

Frontier Instability in Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds

Monique Gallagher

Q. Who is Flann O'Brien?

A. Brian Nolan.

Q. Who is Brian Nolan?

A. Myles na Gopaleen.

Q. What did these three men do?

A. They wrote three books called "At Swim-Two-Birds."

--Brendan Behan, *Irish Times*, 30 July 1960

Each attempt at definition of Flann O'Brien leads to a different image, itself reflecting yet another. The author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* was indeed an elusive figure, whose various identities surpassed in number the Brian-Flann-Myles trinity evoked by Brendan Behan in the dialogue quoted above. Brian O'Nolan refused to constrain the limits of his authorial identity within a single name; when the pseudonym of "Flann O'Brien" was chosen for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, it was only after many hesitations among other possibilities: "Flann O'Brien" was indeed the first pen name Brian O'Nolan suggested, but he soon preferred other names, and kept proposing new ones to his publishers, until they finally decided to resort to the initial one, so that we can say that Flann O'Brien was Longman's choice rather than O'Nolan's. Brian O'Nolan experienced the same difficulty in naming his novel when the time came to give it a title: before *At Swim-Two-Birds* he had considered calling it "Sweeny in the Trees," and there had also been other candidates in his mind, "Task-Master's Eye," "Truth is an Odd Number," "Through an Angel's Eyelids," "The Next Market Day," as indicated in a letter to his literary agent (Letter to A. M. Heath). This difficulty in finding a suitable title for the book, eloquent as to the indeterminacy of its author, might also be considered a portent of the elusiveness of the book, of its polymorphous, kaleidoscopic nature, which escapes definition and summary.

If, as Brendan Behan described it, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is three books in one, it is not easy to distinguish the limits of those "*three books*." And is one even sure that there are only three books under this title? Similar uncertainties are to be faced when it comes to defining what kind of a work *At Swim-Two-Birds* is. O'Brien usually referred to it not as "novel," but as "book," and, in a letter to Ethel Mannin, he suggested that as a genre, his book was open to alternative interpretations: "it is a belly-laugh, or high class intellectual slush, depending on how you look at it" (Letter to Ethel Mannin). Whereas Joyce saw it as endowed with "the true comic spirit," John Jordan considered it "the saddest book ever to come out of Ireland" (5); its publishers regarded it as "fantastic"; it most certainly challenges our reading habits.

"Bound" between the two usual firm frontiers of a front and a back cover, *At Swim-Two-Birds* exhibits many of the characteristics of a "normal" volume, with the usual paratext:

it is most traditionally preceded by a title page and introduces the reader to the text through the transitional threshold of a warning page, followed by another with an epigraph. It starts with a "CHAPTER 1," ends with a conclusion, neatly declared as such, and is punctuated with a triple "good bye." However, these apparently firm indications prove deceptive: the first chapter is not followed by any other; what is presented as conclusion comes after two others, which have been just as clearly signaled--as the "antepenultimate" and the "penultimate"; furthermore, not only are there several conclusions, but the last one, entitled "*Conclusion of the book, ultimate*" (314), professes in its contents its refusal to really conclude, to decide anything: this final boundary is thus in fact repudiated, so that, in spite of the formal leave-taking to the reader and the ultimate full stop, the last border remains open and leaves the reader to his own devices. What the reader had taken for a firm final frontier turns out to be mere trompe l'oeil, sham.

This textual presentation, this refusal to propose just one conclusion, is the application of the personal theory exposed by the narrator in the first page of the book: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings" (9). *At Swim* is the textual enactment of this theory, an exercise in which the theory is illustrated, tested, "exposed," and criticized. The first-person narrator includes in his text his experiment on what he has in mind as to what a novel should be or should not be. Thus immediately after suggesting a possible multiplication of beginnings for his novel, he introduces examples of three different openings. So just as the novel has not one but several conclusive limits, the reader's passage into the text is accomplished through an indistinct zone of alternative options, as if the narrator were reluctant to impose firm directions upon his reader. From the very beginning is established a climate of multiple choices. It is to be observed however that the destabilizing multiplication of openings occurs only after what we can consider the "proper" beginning of *At Swim*: the narrator "opens" his account with what can be considered the one and only actual start of the book--the presentation of the narrator by himself, eating, thinking, and theorizing; and it is only as part of the illustration of his theory that his three openings find their place in his introduction. We can thus say that *At Swim* is endowed with one firm initial narrative border; this boundary marks out a clear diegetic frame, in which a narrator speaks of his life, of his body, of his mind and its activities, of his psyche.

Following the example of the modernist literature that occupies his shelves, the narrator aims at a deliberately Joycean impression of flow, of "stream," of sliding progress. Even if his text is not the pure expression of a stream of consciousness, it does exhibit a mental activity, that of the consciousness of a novelist in the process of creation, receiving impressions from deliberate reflexive processes and reacting to external stimuli he has no control over. As a result his text highlights the effect of jumble produced by the transcription of human consciousness, the chaos of various incoherent impressions induced by the inner and outer stimulations it receives. Whereas traditional novelists concentrate on the inner world of their creation and ignore in the course of their narration whatever itch, twitch, ringing of a bell or call for supper may have disturbed their mental

activity, the narrator of *At Swim* opts for an all-inclusive honesty, abolishing the frontier between the "public" self and the "private" self. His text illustrates how the free and uncontrolled constructions of the imagination can be abruptly interrupted by the excitement of sensitive zones of the brain. Thus the transcription of the activity of his consciousness places side by side the evocation of an ancient Irish mythological hero the narrator is thinking of and the report of an aching sensation in a tooth that for a moment distracts the activity of his brain. No discriminating line has been drawn to separate the level of physical sensations from the images produced by cerebral exercise. An impression of *à plat* has been produced by the erasing of volumes, and effects of recession are blocked by the refusal to give preeminence to one level of experience rather than another.

Not only does the text reproduce in its honesty the meandering, unstable, fluctuating process of biographical reminiscences; it also includes the narrator's report of his literary composition, presented, not as finished product, but in progress, with interruptions and accidents: consequently the novel has a fragmented structure, including the corrections, variations, erasures, or occasional gaps due to the accidental loss of pages of the manuscript or to hesitations in the narrator's memorizing process. The readers are frequently taken to dead ends. For instance a dialogue is interrupted because the page where the narrator claims it had been noted down in the manuscript is supposed to have been mislaid; when the narrator tries to remember the circumstances of the loss of the page, he alludes to a dialogue he had had with his friend Brinsley about his manuscript and leads the reader to expect a report of this conversation with Brinsley; but it is in fact the no longer expected dialogue, previously reported as lost and impossible to transcribe, that is now related (69 71). The reader has been taken astray, conditioned into certain expectations, which are frustrated; a door had been opened and is now closed; and another door which had been shut unexpectedly reopens. This labyrinthine, whimsical, slippery presentation of the text shows the Protean, erratic, elusive working of the mind, and the unreliability of the border between the account of the narrator's private experience and the text of his manuscript.

