

*Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds: An Introduction*

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Once upon a time, a young man from Dublin wrote a very odd novel called, oddly, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. His novel, for all its peculiarity, is hard-pressed to match the strangeness of its own history. It has been praised and ignored, destroyed and resurrected, admired from afar and despised by its creator. It has received the bemused and perplexed criticism of all writing that forges a new direction in literature, has become the playground for myriad critical theories, has been compared (often speciously) to every experimental novel under the sun. The truth, though, is that *At Swim-Two Birds* is like nothing else. Created by a writer who was very much his own man, it is very much its own book.

Perhaps the first oddity is that the author, who was not happy with the name of his creation, was not even happy with his own name. Flann O'Brien never existed. He was a creation of Brian O'Nolan, or Nolan, or Ó Nualláin, the son of a civil servant, Michael, whose surname appeared in all those forms (with spelling variations of the last) on official documents throughout and even after his life (Cronin 3-4). Brian, like his father a civil servant, prudently decided that a writer of fiction and essays, many of which would be satirical and even occasionally scurrilous, would do well to adopt a pen name. While at University College Dublin, he had employed the moniker "Brother Barnabas" fairly consistently, and he would write a column, *Cruiskeen Lawn* (Gaelic for "Little Brimming Pot"), that appeared for decades in the Irish Times using the name "Myles na gCopaleen (or Gopaleen)." Myles and Flann were different in two very important respects: Myles was a complete creation with a separate identity and personality from his creator, whereas Flann was merely a name, and Brian liked Myles. It wasn't so much that he disliked Flann as it was that he decided Flann was bad for business. Sometime between submitting the manuscript to various publishers and its appearing under the Longman's imprint, he got cold feet. O'Nolan had a great fondness, amounting almost to an addiction, for literary and public imbroglios, and he recently had used Flann as a mask during a dustup with Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, possibly the two most important fiction writers then living in Ireland. He therefore felt not so much that his cover had been blown, which it had not been, as that, from a publicity standpoint, there was no way that these two celebrated authors would have anything good to say about their tormenter. He was right, but too late. Longman's loved the name, as they did the title.

The title is a somewhat trickier bit of business. It is taken from a place where King Sweeney, after his transformation into a bird-man, visits, reciting one of his more celebrated verses. O'Brien came to feel that the reference was too arcane and that its strangeness might hurt sales. He was ever hopeful that his books would be widely

popular, evidently not recognizing that their form, and particularly the form of this one, precluded general popularity far more than any title ever could. In any case, his suggestions for alternates point to an ineptitude in the matter of naming that makes the given title seem almost a miracle. "Truth Is an Odd Number," a line repeated in the text, hardly sounds likely to draw bookstore patrons in droves.

The publication history easily matches the naming problems of *At Swim*. Graham Greene, no less, was on the editorial staff of Longman's and proved an early, ardent supporter of the manuscript. Soon Longman's was more positive about publishing the novel than was the author. When the book came out in the spring of 1939, all concerned were full of hope. James Joyce read it (a rarity, given his failing eyesight and general lack of interest in contemporary writing), and William Saroyan tried, with no success, to find an American publisher. Despite keen interest from a number of outstanding writers, the novel failed to catch the public's fancy, and over its first six months it sold (one of the best known sales figures in modern literature) a mere 244 copies. The final indignity came in the autumn of 1940 when, during the Blitz, a German bomb fell on Longman's establishment and destroyed the remaining stock. O'Brien's masterpiece was to remain out of print for many years (a first American edition in 1951, but no English reprint until 1960), and his discouragement, coupled with a single rejection, seems to have led him to stuff his manuscript of *The Third Policeman* into a drawer and to leave it there for the remainder of his life (Cronin 86-102). Despite the paltry sales of the novel, it found an audience and over the years has been praised by writers and critics of widely divergent types. Very little could be found to unite Dylan Thomas, Philip Toynbee, Benedict Kiely, V. S. Pritchett, Anthony Burgess, and John Wain, aside from their all finding qualities to praise in this strange and various novel. A novel with such a diverse list of admirers commands our attention.

