), as well as becoming involved with characters derived from Irish myth and legend. Tracy, for his part, seems to make little distinction between Irish and American materials. Shanahan, for example, has appeared in many of Tracy's Westerns, including a turn as "a cow-puncher in the Ringsend district of Dublin" (73), while Willard has appeared, not only as a cowboy, but also as a Dublin tram-conductor (284).

In Trellis's novel, Willard and Andrews figure principally in an episode in which they (along with Shanahan) are lured away from their ranch by a falsified call to consult with Tracy, whereupon a gang of rustlers led by Red Kiersay (characters from a book by a rival writer by the name of Henderson) descends on the ranch and makes away not only with the cattle, but also with the black maids who have been imported from America to serve the cowboys (75). Eventually, both the cattle and the maids are retrieved, but with much difficulty, and only after Shanahan, Willard, and Andrews are reinforced by a detachment of the Dublin police dispatched by a sympathetic sergeant and a "crowd of Red Indians" borrowed from one of Tracy's other novels.

O'Brien does very little to develop the motif of the kidnapped black maids, though the very fact that they are treated as being very much in the same category as cattle potentially functions as a damning comment on American racism. Of course, it also serves as a potential commentary on racism in general, with racism serving as another form of monologism. Irish racism in this sense is particularly problematic. For one thing, the Irish had themselves been subjected to a panoply of racist stereotypes during centuries of British rule in Ireland. Thus Vincent Cheng, in a recent study of the treatment of race in the work of Joyce, demonstrates that these stereotypes were very similar to those that have also long been applied to Africans and African Americans. In addition, that these black maids are imported from America calls attention to the historical fact, recently documented by such scholars as Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatiev, that the remarkable success of Irish immigrants in America was achieved partly because of the extent to which the Irish in America were able to identify themselves as white, often through their support for racist stereotyping of African Americans.

In this same vein, Fintan O'Toole notes that there is a long tradition of complex cultural entanglement between Ireland and the American West. For one thing, O'Toole parallels Allen and Ignatiev in noting the complex relationship between Ireland and American racism, though O'Toole's work is especially relevant to *At Swim* because it focuses on the American West. Thus O'Toole notes that racist depictions of the Irish in the nineteenth-century English press sometimes compared the Irish to American Indians, concluding that "for Britain, the Irish are the Indians to the far west, circling the wagons of Imperial civilization." Once in America, however, the Irish played a central role in the taming of the West--and in the near-extermination of Native Americans. In this new environment, "the Irish cease to be the Indians and become the cowboys" (134).

On a potentially positive, postcolonial note, the interactions between Irishmen and American cowboys in *At Swim* participates in a motif that runs throughout the text, in which O'Brien's narrator frequently links Ireland and America (with a nod to France as well), often as dual alternatives to English culture. For example, this narrator informs us at one point of a conversation with his friend Brinsley, in which they "utiliz[ed] with frequency words from the French language, discussing the primacy of America and Ireland in contemporary letters and commenting on the inferior work produced by writers of the English nationality" (62).

This suggestion that Irish and American culture, backed up by French culture, are far superior to English culture participates in a long legacy of Irish attempts to recruit France and, later, the United States as allies in the battle against English colonial domination. At the end of the eighteenth century, Irish nationalist leaders such as Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet looked to postrevolutionary France, with its growing military power and increasingly antagonistic relations with England, as a potential ally in the Irish anticolonial struggle. In 1798 a small French army actually landed on Irish soil in an unsuccessful attempt to aid the United Irishmen in their rebellion against English rule. Dreams of further French intervention remained strong throughout the Napoleonic years, and the principles of the French Revolution remained crucial to oppositional Irish thought throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, with the French

Revolution clearly serving as one of the models for the ill-fated 1916 Easter Rising, the central revolutionary event in modern Irish history. Thus, despite the reputation (reinforced by British propaganda) of the Rising as an outburst of irrationalism and archaic appeals to the legendary Irish past, Joseph Lee argues that the Rising should be understood within the context of the modernization of Ireland, not as a reaction against modernity (155).

Of course, by the beginning of the twentieth century (and really from the Franco-Prussian War onward), the United States had become a more formidable power than France. Thus, with millions of Irish-born immigrants living in the United States, the Irish had begun to look more and more to America as a possible source of support against their British colonial rulers. Some support was received, especially in the form of direct contributions from Irish immigrants living in the U.S., though the American government was decidedly cool in its response to calls for help. Moreover, by the end of the twentieth century, such appeals to American help were complicated by the concern, voiced by Irish cultural critics such as Fintan O'Toole and Irish novelists such as Roddy Doyle, that Ireland was finally escaping British domination only to be swallowed up altogether by the global juggernaut of American culture. (For some of O'Toole's concerns, see *A Mass for Jesse James*. On Doyle, see my "Late Capitalism Comes to Dublin.")