Whatever impression of life-like authenticity could be given by such an elastic structure is negated by the narrative approach which strongly emphasizes the narrator's distance from the free associations of his consciousness. The act of writing, of putting words on a page, is signaled as carefully as is the activity of thinking, of remembering, of imagining and creating. The technique of this narrator, who, most significantly, does not write in the present but with the distance of the past tense, is that of a manipulator of words and ideas, who frequently reminds his reader of the artificial, written nature of his text. He exerts control over his text, composing, eliminating, organizing, categorizing, segmenting, dividing his page into punctuated paragraphs. The narrative line is broken into neatly detached fragments, highlighted by the use of commentaries and introductory titles. As if the narrator wanted to reassure, reorient the reader in what would have been without them an inextricable jungle, he provides signposts and marks out the limits of the territories covered. The eye is directed to these short typographical boundaries--"*Extract from my Manuscript*," "*Interjection on the part of Brinsley*," "*Note on Constructional or Argumentative Difficulty*." This strict administrative dryness gives a visual impression of

clarity. If there is only a chapter 1 in *At Swim*, this apparent slackness is compensated for by a careful numbering of ten "Biographical Reminiscences," all clearly preceded by typographically distinct titles which should be so many helpful cues to the reader. This clarity is only an illusion. The titles, often vague--"Further extract from Manuscript," "Biographical Reminiscence, part the fourth"--offer little or no information as to the actual content of the section they are supposed to introduce or indeed occasionally provide misleading information: the title announcing Furriskey's "first meeting with those who were destined to become his firm friends" (67) leads to wrong expectations as this section is interrupted by the intrusion of "Biographical Reminiscence, part the fourth" before the reader learns how Furriskey met those friends. Furthermore, the multiplicity of titles, always presented with the same typographical size and font--"*Description of my uncle*," "*nature of the laugh*," "*quality of rasher in use in household*"--interrupting so frequently the flow of the text, are no longer of any help and are even a factor of confusion for the reader, in a similar manner as visitors to an unknown town will have difficulties in finding their way if they are confronted with a profusion of directional signs. Instead of gliding smoothly according to the flow of associative digressions, the reader is in fact distracted off his course by those signposts placed across the way. Consequently all these signs and landmarks which could have been expected to secure the reader in his progress through the text are so many destabilizing barriers blocking all effect of mimesis or "illusion" of reality.

Moreover, the narrator, while exhibiting his art as a writer, destroys the effect of spontaneous flow by highlighting the stylistic tropes or codes he uses. Many of the indications that punctuate the text are technical or stylistic commentaries ("*Name of figure of speech: Synecdoche (or Autonomasia)*"), which divert the reader from the signified to the signifier and interfere with the flow and significance of the diegesis. A formal frontier is erected between the reader and the message expressed on the page. The reader is confronted, not with the "story" of a narrator, but with the text of this story. The narrator also refers to many details an ordinary novelist in the process of writing might have found interesting to exploit, but which normally would not have left the frame of his preparatory notes--his readings, a letter received, a conversation, advice proposed by an acquaintance. Most of this material is in *At Swim* reproduced on the page, assembled as a collage. The narrator, when quoting such notes, uses the same outlining method, surrounding these inserts with clearly delineated contours, providing indications as to their nature and origins. These fragments are put together within the book in the same way as the cuttings, various passing remarks, and documents that can be assembled and kept together between the two covers of a folder. This work in gestation is indeed presented with the same "unfinished" appearance as a manuscript still at the "folder" stage; in fact, when the narrator refers to the way he usually carries his manuscript, it is the term "portfolio" he uses (69): if the usual purpose of a portfolio is to keep together unbound pages, this system implies that the binding is not meant to be permanent; the sequence of the pages is not finalized; they can be displaced, lost, replaced. *At Swim* reflects this fluctuant nature in its structure: to show that the order of the sections has not been rigidly predetermined, the readers are encouraged to start where they like. Even the readers who started the book at the very first page are disoriented when they read

passages about characters who have not yet been brought to "life" or proleptic extracts from narrative frames which have not yet been introduced.

At Swim is not only a destabilizing transcription of biographical memories: extracts from the narrator's fiction in progress are frequently quoted. His character Trellis having been made a novelist, he introduces the account of this novelist's act of creation. So added to the meandering, unstable contours of the narrator's text about himself, the book introduces a second frame, that of a text about Trellis, which leads to a third, that of the novel Trellis is composing. *At Swim* contains a serial chain of inclusions, each leading to another as the narrator reports how Trellis's pencil, "mov[ing] slowly across the ruled paper, leaving words behind it of every size" (54), gives birth to characters who in their turn have literary inclinations and whose private adventures are also recounted. A further complication in this series of narratives occurs, linked with the "illusion of life" provided to Trellis's characters: the characters of Trellis's fiction have been endowed with such a quality of "life" that they live their own existence outside Trellis's ruled paper, outside the story that Trellis had planned for them. The story of Trellis's characters thus extends beyond the frontiers of Trellis's novel. The characters cross the frontiers of Trellis's controlled territory to enter a zone he knows nothing about. The narrator's manuscript includes the report of the life of these characters outside the frontiers of the plot for which they have been planned, as if the reader were taken to see "through the looking glass."

The serial nature of *At Swim* becomes particularly intricate on account of this sideshow of Trellis's characters outside the limits of Trellis's novel, especially when the narrator decides to include extracts from a text conceived by Trellis's characters, a collective work presented in progress, with repetitions and variations. In their own story the characters take revenge against their "employer" Trellis, whom they place as a character in their text, to torture him; the multiplication of the versions of Trellis's tortures suggested by the characters in their collective enterprise, each of which is fully transcribed, reflects a long repetitive work, a slow elaboration. This story, collectively devised, reflects, in an accelerated way, the process of transformation that folk literature undergoes through time, molded upon the storyteller's work and the transforming, re-creating effect of the listeners' feedback. One has the impression that the end will never be reached. As a matter of fact, the manuscript of Orlick is presented with a "part one, chapter one" which will be followed with neither part two nor chapter two, thus imitating the presence of the sole chapter 1 for *At Swim* itself.

If there is no chapter 2 in the story of the mutinous characters, it is because their tale is interrupted by an external occurrence beyond their control: Trellis is on the point of being sentenced to death in the trial that had been plotted for him, but the accidental burning of the pages on which his characters had been given virtual existence in his home entails their disappearance, their end, hence the end of the story they were inventing about Trellis. It is clear that the narrator has put a limit to the series of tales, to what was beginning to take the shape of an infinitely continued series, each story generating another, in an endless *recurso*. With this dramatic authorial intervention on the part of the narrator, the number of fictional frames embedded in *At Swim* has been limited to what appears to be four--the story of the narrator, the narrator's novel (with Trellis as

character), Trellis's novel (with Trellis as author dealing with his characters), and finally Trellis's characters' story (with Trellis as character).