### **The Author**

Brian O'Nolan (b. 1911) made his career for years as an Irish civil servant, while writing newspaper columns and fiction under pseudonyms, which was probably a good idea, given the prickly nature of some of his writings. He had been educated, like Joyce before him, at University College Dublin, the comparatively recent Catholic answer to Trinity College. His protagonists are often students or graduates of an institution very like UCD, although their sloth stands in contrast to O'Nolan's evident industry, given the level of his success and the variety of his activities. After university, he was for decades a Dublin figure, stirring up controversies, holding forth in public houses, making one of the most celebrated Bloomsday pilgrimages with the poet Patrick Kavanagh, making the city his own.

His main contribution to Irish letters, as seen during his lifetime, was his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, which he produced in his guise as Myles na gCopaleen, elderly polymath and crank. Myles is an expert in all fields, a dab hand at mechanical engineering in particular, always ready with advice for the government, never without an idea about social improvement. The columns--frequently satirical, always engaging, and usually hilarious--were written chiefly in Gaelic at the outset, beginning in 1940, but edged more and more

into English, until eventually they were nearly all written in English. They continued to appear right up to his death in 1966, on April Fool's Day.

It may be that O'Nolan will be remembered for the columns by Myles, but over the intervening decades his novels have begun commanding more attention. In addition to *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the self-suppressed *The Third Policeman* (1967), each masterful in its way, he also wrote (as Flann) *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), *The Hard Life* (1966), and a satire in Gaelic (as Myles), *An Béal Bocht* (1941, published in English as *The Poor Mouth* in 1973). *The Dalkey Archive* reworks much of the material of *The Third Policeman*, although it is much less bold and assured, while *The Hard Life* is a slight, if very funny take on a certain type of Irish story. Of the three, *The Poor Mouth*, a relentless little satire of the Irish peasant story, really stands up, even in translation. As a novelist, though, Flann's reputation rests chiefly on the first two novels he wrote. And they--inventive, witty, groundbreaking, unlike each other or anything else in the world--are enough.

### Story and Character

The hackneyed approach to summarizing *At Swim-Two-Birds* is to confess the impossibility of the task, then to plunge ahead in a rush to encompass all the mad detail of the novel. It may be that there is no other way of approaching O'Brien's very strange story, yet on one level (and one only, that I can discern) the narrative is really very simple: this is the story of a young novelist playing with all his toys. It is almost as if O'Brien decided to take everything he knew and construct a narrative framework that would allow him to put it all in. The elements of the novel--legendary Irish figures Finn Mac Cool and Sweeny (in his customary spellings), cowboys from Western novels and films, the novels of James Joyce and Aldous Huxley, figures of Irish superstition and Christian mysticism, class-distinction warfare, the nature of the novel, aesthetic theory--simmer together in a lively stew pot of story.

At this level, the novel is highly autobiographical. The narrator, a student at something very like the University College Dublin attended by Brian O'Nolan, lives with his uncle, rarely bathes or attends class, drinks and smokes rather too much when money permits, and works on his novel intermittently, all very much like his creator. Like O'Brien, too, the narrator is a young novelist drunk on the possibilities of his chosen form. Unlike O'Brien, he is not fully in command of his materials. At the end of the novel, for instance, he is reduced to the deus ex machina of a burned manuscript to unsnarl all the difficulties he has created for his novel, which device (anticipating deconstruction by several decades) erases the characters who have ganged up on *their* creator, the malicious but feckless Dermot Trellis, the novelist who is the main character of the narrator's novel.

Inside that initial frame, things get pretty wild. Trellis is writing a novel in which he mixes characters of his own invention with others borrowed from Irish classics, Irish myth and folklore, and literature of his own experience, as for instance, with his use of cowboys from the Western novels of William Tracy (invented for the purpose by O'Brien, he seems to stand in for Zane Grey). Although Trellis has read a great deal, he is

limited by an *idée fixe* which permits him to read only books with green covers; this has slanted his reading quite heavily away from contemporary fiction and toward Irish literature and history, although his preference is evidently religious, not nationalistic. Among those Trellis creates is Sheila Lamont, whose beauty so overwhelms him that he forces himself on her and gets her with child. The birth, since the offspring is born full-grown, kills the unfortunate mother, and the resulting son, Orlick Trellis, becomes a character in Trellis's novel and a ringleader in the rebellion against him. Trellis also creates John Furriskey, whose main function in the novel is projected to be the rape of the maid Peggy. The account of Furriskey's birth (he springs into this life fully grown, with memories but no experience to account for them and teeth already tobacco-stained) is a small comic masterpiece. Furriskey, though, proves to be considerably more moral than his master and, quite apart from ruining Peggy, falls in love with and marries her. They set up a household together, although they must race back to the Red Swan Hotel, where Trellis compels his characters to live with him, each evening before Trellis awakens and finds them gone. Fortunately, Trellis sleeps nearly all the time, so most of their time is their own.