The Easter Rising itself had a direct American connection in that one of its leaders, Eamon De Valera, was an American citizen, having been born in New York City in 1882. De Valera was virtually the only leader of the rebellion who was not either killed in the Rising itself or executed by the British in the Rising's aftermath. He was, in fact, spared by the British precisely because of his American citizenship, a move whereby the British hoped to cultivate American support for their efforts in World War I. Arrested again in 1918, De Valera soon escaped and fled to the United States, where he sought to raise funds in support of Irish independence. In 1920 De Valera returned to Ireland, where he remained actively involved in politics, ultimately becoming the Prime Minister of the Irish Free State in 1932. He was still Prime Minister in 1937, when he led the fight to declare Ireland a fully sovereign state and was still the head of the Irish government when O'Brien wrote and published *At Swim*.

In short, close connections between Ireland and America were well established by the time O'Brien wrote his novel. Moreover, by 1939, American culture had already established a firm beachhead in the Irish (and European) imagination, with Westerns being particularly popular. Writers such as Zane Grey were well known in Europe, where novels such as *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) had been widely translated and read. Indeed, European writers such as Karl May had reached a wide readership with stories of exotic adventure in the American West as early as the 1890s. That Irish boys were fascinated by tales of the American West by the beginning of the twentieth century is already obvious from Joyce's *Dubliners* story "An Encounter," in which Irish schoolboys spend much of their time playing cowboys and Indians, having been inspired through the reading of Wild West adventure stories in "chronicles of disorder," i.e., pulp magazines (*Dubliners* 19–21).

By 1939, Joyce included frequent references to the American West in *Finnegans Wake*, sometimes in conjunction with Irish myth. For example, amid a massive catalog of the attributes of Finn MacCool, we are informed that MacCool's "Indian name is Hapapoosiesobjibway and his number in arithmosophy is the stars of the plough" (134.13–14). This final numerological reference parallels the fascination with numerology in *At Swim*, while the mention of "the stars of the plough," suggesting most obviously the revolutionary banner of the Irish republicans, also inevitably evokes Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), a satire of the Easter Rising, about which more later.

In addition, the idea of cowboys herding cattle in Ringsend and fighting rustlers in the midst of Dublin may not be quite as far-fetched as it first seems. After all, cattle have been raised in Ireland far longer than in the American West. Moreover, one of the central works of Irish epic poetry, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (English translation, *The Cattle-Raid of Cualnge*) is precisely about cattle rustling, though in a somewhat more heroic vein than that which prevails in *At Swim*. In this way, of course, the rustling narrative of *At Swim* potentially reflects back on the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, undermining its authority as a grand narrative of Irish heroism--just as O'Brien's general treatment of Irish myth and legend tends to undermine this narrative.

Of course, it is crucial to Bakhtin's conception of dialogism that the dialogue between discourses goes both ways; thus if *At Swim* potentially challenges the authority of Irish myth partly by entangling that myth with seemingly debased popular tales of the American Wild West, it is also the case that this entanglement calls attention to the mythological dimensions of the American West itself. Richard Slotkin, in the third volume of his magisterial study of the importance of the idea of the frontier in American cultural history, notes the mythological dimensions of popular representations of the American West, especially in the twentieth century, when the real frontier has been swept away by capitalist modernization. In particular, the mythology of the American West is founded on the construction of the American national identity through a vision of the violent destruction of "savage" enemies, most centrally Native Americans. This phenomenon, according to Slotkin, is typically marked by a complex constellation of class-based and racial stereotypes, including, among other things, stereotypical depictions of working-class Irish immigrants (such as those who belonged to the Molly Maguires) as "intuitive, mystical, combative, and capable of identifying with the underdog" (148).