This simplicity is once more illusory. If readers may be one moment reassured by the neatness of these four frames, they are destabilized in their count by the flexibility of the narratives those frames contain. Indeed, following the manner of the inclusions in the first narrative frame, the nesting stories contain, at each level, diverse inserts, letters, pseudoextracts from the press, quotations from encyclopedias, from religious publications. Besides, the characters also have their own little stories to tell, some of which are lengthy, like the tale of Sweeny, an almost integral translation of an old Irish medieval manuscript. Stories pile up, each character wanting to participate with his own contribution. It happens on many occasions, when for instance, after hearing of Sweeny's leaping competition with a hag in his tale, Lamont tells the story of "Sergeant Craddock, the first man in Ireland at the long jump in the time that's gone" (119). The thread of a story leads to another: Orlick's tale has the plastic, ever-changing quality of oral tales, open to all the variations that successive generations of listeners, transformed in their turn into tellers, impart on them. It is in constant process of formation, building up, deconstructing and reconstructing itself with the remanipulation of former material, undergoing various metamorphoses according to the suggestions, corrections, and additions of the writing team, giving the impression of a seething mass in a state of perpetual "becoming." The subordinate stories, like the framing contexts, may have porous boundaries and allow some of their elements to escape into their textual environment, as is the case with Sweeny. Sweeny can cross textual frontiers, be summoned to several stories at the same time: he performs a part in Finn's story at the same time as he is employed as companion to Trellis's characters; he will even be given a part at Trellis's trial. Thus the texts and inserts do not constitute specific individualized worlds with irrefutable characteristics. Scales are confused and all effect of relief, of recession, of one frame encompassing the others is denied. So instead of proceeding confidently from a frame to the next, the reader is confronted with a text which develops in different directions, with narrative digressions and excrescences. The reader is not just submitted to such variations and changes, but also to sudden interruptions or lacunae, corresponding for instance to a hole made in the paper by the finger of a character. Moreover, the status of the characters as regards their narrative frame is hesitant. Orlick belongs both to the level of Trellis's life, being Trellis's own begotten son, and to that of his fiction, born of Sheila, one of Trellis's heroines; and we know that he also belongs to the mutinous section, where he is given a role of "author" in the story that tortures his father Trellis. The frontiers between "texts" are unstable when characters can thus wander from frame to frame. To add to the general confusion of frames, inserts, and overlapping fictional worlds, the reader is confronted with satellite frames or in between zones, difficult to situate anywhere in the general structure. Furriskey can be seen immediately after his "birth," before his actual "entry" into the role assigned to him by Trellis, before he is even told what part he is supposed to enact; he is presented before his story begins, and the narrative zone where he is described does not belong to any diegetic domain in the book, as if it were between the lines, in a no-man's-land that has been given virtual shape and substance but no identified narrative voice. Narrative space has lost its stability, its harmonious security, its clearly defined boundaries. It has become pluralized.

It has fragmented into several heterogeneous parts whose limits fail to keep their contents secure and well defined.

This disappearance of the boundaries that usually keep characters within the textual environment which has given them their literary existence, which defines them and gives them their coherence and integrity, is exploited further in one of the theories expressed by the narrator, in which he claims that characters, once created, become part of a limbo from which they can be extracted at will (33). The fact that those characters are "in limbo" suggests they do not belong exclusively to their original textual territory or any determined space, but to an in-between zone, an indeterminate place, neither here nor there, a border region, according to the etymological meaning of the word--*limbus*, in Latin, meaning *border*. The character of fiction, according to this theory, floats outside the limits of the work to which it owes its existence; this limbo is, according to the narrator in *At Swim*, a common, open territory, devoid of frontiers, which can be explored and exploited by all authors. Thus in *At Swim* Sweeny is taken out of his mythological limbo, as are the Celtic giant Finn Mac Cool and the folkloric Pooka. Other characters claim to have had an existence in other compositions, like Shanahan, "who had appeared in many of the well-known tales of Mr Tracy" (73), or Lamont, who alludes to "an adventure which once befell him in a book" (73). All these characters taken from various cultural, spacial, and temporal backgrounds, fictive or real, are "hired" by Trellis to play a part in his book. They share the same adventures in a Dublin hotel, where "there is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr McCool . . . is on the floor above. The cellar is full of leprechauns" (47). Not only authors but also characters can help themselves to this big collection of ready-made figures: for instance, when Trellis's characters Lamont and Shanahan meet in their peregrinations Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews, it is not because the author Trellis has summoned Slug and Shorty, but because Slug and Shorty are private acquaintances of the characters Lamont and Shanahan, and, as such, have the possibility of being recognized by them as part of their own past private experience and consequently of being invited to share their personal new adventures. So the author Trellis, who thought he had borrowed a "limited" number of characters, is incapable of controlling the number of other "secondary" characters his employees may feel like taking along with them out of this limbo. It is thus difficult to know to which frame Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews belong, since they had not been planned in Trellis's project--so do not belong to his narrative level--and on the other hand, since Trellis's characters have not yet started composing their story, they do not belong, at this stage, to this frame either. They have been taken out of a limbo into another limbo, another uncertain border.

In addition to these floating frame-limits the young novelist blurs the frontier between the literary limbo from which an author can borrow fictional characters who have already an existence in libraries or in the collective memory--like Finn Mac Cool or Sweeny--and a "pseudolimbo" of fictional characters, like Lamont and Shanahan, borrowed from fictional works by fictional authors. There is no scale of recession in this domain either. Once named, the character exists, whoever its author, fictive or real, may have been. Disparate elements of culture become the ingredients of a new brew which ignores the barriers that separate fact and fiction, myth and reality, transgresses the frontiers between past and present. The characters drawn from a common reservoir are all old neighbors, as

it were. The Pooka refers to King Sweeny as if he were a mere ordinary Dublin man--"I think I know the gentleman. . . . I fancy . . . that it is a party by the name of Sweeny. He is not all in it" (178). The frontiers that usually separate noble and popular literature are abolished by this leveling of the hierarchy between characters, by this democratic suppression of literary "classes"; nonetheless, the characters bring along with them in their new environment their "private," distinct cultural background and the experience acquired in their "existence" anterior to their present employment; there are still elements from their former context which cling to them and mingle with their new textual domain. They keep their language, their style, their mannerisms, blatantly exposed by the device of *oratio recta*: the elaborate refinement of Finn Mac Cool clashes with Shanahan's pedestrian English; Shorty Andrews still keeps the slouch, the manners, the lexicon of the cowboy he is supposed to have been in another story; as to Sweeny, his sides, when Trellis's characters encounter him, are still "filled with the underwood of the trees of Erin" where Irish mythology had perched him. Through the porous boundaries of each fragment, images and discourses from disparate sources insinuate themselves and contaminate the new context, jeopardizing its homogeneity and integrity. O'Brien obviously plays with the comic situations entailed by the interpenetration of the world of myth and the modern world, the poetic and the trivial. Burlesque effects are provoked by the promiscuity of the mythical and the ordinary. The frontiers between styles are often breached. Thus Sweeny the poet can interrupt his long chant with such a remark as "I will take a hand," becoming involved in a game of poker. The stylistic frontiers between characters can thus disappear: the style of Finn is used by the narrator to describe Trellis, and a vulgar line borrowed from the fictitious popular poet Casey finds its way into a style imitative of Sweeny's stanzas uttered by Shanahan: "When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the colour of bran, when a badger bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN" (112-13). The elimination of the frontiers between past and present, between fiction and reality, between the mythical and the commonplace, is part of a general atmosphere of playful whimsicality, of fantasy.