Besides Peggy and Furriskey, characters he has created, Trellis has also "hired" (in the words of the narrator) Paul Shanahan and Antony Lamont from other literature. It is instructive to note that whereas he has "hired" Lamont, he "creates" Lamont's sister, Sheila, "in his bedroom," evidently as an embodiment of his sexual fantasies. Similarly, he hires Finn Mac Cool, based on his "venerable appearance" (85), to act as Peggy's father, but Finn commits crimes against her chastity while Trellis is sleeping. Virtually no one cooperates with the writer's plan: just as Furriskey turns out to be more virtuous than planned, so Finn and Shanahan both seduce Peggy, and Lamont, whose chief function is projected to be demanding satisfaction when his sister's honor is destroyed, seems not to care.

So too with the characters in the outer narrative. The Pooka McPhellimey, while "a member of the devil class," is less uniformly evil than initially drawn, while the Good Fairy is often a fair distance from goodness. On the other hand, Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews, ostensibly characters from novels by William Tracy, play largely to type, acting out their cowboy roles in hunting down cattle rustlers in the unlikely environs of greater Dublin. And the character who is most fully his expected self is Sweeny, the mad bird-king of Irish epic. Homeless, alienated, unhappy, yet in love with his new environment, Sweeny declaims lays of his lost life and his new life in a voice of sadness and sweetness, often almost completely disconnected from his fellow travelers. Much comedy ensues, as his lack of acknowledgment of others infuriates the hot-tempered Shorty to the point of wanting to shoot him, while causing other to speculate on his mental state or sobriety even as they try to interpret his non sequiturs.

The stories of these various characters interweave among the levels. The Pooka and Good Fairy engage to attend the birth of Orlick Trellis, the offspring of a mating between the novelist and one of his characters (during which travel they discuss the inadvisability of matings between angels or bodiless spirits with humans, as well as of humans with kangaroos, situations not less ridiculous than the one that currently occupies them).

Along the way, they pick up Shorty and Slug, as well as Sweeny and the working-class poet Jem Casey. Casey's chief contribution to matters is to point out inadvertently that his work has been bastardized by Shanahan in the inner narrative; his refrain celebrating the working man, "THE GIFT OF GOD IS THE WORKIN' MAN," no prize as poetry in its own right, has been transformed into a celebration of the working man's beverage, "A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN." Sweeny offers his own lays from his epic, which we might contrast with those Finn recites earlier in the novel. Of course, this contrast is appropriate to the *Buile Suibhne* ("The Frenzy [or Madness] of Sweeney"), which is clearly a product of various hands over two or three centuries and of which some parts are prose narrative and some voiced by the protagonist himself.

The unholy birth these less-than-wise men travel to attend is the result of a far-from-immaculate-conception, and the issue proves to be more in the mold of the Fallen Angels than of the Son of God. Indeed, the whole story of the Trellis rebellion is a bit like *Paradise Lost* turned on its head. Dermot Trellis is the absent-god-figure, the maker of rules who largely withdraws from his creation. When he does interact with his creatures, it is he, not they, who introduce corruption. Orlick could be his representative in the world below heaven, but instead he sides with the rebels who would overthrow their despotic creator.

The form their rebellion takes is to begin writing a story in which Trellis is himself a character and therefore trapped, a prisoner to their collective wills. In other hands this might become a tale of cosmic justice, the corrupting figure undone by the products of his own malevolent behavior, possibly even teaching a lesson to one or more of the characters. Here the justice is not cosmic but comic. Yes, Trellis's underlings get the opportunity to pay him back in kind, but the outcome is chaotic rather than didactic; neither Trellis nor anyone else learns anything. Perhaps this is in fact a kind of cosmic justice, since Trellis has aspired to write a morally uplifting fiction and has only, he claims, created the evil in his novel (such as his plans for Furriskey) in order to provide a kind of moral legitimacy. That no one, including readers, can take any sort of ethical instruction from his novel conforms much more closely to O'Brien's view of the novel than to Trellis's.