This last quality, while it might sound positive, also suggests that such immigrants are dangerous as potential participants in political revolution or other forms of subversive violence. This notion brings us back to the content of *At Swim*, which is filled with working-class characters who do, ultimately, resort to subversive violence. As Devlin notes, *At Swim* figures "the author-character relationship in terms of management and labor" and is thus a highly political novel centering on "questions of class and ideology" (91). In particular, Devlin sees the rebellion of Trellis's characters against his authorial control as a sort of proletarian revolution. But he also notes that the farcical nature of this rebellion tends to undermine the notion of such revolutions, concluding that "the text implies that the result of the workers gaining control of their lives is only that they now

drink their pints of plain from fancier glasses" (100). Indeed, once Trellis's characters get him in hand, they first torture him, then subject him to a ludicrous, surreal trial that recalls Bloom's trial in the "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses*, but that also, in the context of 1939, recalls the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s, by then already widely taken in the West as an example of the negative consequences of proletarian revolution, after which the inmates supposedly end up running the asylum.

The skepticism toward revolution shown in *At Swim* again identifies it as postmodern; Alex Callinicos notes, for example, that phenomena identified as postmodern "generally go along with rejection of socialist revolution as either feasible or desirable" (9). In the context of Ireland, of course, any such literary treatment of rebellion tends to evoke not a proletarian revolution, but the anticolonial Easter Rising of 1916, an event that itself had numerous literary characteristics and that has been treated in a number of works of Irish literature, including Yeats's "Easter 1916" and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. Both Yeats and O'Casey, for example, complain of the excessive violence of the Rising, a motif that links that event to the preposterous violence wrought by Trellis's characters against their maker. Moreover, as Devlin points out, the torments visited on Trellis in *At Swim* seem to have been modeled on the suffering of the mythical Sweeny (93), which echoes the widely-held (but only partly accurate) notion that the Rising itself was based on a glorification of suffering and violence derived from the heritage of Irish myth and legend. In addition, the fact that Trellis's characters execute their rebellion by writing a book about Trellis recalls the centrality of literature to the anticolonial tradition of Irish nationalism and to the Rising itself. Finally, that the rebellion is snuffed out so easily (when the narrator, showing that he is really in authorial control of the situation, has a maid accidentally burn the section of Trellis's manuscript in which the rebellious characters are created, thus rendering them--and their rebellion--nonexistent) echoes the seemingly hopeless nature of the Rising, which was, in fact put down easily, even though the violence of the British reaction triggered a new wave of anticolonial resentment that eventually led to the Anglo-Irish War of 1919–1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

Nevertheless, if *At Swim* is, in some sense, "about" the Easter Rising, it is again virtually impossible to reach a final conclusion about the text's attitude toward that Rising. On the one hand, Trellis is a truly reprehensible and dictatorial figure who deserves to be overthrown; on the other hand, the characters' rebellion is clearly ridiculous, among other things making the characters appear just as cruel and heartless as Trellis. Meanwhile, reading the rebellion in *At Swim* at least partly as a satire of the Easter Rising makes *The Plough and the Stars* a particularly interesting predecessor to O'Brien's novel, especially given Joyce's suggestion, in *Finnegans Wake*, of symbolic resonances among O'Casey's play, Irish myth, and the American West. But *At Swim* is in this sense hardly a ringing endorsement of O'Casey or his play.

O'Casey's play is just as irreverent as *At Swim*, if less comical--to the point that it caused a riot when it was performed at the Abbey Theater because the audience felt that it denigrated the Irish heroes of the Easter Rising. In the play, O'Casey presents the nationalist participants in the Rising as posturing braggards and self-promoters, more

interested in spouting myth-inspired slogans than in any serious political analysis of their colonial predicament. For example, Jack Clitheroe, the central insurgent figure, seems far more concerned with personal glory than political justice. He is, of course, killed in the hopeless Rising, leaving his young wife distracted and alone. On the other hand, "the Covey," the character in the play who represents what is presumably O'Casey's own socialist inclinations, comes off as a mere spouter of Marxist clichés, even if it is also the case that most of those clichés are verified by the end of the play. Still, *The Plough and the Stars* seems to indict socialists for not taking effective action against British colonial rule of Ireland, and (as Kiberd points out), it was, in fact, socialist republicans, rather than "narrow-gauge nationalists" who led the protests against the play when it was first performed (234).

Kiberd concludes that O'Casey ultimately mocks all political positions, helping him to achieve "the unusual feat of making politics one of his obsessive concerns, and yet emerging as a type of the apolitical artist" (235). As a whole, one might say very much the same thing about O'Brien in *At Swim*, which tends to dismiss as ludicrous all of the political positions it entertains, leaving no options standing and leaving the text without a real political position of its own—including no clear position with regard to O'Casey or his play, even though there are possible references to O'Casey in the novel.