The combination of incongruous elements, the merging of usually separate worlds, contributes to the disorientation of the reader who, in spite of frequent reminders of the "literary" dimension of the text in the commentaries on writing techniques, retains the automatism of a referential use of language. The representational understanding of language is exploited and taken literally when Trellis's characters plan to exterminate their author Trellis with weapons just written or spoken about. O'Brien explores the constructibility of language, the referential and figural quality of words, their mysterious power. The communication between the world of language and the world of reality goes as far as to introduce a total confusion between the word and the material world it names. There is a sliding between the signifier and the signified; the word becomes the thing; the metaphor is taken literally; the meaning of the word slides from the abstract to the concrete: for instance, when the term *kangaroo* is presented as "*contained in marsupial*, which is a broader and more comprehensive word" (177), the Pooka immediately converts the notion into a visualization of a marsupial carrying a kangaroo in its pouch. The distinction is blurred between the abstract and the substantial, the nonorganic and the organic, the inanimate and the animate. The most abstract of words, the word that is not even supposed to have ever "represented" or signified anything, like a grammatical

notion--a tense--crosses the limits of its linguistic function to be given a semantic role: one of the tortures envisaged for Trellis is "to pierce him with a pluperfect," and two syntagmas taken from a Latin sentence--"Timeo Danaos et Dona Ferentes"--are transliterated into two Greek characters, Timothy Danaos and Dona Ferentes. What is implied is that whether named Timeo or Timothy, a character is only ink printed on paper and that a weapon referred to in a word is no less a fictional text when it is called "knife" than when called "pluperfect." *At Swim* confronts its readers with the reality of their representational habits by showing them how their imagination can be lured by mere printed letters.

It is on the lack of a distinct frontier between the character of ink and the illusion of reality that *At Swim* bases most of its effects. The word that has named Trellis has given him as much material substance as the words naming his characters give them materiality, hence the possibility that letters offer Trellis, created as author, to give "castaways of his own wardrobe" to his characters and even have physical intercourse, of a textual/sexual kind, with one of his female characters. What is exploited here is the power of the word to create illusions of experience, even if the situations suggested have nothing to do with the world the reader has left before entering the text. *At Swim* is a *fabula*, where the physical limits that natural laws force upon reality are ignored, where the time space limits of normal experience are subverted. Characters go through walls; "three fifties of fosterlings can engage with handball against the wideness of [Finn's] backside" (10). Creation becomes a sort of delirium where the frontiers of time and space can be traversed, where everything can merge, where the course of time can be reversed. There may be no limit to the agony inflicted upon Trellis when the laws of nature are thus defied, and Trellis's agony is all the more enduring as, in spite of the disintegration of his body, his life refuses to depart, the magic of the text supporting him "by the loan of supernatural strength" (282), and endowing him with such a quality of endurance that, in spite of his mangled and fragmented body, he does not lose his consciousness, including that of suffering, and still feels, thinks, expresses himself, and can even, when he attempts to defend his rights, manipulate a rational language. The text in its power to conjure visions can ignore the frontiers of what a human constitution could normally tolerate. The atmosphere of magic is nevertheless sometimes interrupted by reminders of realistic human limits: for instance the magic which enables the birth of an adult male by the process of "aestho autogamy" does not apply to Sheila's body since, though fictional, Sheila proves unable to survive the delivery of her progeny. The reader is given signs of the unreliability of the cooperation between the two worlds, that of magic, that of reality, and is destabilized by the erection of such barriers between fields where magic prevails and others submitted to natural laws. Moreover those frontiers are ill-defined: the distinction between where the magic will work and where it will not is arbitrary. The effects of magic are in fact entirely dependent on one will, that of the fabulist, the manipulator of words.

From his "control tower," the narrator fills, in his text about Trellis's characters, the gap between the fictional existence that their author Trellis has conceived for them--in the text of his book, in which they have predefined functions--and the illusion of life the reader of Trellis's book would normally be expected to construct about them. He drops

the barrier that usually contains the life of the characters inside the book. Indeed, he erases the frontier between the level of the diegesis and what is not written but usually taken for granted by the reader--the life of the characters "between chapters," during the ellipses of the text. Moreover he invents for them yet another frontier that he transgresses, a frontier the reader would never think of considering, that which separates the context for which their author has planned the characters and given them a certain plausibility and another form of existence without any relation to the diegetic context. He superimposes another dimension of "life" in the character, a literal interpretation of the notion of life, a confusion between fictional life and real life, which subverts the conventions of "believability" of the character. What the narrator's theory claims for characters is the same rights to a private life as actors have: the narrator thus creates an additional zone of existence for the characters, giving them "substance" outside the role assigned to them in the plot. Not only does he allow the characters this private life in theory, but he actually lets the reader have access to it. Paradoxically, by adding reality to the characters, by making them appear as if they were actors with a private life, the narrator deprives the characters of their capacity to delude us into "suspending our disbelief." The narrator interferes with the "leap" the reader's imagination usually makes in order to build up the fictional existence of the character. As if at the theater during the performance of a play the audience were allowed to peep into the wings and see that the actor who a minute before was Macbeth on the stage is now, while the play is still going on on the stage, sharing a sandwich with one of the witches: all possibility of "believing" in King Macbeth would be destroyed.

The reader is left in doubt as to the narrative frame in which those characters' private adventures occur: they are characters in Trellis's novel, so should belong to Trellis's narrative frame, but since they exist outside his control, outside his writing, having escaped from his watch, they are no longer within the frontiers of his text. The characters have, of course, a textual existence since it is included in the narrator's manuscript, but at another level they have been given an "extratextual" existence: they "live" in a new dimension, another territory, a no-man's-land, outside the limits of the text. But of what text? Trellis's novel has indeed no textual substance in *At Swim*; if the reader is acquainted with it, it is only because the student-narrator speaks about it or the characters escape from it. Trellis's novel does not really exist as text. The readers who had included Trellis's manuscript in the narrative structure of *At Swim* discover its absence when they try to seize it. This narrative contour was a false lead and slips into nothingness: the author Trellis is lengthily described, with his reading, eating, sleeping habits, his novelistic "projected labour" (48); synopses of his work are provided; his way of writing, of creating characters is evoked; his characters are present, the functions he has devised for them are described, but if those characters are seen in action, this action has nothing to do with Trellis's novel. The characters allude to Trellis as employer in their life outside his novel and dread the moment they will have to return to it, but nowhere in *At Swim* do we find extracts from Trellis's novel presented as such. This frame is only *trompe l'oeil*. Instead of Trellis's novel, what the reader gets is the story of the author Trellis and the story of Trellis's characters, the story of their "private" life, independent of Trellis's plot, and the story they decide to compose together, their book in progress.