Trellis, then, proves a far less successful novelist than he aspires to be. He plagiarizes from William Tracy and others, particularly in the matter of characters, violates his own precepts, fails to control either himself or his characters, succumbs to sloth when he should be writing, and produces a shapeless, aimless mess which literally overwhelms him. His student creator is little better, since he has only fragments of a work-in-progress and can resolve his story only by the fire that, flimsily echoing the end of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, destroys all of Trellis's manuscript and, with it, the characters who have been tormenting him. O'Brien produces a brilliant novel made of defective narratives, since neither of the internal stories comes close to being a finished novel.

### **Mythic Figures**

Among the characters of the novel, four who aren't quite human figure prominently. Finn MacCool, Sweeney (or, as O'Brien generally prefers, Sweeny), the Pooka MacPhellimey, and the Good Fairy all play substantial roles in the narrative, although their behavior may not always be what we've come to expect from other characters bearing their (or similar) names. For instance, commentators are fond of pointing out that the goodness of the Good Fairy is highly open to question, while the Pooka is often far from the devil we might expect given his initial description.

Each of these figures has qualities that make him recognizable. Finn, for instance, is sufficiently large to remind us that he is often depicted as a giant, and indeed his initial descriptions employ the sort of gigantic inflation that Joyce borrows in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*—"three fifties of fosterlings," for instance, can play handball against his backside--and which comports to the oral tradition of tales about Finn. Moreover, he recites pieces of various lays relating to his history, some from *Duanaire Finn* (*The Book of the Lays of Fionn*), some from elsewhere. On the other hand, readers who recognize him and hope to be regaled with the Further Adventures of Finn MacCool will be disappointed. Finn is for O'Brien's purposes a less than heroic figure, as his violation of Peggy demonstrates, despite his "venerable appearance." O'Brien's handling may remind us that the heroes of the Irish epic tradition were often highly fallible, but even by those standards, the conduct of this Finn proves to be a bit much.

Sweeny, while less debased than Finn, also has less distance to fall, given the terrible sacrileges that cause his being cursed in the original. Sweeny's story is important to the novel, since O'Brien makes use of it in several forms. A king of Dal Araidhe in ancient Ulster, Sweeny resists the coming of Christianity with violence. Twice he assaults St. Ronan, the first time breaking the cleric's bell and throwing his psalter into a lake, where it is rescued and returned to the saint, unharmed, by an otter. Not learning from the obvious message carried by the otter, Sweeny the next day kills Ronan's assistant before the battle of Mag Rath. Ronan curses Sweeny on each occasion, with the net effect that the king is condemned to wander Ireland mad and naked and living in the trees as a bird. Since he is not a bird but in effect a bird-man, his life in the trees is far from comfortable. He suffers from cold, heat, collisions, and falls from trees. Ultimately, he is redeemed, given something like absolution from St. Moling, although the cleric fails to protect him from a jealous herd who kills Sweeny with a spear (fulfilling the last part of the curse).

As Eva Wäppling notes, Suibhne/Sweeny appears twice in the novel, once in Finn's faithful and tragic version of the original, including the death of Suibhne, and again in Trellis's novel as an instance of sin, when he is brought back to life and must undergo his torments afresh (Wäppling 63-66). Significantly, his arrival in this second frame involves an experience of the Fall, when he comes crashing down from the trees. His story also has a third version that is transferred onto Trellis in Orlick's narrative. Trellis experiences the Fall when he is launched out a window and crashes to the street below, breaking his leg and bursting an eyeball. During the ordeal he is written into (and survives only because the other characters have given him superhuman strength to withstand the suffering they visit upon him), Dermot Trellis outrages the cleric Moling in the same fashion Sweeny outrages Ronan in *Buile Suibhne*, attacking the bell and destroying a

holy book (for Sweeney, a psalter, for Trellis, a breviary). Wäppling sees this pattern as part of a theme of crime and punishment (66), and O'Brien is faithful enough to the original Irish version that he includes it, although it must also be noted that a fair bit of criminality in the novel goes unpunished.