One of the next major figures introduced in *At Swim* after the rustling episode is one Jem Casey, the "poet of the people" (102). Described as a plain working man himself, Casey writes poems that are apparently intended to honor the labors of his fellow workers, so that his poetry builds upon the entire legacy of 1930s proletarian literature. Seen this way, it builds most directly on the work of O'Casey, whose birth name was John Casey, who was widely known as Ireland's "worker playwright," and whose expressed socialist sympathies were well known, however problematic their representation in his drama.

In *At Swim*, however, Casey (like everyone else in the book) is presented as a largely ridiculous figure, whose verses border on doggerel and feature pedestrian subject matter such as that of "The Workman's Friend," which is (at least as recited by Shanahan) an ode to porter, featuring the memorable refrain, "A pint of plain is your only man" (108–09). In Casey's defense, it should be noted that when he himself recites his own poetry, the refrain comes out as "The gift of God is a workin' man," suggesting that Shanahan may have modified Casey's poetry to fit his own doctrine, though Casey's appeal to divine origins suggests that his own proletarian attitudes are a bit confused (172–73). Even when it is presented by Casey himself, this poetry fails either as art or as political statement, comprising little other than a series of platitudes, somewhat in the vein of the clichés spouted by O'Casey's Covey as he incessantly quotes from Jenersky's theory of the historical evolution of the proletariat while showing little or no sympathy for real proletarians.

If Casey is, at least to an extent, O'Casey, then O'Brien's comic presentation of Casey's proletarian poetry is consistent with O'Brien's antagonistic attitude toward Casey's drama and toward the Abbey Theater as a whole, which he described as "an association of halfwits" (Clissmann 225). In addition, the characterization of Casey, along with the satirical treatment of the characters' revolution, might be taken as O'Brien's rather clear

dismissal of 1930s proletarian literature as a whole, especially of the Irish variety. Granted, 1930s proletarian literature is usually associated primarily with English and American authors, the ultraconservative Irish Free State of that decade leaving little room for radical politics in literature. But there is, in fact, a tradition of Irish proletarian literature that, in addition to O'Casey, includes such writers as Patrick MacGill, James Hanley, and Peadar O'Donnell. O'Donnell's *On the Edge of the Stream* (1934), which features a local rebellion that presents the Irish quest for national freedom as a nonsectarian class-based struggle, is particularly relevant to *At Swim*.

Of course, the "heroic" poetry of the mythical Sweeny (who is explicitly linked to Casey in the text) is just as ridiculous as the proletarian poetry of Casey, also suggesting a dismissal of the Irish heroic tradition lampooned by O'Casey in *The Plough and the Stars*. But one typically comes to this "yes, but" point in attempting to read *At Swim*. The reflexivity of the text distances it from material reality, but opposes reification; the dialogism of the text critiques nationalist (and, especially, Catholic) monologism, but potentially destabilizes the attempt to establish a viable postcolonial cultural identity for Ireland; the use of American cowboys in the text opposes the rich cross-cultural heritage of the Irish-American interaction to the oppressive legacy of British colonialism, but potentially contributes to the eventual cultural colonization of Ireland by America, while criticizing the Irish for their weakness in being forced to rely on outside help to generate an identity independent of English control; the depiction of revolution in the text links it to O'Casey and proletarian literature, but also depicts that literature as ridiculous. Even this doubleness in possible interpretations has double and contradictory implications: for example, it subverts authoritarian political positions, while at the same time undermining any potential oppositional positions.

Ultimately, the radical undecidability of *At Swim* means that a reader who wishes to draw conclusions about the political implications of the text must simply choose a position and then stick to it. Of course, that is what politics is all about. From my own point of view, O'Brien's refusal to make such a choice makes *At Swim* weak as a political novel and, consequently, as a postcolonial novel. At the same time, the contradictory doubleness of the text, which echoes the logic of late consumer capitalism, potentially makes *At Swim* more interesting as a postmodernist novel. And there is nothing wrong with this in itself. I personally do not accept the widely-held (at least since the cold war) notion that overtly political literature is inherently inferior to literature that refuses to espouse a political position. This does not, of course, mean that all literature needs to be overtly political in order to have value. It does, however, mean that we should not be so fast to declare works of literature to be "subversive" and "political" without first stopping to try to determine just what they subvert and just what kind of politics they represent. We can gain more insight into *At Swim* and the cultural phenomena it reflects by reading it within the context of postmodernism (especially as envisioned by Jameson) than by trying to force it into a postcolonial mold that just doesn't fit.

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