Trellis's status keeps changing during the course of *At Swim*: character at the level of the narrator's creation, author at the level of his own ambitions, Trellis again becomes a character at the level of his characters' virtual existence. He is at this level no longer presented as source of the text, but object. The status of the characters consequently fluctuates too. Not only do they become authors, but, listening to their neighbors' contributions to their collective tale, they also play the parts of readers and critics. They thus widely transgress the frontiers of the obedient role that had been assigned to them by their creator Trellis. This liberation is operated by another creator, the young narrator. Here again the frontier of their origin is blurred, since they have a dual parentage: Trellis conceived them as determined creatures, but the narrator allowed them free will and rebellious instincts. These characters have the uncertain status of their double origin and are pulled in different directions. Liberated from one text they seem however to be trapped into another, for their freedom indeed is uncertain: Can we say that Orlick is a free character when we know that a Pooka has sown in him the seeds of *non serviam* and predetermined him to follow the path of revolt and revenge? If the rebellious characters who manipulate their father Trellis seem to have been freed, the novelist at the origin of their free will ultimately proves to have in reality supreme control over them, since he is the one who decides to put an end to their existence. Or is he? This narrator, who seems to be in full control of his narration, who has the last word and decides to put an end to the serial vertigo of stories, is after all but a character himself, in the hands of an invisible creator, himself an unclearly identified figure, Brian O'Nolan, hiding behind the mask of an author, Flann O'Brien, the name printed on the cover of the published book.

Reaching this identity at the origin of the book, one has the impression of touching its initial limit, that of its author. But there again the construction of the book, the accumulation of quotations from various sources, certain pages borrowed from the Bible, tend to demonstrate that the limits of the authorial voice are themselves indistinct. Yet there may be one voice controlling these various authorial sources: invisible, distant, mysterious but all-powerful, a general controlling master may be hidden, weaving a structure with all the disjointed segments of his main character's work in progress and possibly building a coherent whole in which the reader could hope to trace the limits of a meaning. The reader is indeed encouraged within the text to consider a musical interpretation of the book when one of the characters evokes "the fugal and contrapuntal character of Bach's work" (156). A connection is established between this textual remark and the serial effects of recursivity derived from the accretion of stories in *At Swim*, where it is possible to recognize the structural elements of a fugue and Bach's endlessly rising canon. The technique of superposition, the intertwining of frontiers, are textual adaptations of the simultaneous sounds of counterpoint in music. Another self-reflexive intratextual commentary can be observed in the evocation of the "four figures" of the fugue, from which "it is a great art that can evolve a fifth Excellence": the fifth level of "excellence" may be interpreted as the level of the whole finished work, in which the multiplication of narrative contexts, the ruptures, the heterogeneous fragments, like in a fugue, allow different modes and variations on several themes, linking each character to characters of other narrative levels, creating correspondences from section to section, with a unifying intention.

The shifting figures of the characters can be perceived as part of a thematic scheme, and uncertainty, dizziness, dissolution of the identity, as variations on symptoms of neurosis. This interpretation is supported in the apotheosis of the final page, with its emphasis on the notion of paranoia, which reflects back on the whole book and constitutes a sort of guidance as to intertextual connections between images of folly, whether they be a simple evocation of the madness of Emperor Nero in a dialogue or more extensively developed illustrations, such as the tale of mad Sweeny. It is possible to see in the tortures of the author-image by his characters a textual projection of Trellis's neurotic hallucinations; Trellis, who confesses his state of mental exhaustion to his servant Teresa, suffers from too intense cerebral concentration and has become haunted by his creation. The shape of the text can be considered a metaphoric echo of Trellis's mental confusion. The folly metaphor serves several purposes simultaneously: if the mutiny of the characters corresponds to the phantasms that haunt Trellis's heated brain, the frenzy of the text and the apparently interminable acts of violent revenge exerted against Trellis can also be interpreted as projections of the rebellious animosity the student-narrator covertly nurtures as regards his uncle. It is clear that the narrator shares phobias with Trellis. This narrator who creates a character that can be considered neurotic is not exempt from his own psychic disturbances. If he certainly assuages his rebellious impulses while writing about Trellis, his act of writing also evinces certain problems with self-definition, with the limits of his person, with the frontiers of his body. Particularly significant is the parallelism between the excess of attentiveness of Trellis to his own body and the narrator's own anxious obsession with the materiality of his flesh, with its involvement in the whirl of biological life.

The confidences of the narrator and the dialogues he reports express his awareness of the continuous flow of life. In spite of the textual interruptions due to the profusion of inserts, the biographical reminiscences of the narrator take into account the movement of life and the course of time. Season follows season. The narrator observes the chronological progress of food through the body, comments on the chemical transformation that a beverage has to undergo during the process of digestion. He notes the concatenation of causes and effects leading from one phenomenon to the next. This consciousness of the flux of life, of its powerful energies, of the mysterious alchemies of the body, can be felt in the effervescence of his characters' boils and pimples--"When the quality of the blood isn't first class, out march our friends the pimples" (225), explains Lamont. This sense of the dynamics of life is echoed in the fantastic constructions of the characters' fiction, in the prolific exuberance of the text, where story mingles into story, where a symphony of conversations on different subjects going on at the same time among several characters is reported verbatim (89), exploding the limits of the discursivity of language and expressing polyphonic effects. This all-inclusiveness, this transposition in art of the elasticity and the volume of life, connects O'Brien to the ancient Celtic tradition, with its infinite power of proliferation. There is in *At Swim* a Celtic exuberance and vitality, expressed in the refusal to stop, to conclude, in the flow of words, the hyperbolic accumulation of lists, the inexhaustibility of catalogs, in the enumeration of encyclopedic facts. This text which proceeds by accretion, by addition, as if there were not going to be any stopping point, is reminiscent of the convoluted lines of the Book of Kells. To an impression of infinity also contributes the recursive embedding of story within story and

the fact that the same story can be told over and over again in various forms. Variations on the theme of Sweeny's tortures, variations on the theme of mutiny, variations on the theme of punishment: the baroque, extravagant energy that is imparted to Trellis's torturers, hence to the victimized Trellis whose life is perpetually maintained or renewed by the insistence of the rebellious narrators to prolong their tale of torment, this refusal to put an end to their story on the part of the characters, which corresponds to the frenetic violence of their revolt, is also the sign of the energy that inhabits them, of the exuberance of their life. The text expresses the ebullience of life.

The energy of the text, which can suggest the whirl of biological chains of transformation, can also transcend the frontiers of physical experience and confer additional malleability to matter, confusing the identifying limits of objects. The body, by the magic of words, can be submitted to transmutations, dilatations, permutations. The text of *At Swim*, which contains references to old Celtic tales, includes some of their accounts of heroes' bodies submitted to spectacular shape shifting, to distortions, disfigurements, and mutilations. In the fantastic imagination of his torturers, Trellis is transformed into "a buck rat with a black pointed snout and a scaly tail," while the Pooka, better to chase him, is in his turn metamorphosed into "a white-haired Airedale terrier, the natural enemy of the rat from the start of time" (262-63). Such metamorphoses are imitations, in a burlesque vein, of the transformations of King Sweeny into a birdlike creature in the Irish myth from which he has been borrowed. A storyteller can manipulate the substance of his heroes like play dough: Finn Mac Cool, who in *At Swim* is not only the hero of Irish mythology but also a commentator on the art of storytelling and on his own treatment in literature, mentions the transformation of *The Children of Lir* "into white swans with the loss of their own bodies" (25) and evoking his own metamorphoses, complains about being "twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a storyteller's book-web" (24) after having chanted the litany of his simultaneous identities--"I am Cuchulain, I am Patrick. I am Carbery-Cathead, I am Goll. I am my own father and my son. I am every hero from the crack of time" (24), a confusion of selves that transgresses the frontiers of humanity and even slips away from the domain of living creatures--"I am a tree for wind-siege. I am a windmill. I am a hole in a wall" (18). Such parodic echoes of the old Celtic use of Protean creatures, which can also be interpreted as probable imitations of the Joycean use of confused identities in *Ulysses*, constitute an autoreferential image on the part of the text and a projection of the unstable limits of the characters' identity in *At Swim*.