Like Sweeny, the Pooka exists on two levels in the narrative. He is brought to the Red Swan Hotel as one of Trellis's characters, and he is later written into Orlick's story to aid in torturing Trellis. The Pooka of Irish tradition is a multivocal figure capable of comic mischief and genuine evil, and O'Brien's version certainly provides the full range. He can be gracious, even courtly, lighthearted, mirthful, almost gentle. Yet he trains Orlick to rebel against his maker, to act out the *Non Serviam* of Milton's Satan. He also engages in the torment of Trellis with genuine enthusiasm and malevolence, so that our memory of his earlier, lighter conduct is almost erased. We sense from the outset, however, that he is capable of darker conduct than he at first displays, and O'Brien is at pains to remind us that he is a "member of the devil class" (9). When he proves to be truly devilish, our surprise is muted.

The odd figure in this foursome is the Good Fairy, who is drawn from no such clear tradition as the other three. O'Brien seems to invent him for the occasion, drawing on only the fuzziest basis for constructing this foil to the Pooka. Many commentators see the conflict between the Pooka and the Good Fairy as a struggle between good and evil, yet the latter is hardly a force for unalloyed good. He wagers when he has no money to back the bet, angers quickly, causes trouble for no clear reason, behaves cruelly to Sweeny (unlike the Pooka), and loses Orlick's soul to the Pooka because of his cheating at cards.

### **Form and Structure/Levels and Layers**

Calling *At Swim* a frame tale is a little like calling *Moby-Dick* a fishing story: there may be truth in the term, but it falls so far from adequacy as to be almost meaningless. O'Brien builds in so many frames that interact so freely that it becomes nearly impossible at times to identify the frame in which a given scene is taking place. This overlapping-frame issue derives from characters from one frame climbing, as it were, into the previous frame and participating in action on that "upper" level.

For instance, Dermot Trellis begets his son, Orlick, on a character he has created for his story. Is Orlick, then, a product of Dermot's frame or that of the unfortunate mother, Sheila Lamont? Moreover, when Orlick leads a revolt against his sleeping father, his confederates are the characters Dermot has created for his novel. When the father-author sleeps, however, he loses control of his creatures and they can act as independent agents in his world. This business of frames sliding through and over one another is addressed more fully below by Monique Gallagher in her essay, "Frontier Instability in O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*."

As important as the framing devices are to the novel's form, however, they constitute only one part of the book's shaping. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is made of pieces of narrative: "biographical reminiscences" (as the student narrator calls them), bits of, or rather plans

for, the putative novel of Dermot Trellis and of the novel his characters begin writing to ensnare him, translations and corruptions from classic Irish texts, borrowings and echoes from contemporary novels, approximations of Western set-pieces. This ceaseless intertextuality has made the novel the darling of followers of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose notions of parody and carnivalesque find apotheosis in O'Brien's novels, and particularly this first one. Bakhtinian parody involves any reuse of source material that differs from the original intent (as, for instance, Joyce's use of Homeric materials in *Ulysses*). The informing principle of O'Brien parody, however, might best be called travesty. No source text escapes unscathed. Even the *Buile Suibhne*, which is translated with considerable reverence, suffers indignities from the situations into which it is inserted and from comparisons drawn to other works. And O'Brien's Sweeny is a shabby, smelly figure (as, indeed, he implicitly is in the original) commanding neither respect nor sympathy from his fellow characters, further reducing the grandeur of the poem of his fall and rise. Techniques and even situations are borrowed from James Joyce (as Kelly Anspaugh discusses below in his essay, "Agonizing with Joyce"), but with all the reverence one might expect from an author who later, in *The Dalkey Archive*, would resurrect Joyce as a man hiding from his fame, denying his earlier work, and writing religious tracts.

Thirty years before John Fowles contrived two endings for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, O'Brien was opening his first novel with three beginnings. Actually there are four openings, given the three the narrator offers and the one in which he exists. The narrator begins by announcing that one beginning and one ending to a book "was a thing I did not agree with" (9). He offers his triad of openings, the first featuring the Pooka MacPhellimey, "a member of the devil class," the second John Furriskey, who is born fully grown (as a character in the novel being written by Dermot Trellis, himself a character in the narrator's novel-in-progress), and the third introduces us in exaggerated terms to Finn Mac Cool before calling the narrator back to reality by the device of an injured tooth.

So too with endings: the narrator offers a triple-decker ending, although those three endings tie in with the openings in only the loosest fashion. What O'Brien offers, then, is more the illusion of symmetry rather than any actual symmetry. As befits a work with so many starts and stops, the narrative throughout the novel operates on multiple levels, often simultaneously. As we have seen, characters exist on multiple levels, appearing in the Trellis narrative (as if on hire) and also living with Trellis in the Red Swan Hotel. The Pooka is a character in Trellis's novel and in the narrative by Orlick, in which Trellis, who seems to be himself, is tormented by characters he has initially created.

### **Sources and Background**

Virtually every commentator on *At Swim* will, usually sooner rather than later, point out that this text is, like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, made out of other texts. And like Eliot's masterpiece, those works are sometimes scarcely recognizable after O'Brien finishes with them. Readers of *At Swim* may find their understanding of the novel enhanced by further acquaintance with some of his source texts.

*The Madness of Sweeney*. Two excellent translations of this appeared in the twentieth century. The first, *Buile Suibhne*, translated and edited by J. G. O'Keefe and published by the Irish Texts Society in 1906, is the English version to which Brian O'Nolan would have had access. He claims to have used his own translation, but his is often very close to O'Keefe's. Seamus Heaney also published a fine version (he avoids the word *translation* as too confining for his sometimes rather loose rendering), *Sweeney Astray* (Field Day/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

*Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Although the Cattle raid of Cooley figures less prominently in *At Swim* than the stories of Finn and Sweeney, O'Brien clearly knows and makes use of it. Thomas Kinsella has published an excellent version, *The Táin* (Oxford, 1969); it remains the standard available version.

The American Western. The cowboys of Ringsend draw on multiple sources from American popular culture, even if the parody they constitute clearly abuses the tradition. The novels of Zane Grey seem to inform O'Brien's use, and *Riders of the Purple Sage* is often mentioned in this connection. *At Swim*'s cowboys also owe much to Hollywood. While the novel predates John Ford's landmark Western, *Stagecoach* also appearing in 1939, the cowboy was already a familiar figure to cinema-goers worldwide, from the Tom Mix features to the hundreds of Republic B films made throughout the twenties and thirties. John Wayne alone appeared in something like eighty Republic pictures before landing on top of Ford's stagecoach and vaulting to feature stardom.

The Finn Cycle. There are many versions of the tales of Finn and the Fianna. The Irish Texts Society published *Duanaire Finn (The Book of the Lays of Fionn)*, Part 1, edited by Eoin MacNeill (1908), and Parts 2 and 3, edited by Gerard Murphy (1933, 1953). There are of course many retellings of these tales, as with the case of Diarmaid and Grainne, whose story was published in an edition translated and edited by Nessa Ni Shéaghda, *Tóruigheacht Dhairmada agus Ghráinne (The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne)*, 1967).

*Ulysses* (1922) and *Work in Progress* (the early published sections of *Finnegans Wake*) by James Joyce. Although O'Brien came to detest mentions of Joyce in connection with his own work, and *At Swim* in particular, the affinities are unmistakable. Joyce's innovations afford all who come after him license to pursue innovations of their own, of course, but O'Brien makes use of specific techniques, such as the question-and-answer format of the Ithaca episode or the gigantic inflations associated with Finn in Cyclops. *Finnegans Wake* also appeared in 1939, and while the two books are formally very different, they share a wild inventiveness and a cavalier attitude toward the sanctity of many texts from which they draw.

*Point Counter Point* (1928) by Aldous Huxley. Huxley is the only living writer other than Joyce mentioned in *At Swim*, and the frame-tale structure clearly owes much to the Englishman's work.

*The Counterfeiters*. André Gide's 1925 masterpiece also employs embedded narratives; there is evidence O'Brien knew Gide's work, despite his anti-Continental posturing, and Graham Greene saw and noted the connection when he read the manuscript.

*The Plough and the Stars* (1922) by Sean O'Casey, and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) by John Millington Synge. O'Brien is hardly the first Irish writer to undercut the grandeur and tragedy of Irish legend. The comic and far-from-heroic figures of *At Swim* owe a great deal to the revisionist treatments of Celtic Twilight reverence offered by O'Casey and Synge.

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