Just as the spirals of illuminated medieval manuscripts confuse in the same whirl the folds of an Evangelist's vestment and the tail of a snake or other beast, identities seem to merge in the fictions contained in *At Swim*. The frontiers between man and animal can be dissolved: a cow can talk; King Sweeny is bird as well as man; the Pooka wonders if Miss Lamont is a man (158) and does not know if his wife is a woman or a kangaroo (150); he even wonders if she is not a mere "wrinkle" or a "shadow" (146). The human body loses the stability of its identity, its structural consistency. The characters are not treated as finite wholes, as defined circumscribed bodies. Their physical determinacy is transcended. In certain characters there is no limit between the monstrous and the human. The Pooka, who has nonhuman features, behaves and speaks like a human and shares the

activities of the plain people of Ireland. The Good Fairy has no materiality, is only a spirit, but is endowed with the faculty of speech and with physical sensations. Appearances--or nonappearances in the case of a spirit--cannot be trusted. Trellis is fooled by tricks of light that make the difference between blue and green indistinct. The inner dimension of characters is no more reliable: the Pooka, supposed to be a creature of the devil variety, who indeed sows seeds of revolt in Orlick, is also a most civil, generous person, whereas the "Good" Fairy is cantankerous and cheats at cards. Furriskey, who was planned as the villain of Trellis's tale, will, instead of playing the part of alcoholic lecherer that had been outlined for him, fall in love and become a most conventionally behaved husband, expressing conformist bourgeois points of view. Conversely, Finn, who was to be a father to Peggy, will actually "assail" her. Trellis himself is difficult to seize and his morality cannot be trusted: although he professes to be an advocate of virtue in the book he has begun to write in which he nonetheless puts "plenty of smut" (47)--he is the one who assaults his young heroine Sheila Lamont (86). He has features--which connect him to the student-narrator, since he is like him a novelist lazing in his bed and has certain obsessions with hygiene, but he also resembles the student's uncle, whose rigid moral principles and fussiness he appears to duplicate. Not only has Trellis been given indistinct personality features, but the very limits of his character do not correspond to those of an individual identity since the latter has been usurped: indeed, the young novelist confesses that he used, to describe "Trellis's person," a passage which refers to another--"to Doctor Beatty (now with God) but boldly I took it for my own" (40). This lack of firm individuality does not only concern Trellis: one of the reproaches formulated by the narrator's friend, Brinsley, about the characters in the manuscript he has been given to read is that they could be interchangeable.

The blurring of distinctions between individuals, the erasing of generic frontiers between animal, vegetable, or mineral, the confusion between the concrete and the abstract, the lack of separation between ideas and perceptions, the merging of mind and matter, are symptomatic of a potential dissolution of the self. Such examples of uncertain frontiers are not limited to the levels explicitly presented as fiction in this multilayered novel. Although it is true that the first level, supposed to represent the world of the narrator's "reality," is free of fantastic confusions, in so far as material objects usually keep their usual contours (we do not find at this level chamberpots transformed, as in Trellis's story, into the castors of a bed), if indeed past and present do not communicate in the house of the uncle, nonetheless the characters at this realistic level do give signs of unstable, unreliable identities, of structural inconsistencies. The uncle is unpredictable, first irritable and cantankerous, finally generous and affectionate. If the uncle's humor as regards his nephew is variable, the narrator himself when he describes him slides from a disparaging presentation to a more positive one, promoting him from "Guinness clerkship the third class" to responsible membership of "large commercial concern." One could go as far as to say that the narrator is several persons in one, since he often hides his true face and wears masks. He never tells his uncle about his novelistic enterprise and leads a sort of "double life" at home, letting his uncle believe he is a lazy young man who never opens a book at all, whereas he proves to be quite diligent and productive as a writer and will be successful in his college examinations. In his literary account he assumes similar ambiguous appearances: on the one hand he dwells on images of himself as a gambler,

getting drunk and "embracing virgins" instead of attending lectures, yet he also describes himself as "purporting to be an immoral character," which implies he only plays a part when he leads this dissolute life. He often usurps identities, being no longer his own self but another: this is obvious in his imitation of written styles in his manuscript and in his private conversations with his friends when he "couches" his talk "in the accent of the lower or working classes" (31). As a connoisseur in literary matters and expert in the imitation of styles, he molds his biography, the identity he gives himself, on models: if Trellis's identity is usurped, the narrator's identity is also borrowed; it is indeed possible to recognize in his poses features of Stephen Dedalus/James Joyce, whose peregrinations in the Irishtown area, whose aesthetic theorizing and introspective inclinations he imitates. The narrator is thus an amalgam of poses.

Hesitant as to the definition of his personality, the narrator also expresses his sense of the vulnerability of his physical contours. While projecting himself as rebel in Trellis's aggressors, he also expresses by proxy in Trellis his own anxious fear of physical exposure. Trellis's mangled body signals the narrator's consciousness of the vulnerability of a body submitted to the assaults of a hostile environment. The narrator indeed discloses in his biographical reminiscences certain apprehensions concerning the fragility of his body, his fear, for instance, as regards the unwelcome contact between his person and the snow or the cold rainy weather outside (83). The narrator does not just suffer from problems of communication with his uncle but also with the world at large. This anguish transpires in the iteration of significant images. In the network of correspondences between the primary narrative and the nesting stories, it is no coincidence that when Sweeny is shifted from Finn's tale to his "physical" encounter with characters from Trellis's fiction, it should not be his birdlike, aerial aspect as exile from the world of earth and matter that was retained, but his fleshly, earth-bound materiality. His falls have afflicted him with gaping wounds, which transform him into "a human prickles [*sic*]" (179), stuffed with the surrounding briars; the thorns around are, as for them, crimson with Sweeny's blood. Blood and thorns merge; what should be inside is outside; what should stay out of the body has invaded it, the body failing to form a protective barrier from the assaults of the environment. Sweeny, who will have in Orlick's story the features of tortured Trellis, is, like Trellis, a projection of the narrator's neurotic fears as regards the uncertain frontiers of his body. The images of transmigration of matter into other bodies, of perpetual metamorphoses, are other forms of expression of a sense of existential instability connected with the impression of weakness due to an imperfectly circumscribed body. Eating, drinking, evacuating are functions that the narrator and his group of friends are obsessively concerned with: they are indicators of the openness of the body which can absorb external elements but also evacuate them and lose part of itself in the process. The energy of life can be perceived as threatening for the individual immersed in its flow. The many gaps and openings in the body referred to by the narrator are the signs of an obsession with the passage from the body into the external world. The dynamization of matter, the restless energy that is felt in *At Swim*, so reminiscent of Celtic art, does not suggest so much an *élan vital* of a Bergsonian nature as a Swiftian or Beckettian sense of the continuous flux of an oozing substance.

The permeability of bodily frontiers is a reminder of the fragility of the self attached to this vulnerable envelope that cannot be disposed of. In spite of all the efforts of the narrator to erect frontiers between his body and the outside world, fending off the elements behind the "citadel" of his coat or "reclining safe from ill and infection in the envelope of [his] bed" (83), he cannot detach himself from his materiality. Even if, engrossed in his thoughts, he may hope to abstract himself from the world of matter, he never manages altogether to erect an unbreachable frontier between his body and his mind. Constantly the body recalls its presence to the young intellectual's attention when he wishes to black out his consciousness and retire "into the kingdom of his mind." As an anticonformist young student the narrator might have been expected to ignore the moralistic essays he was coming across, warning him of the danger of decrepitude and "degeneration of the tissues," linked for example to an excessive use of alcohol; if it is true that their inclusion within the text enhances the narrator's sarcastic ignorance of the instructions they contain, their message is not devoid of irony: the moralistic teaching of the Christian Brothers is in fact a textual echo of the young student's own preoccupations. Indeed, he can himself observe, not without a sense of shame, the effects on his person of alcohol and bodily neglect. He resents the vermin on his clothes and flesh, the result of an endless chain of biological causes and effects: if one does not wash, one's body becomes verminous, lice proliferate, and even if one's soiled articles of clothing are hidden under a mattress, unwholesome smells will continue to propagate, contaminating the atmosphere.

The narrator bases most of his fantastic constructions on the transposition into the world of fiction of the chain of biological connections and interactions, implying, in the excess of certain applications, all the difficulties the author of a naturalistic fiction encounters if he wants to respect the material substance of characters: we have seen the example of Sheila's problems with the birth of Orlick; in a similar way a mere cow used as an element of the decor may be difficult to keep if the implications of her "life" are taken into account, for "a cow will suffer extreme discomfort if not milked at least once in twenty-four hours" (294-95). The chemistry of matter penetrates the process of creation: the supernatural aura that surrounds the creation of Furriskey is a cloud of vapor which the character perceives physically with a smarting in his eyes and a dilation of his pores. The liberties the narrator takes with the constraints of material existence in his fiction, the metamorphoses, contorsions of bodies, the liberation of certain characters from the space and time limits of physical existence can be understood as ways on the narrator's part of compensating for his own biological determinism.

An imaginative spiritual process can indeed virtually shatter the material limits of existence. The narrator shows several characters who, as practitioners of "psycho-eugenics," dream of achieving an act of procreation without conception or pregnancy. Aesthoautogamic conception changes "the monotonous and unimaginative process by which all children are invariably born young" (56). What a novelist performs constantly, the creation of characters already adults at the instant of conception and born with a memory, is a way of disposing with the initial biological limit of existence; a novelist has the power of displacing this limit from infancy to adulthood. However, even in the free constructions of his imagination the narrator confesses his technical difficulties in erecting a frontier between the spiritual and the physical. At the moment of conceiving a

character that would be half-flesh and half-spirit, he is blocked by the problem of how to describe the semihumanity of a "quasi-illusory type of character" (206). The conception of a purely spiritual character is no easier: the "Good Fairy," who is supposed to have no body that it could feed and who is invisible to the other characters, keeps complaining about physical assaults on its person, like thorny brambles or unpleasant smells; it is endowed with the faculty of speaking, and if it does not have any pockets and, hence, "cannot keep a pipe," it does smoke cigarettes. Its invisibility itself is uncertain since the Pooka comments on a movement produced by the thumb of this invisible Fairy: "If I could only see your thumb the time you jerked it" (158).

The imagination of the narrator admits that a spirit can handle the same language as an organic creature. In the encounter between the Fairy and the Pooka, there is no linguistic barrier between the invisible spirit of the Fairy and the allegedly visible materiality of its interlocutor. Their handling of discourse is, as a matter of fact, edifying. Different subjects are debated at the same time by the two characters and reported in a "multi-clause colloquy" (150-57). How could two persons in the reality of the author's and reader's experience orally conduct such a dialogue, with "fifteen subordinate clauses in all . . . the substance of each of them contain[ing] matter for a colloquy in itself" (155)? In this case it is the limits of what a normally constituted human brain can master orally and the limitless possibilities of written language that are confused. While playing with the powers of language in his fantasy, O'Brien evidences a certain superiority of written discourse over the forces of disorder. Could the structure of language offer a way of controlling the threatening exuberance of life, of taming it?

One of the possible effects of the linearity of language is indeed to flatten perspectives and reduce the volume of life: it is what happens when the account of a game of chess, described by the Pooka, is intertwined, without any indication of recession, with the account of the game of poker in which he is participating (200-01). The recourse to the language of mathematics also provides an impression of organization, introducing the geometry of straight lines, hypotenuses, and exact measures where the eye might have seen only a confusion of forms. Numbers, shapes, diagrams are introduced in the text. Catalogs, classifications, and neatly defined categories also contribute to an impression of organization and method. As if better to encompass the objects named, the narrator often accompanies his words with their definitions: "He was seated at his diptych or ancient two-leaved hinged writing-table" (9); "scirrhous, and mycetoma meaning respectively food when acted upon by gastric juices and converted into acid pulp" (277). However, even if the frames of the sentences and the form of the discourse have the firm appearance of "the sophistry of mathematics," it is not numbers that are manipulated, but words--which have the propriety of referring to objects and may refer to several different objects at the same time. The apparent rigour of verbal manipulation, with the abundance of definitions, works in fact in two different directions: the definition is supposedly intended to reaffirm the meaning of the word, but it also contributes to an impression of diluteness, of elasticity. Moreover, the definitions, instead of confirming to the readers the firm boundaries of the signifiers, frequently reveal fluctuating meanings:

Extract from Concise Oxford Dictionary : Kiss, n. Caress given with lips; (Billiards) impact between moving balls; kind of sugar plum. (71)

The frontier between notions is ignored by language, which can confuse instead of clarify. The many puns which amuse the characters exploit the slipperiness of language, the unstable nature of signification. Words are a supple material that can be used for different purposes: the narrator for instance can "make a book" in a double way, as the horseracing gambler that he is and as a novelist. Since there are several signifieds for one signifier, the frontiers between distinct orders of meaning can be blurred; mercurial passages from one semantic world to a totally different one are allowed. Confusions arise from this polysemy: when the barriers between two different meanings become porous, a "spirit," invisible but corresponding to an immaterial essence, can be contaminated by another "spirit," just as intangible, but distilled from a material substance: "I am perfectly sure that spirit though you be you would be troubled by a fog, for there are few things so spiritual . . . as a wispy fog . . ." (153). The magic constitutive potentialities of language evidenced in all the liberties it allows are also ironic illustrations of its unreliability.

At Swim exploits this destabilizing plasticity of language. Words are arranged, put together, examined, scrutinized, technically commented upon. A word leads to a definition, which requires the use of other words, of comparisons; the meaning thus slips away from the object it was supposed to refer to. Or the definition of the word leads to another, the text turning back on itself--"dittany see fraxinella above" (278)--in what proves to be a tautological circle, for the definition of fraxinella supplied a few lines earlier does not clarify anything--"fraxinella species of garden dittany" (278). The word repeating itself in another form in its definition, contributing to the general atmosphere of metamorphosis and flux, keeps the readers at the level of words while depriving them of any significance. The text only refers to itself with a loopleftike effect. The only reality communicated by the reading of the text is that of the text. The reader who expected a meaning only finds characters of the alphabetic variety. The same effect is produced when a synonym, or a translation into another language, is indicated beside the English term--"*Name of figure of speech: Synechdoche (or Autonomasia)*" (63). The narrator continually performs such translations, sliding from a word to its definition, to its synonym, to its equivalent in another tongue. This slippage may have nothing to do with semantic similarities: semantic barriers are transgressed in a translanguistic homophony when the title of Heine's novel--*die Harzreise*--evokes "Heartrise" (52), more familiar to an English speaker. The purpose of the text in the display of such synonyms or homophonies cannot be to express or clarify a meaning. The recourse to a translation may even confuse rather than enlighten the reader if it arbitrarily substitutes itself for the English word which existed to describe a most concrete ordinary phenomenon: when a noise is described by the use of a Greek word, most readers will have no idea of what the noise may have been.

Words are often manipulated for their quaintness and "difference" rather than for the message they convey. The "difference" in words does not always suggest a "difference" in the object named, which is obvious in the use of synonyms. The most specific and scholarly terms may prove insufficient to perform a referential, defining function, to

signal the distinctive limits of an object or the outlines of an individual personality: when the narrator's friend Brinsley remarks that the characters of the manuscript he has been given to read could be interchangeable, the narrator carefully endeavors to ascribe to each of them a set of three distinctive features, expressed in a learned, scientific way, yet he fails to transmit any sense of life or original individuality. Instead of defining characters, the random choice of personality features reinforces the very impression of interchangeability the narrator was supposed to correct. Words may only pretend to signify and be mere shells suggesting no meaning. They may be so technical that only specialists can know what they refer to: whole pages of *At Swim* are filled with long lists of learned words from the field of botany or anatomy without suggesting any global signification to the readers who, unless they are specialists, have the impression of being in front of a foreign language and wish words could "tell" them something; a barrier has been interposed, that of a technicality which destroys the relationship between what the text says and what the reader experiences.

In *At Swim*, the mechanics of language may matter more than content, the art of discourse more than the conclusions reached. As a matter of fact, certain arguments do not lead to clarifications, but to confusion. Thus the exchange between the Pooka and the Good Fairy after their first meeting is a long rhetorical game, an exercise in sophistry, in which the main point for both protagonists is to prove capable of memorizing topics, in an ever-increasing number, and to deal with them in the proper order; their discourse is rational, methodical, has the framework of Aristotelian logic, yet stretches toward nonsense, at the uncertain border between the logical and the impossible. Such a pointless use of language is emphasized in the encyclopedic exposé of facts, which serves apparently no other purpose but to sustain a nonsensical atmosphere in a gratuitous display of scholarly terms. The narrator often seems to have opened a dictionary and tried to find the most arcane terms. Insofar as the use of learned, technical terms blocks most readers' understanding, we could say that instead of using words to clarify meaning, to make the text transparent, the narrator sometimes uses them to erect a barrier between the reader and the meaning of the text. Quite often, the definitions, explanations, synonyms, commentaries, translations, instead of clarifying the meaning, provoke in their profusion an excess of meaning which in fact leads to no meaning at all. The reader's understanding is forced to slip away from the immediate message. In a parallel way, the interference of figures of speech, of comparisons or metaphors, forces the reader to leave the situational context that is being described, for a completely different destination. The imagination of the reader is thus manipulated, forced to slide from one context to an incongruous one: "Byrne made a noise in the darkness of a kind associated with the forcible opening of the lid of a tin container" (143). Whereas words in usual practice perform unnoticeably the operation of naming, of suggesting the thing they name, in the text of *At Swim* the process of naming becomes perceptible, staged, obtrusive. Words call attention to themselves more than to a reality; language has been deviated from its immediate function of communication and representation, and all mimetic effect is denied.

The metafictional devices ostentatiously displayed by the narrator expose the literary, verbal, written dimension of the text and, diverting the attention from the signified to the signifier, distance the user of language, at both production and reception ends, from its

representationality. The narrator interposes the barrier of a text between himself and the object of literature, between the reader and the referential habits of reading. Significantly there is a text inscribed on the mirror on which the narrator, in the first pages of the novel, tries to find his reflected features. The "reflection of [his] countenance" (12) is inserted between words on this mirror. This image is a self-referring metaphor on the part of the narrator, whose mirrored image cannot be perceived without a text, since his reflected outlines merge with written "characters." During the process of inserting the contours of his identity within the frame of his autobiographical text, his features become confused with words that do not reflect him, that block representation. A message is implicit: the reader who tries to read a representation of life in the mirror of literature only finds the confluence of a virtual picture and of words. Furthermore, the words printed on the student's mirror in his room, naming "a proprietary brand of ale," constitute an incongruous verbal interference and are parasites on the picture: the "brief letterpress" on the surface of the mirror can be seen as yet another metafictional commentary on the parasitical, disturbing presence of certain words introduced in the text of *At Swim*, which, while naming and referring, jeopardize the firmness and solidity of the narration.

We need to be adventurous readers to proceed on this slippery ground where reading habits have at times to be discarded. However, remembering that what creates the impression of uncertainty is what is printed in the narrator's literary exploration, and that there may be a distance between the frame of the novel and that of this "artifice," we are tempted to confer a hermeneutic role to this instability that characterizes the literary world and read it as the projection of a neurotic view of the world, of an insecure apprehension of language. The narrator can be perceived as a parody of the modernist artificer, engrossed in his solipsistic world, prisoner of his text, so absorbed by his literary manipulations that he is devoured by his work--the farrow that eats its dam. The narrator's fate is no better than Trellis's, since the creature destroys its creator, and the folly of Trellis is but a projection of the narrator's own folly. In Trellis, with his schizophrenic tendencies, with his nightmares and obsessions, with a mental life threatened by the swarming, uncontrollable energies of his imagination, the young student-narrator may have projected his fears as regards the risks of too much social isolation and concentration on the self. When the brain broods on an obsessive activity, it becomes either self-absorbed or asphyxiated. It could well be that the narrator--or the author who manipulates him--perceives the danger for the creator of an excessive immersion in the world of fiction and words and, having exposed this awareness in his construction, has an ultimate message to impart, one of reconciliation with the extraliterary world, going with a distrust of letters; if the narrator finds his new mood "difficult of literary rendition" it may be because this mood is imbued with sincere emotions of generosity and humanity--which the unreliable word should not be entrusted with. Indeed, when the tenth biographical reminiscence of the narrator is reached, the reader has the impression that a meaning can be perceived in the sun trellised jungle of the book: the different stories and inclusions all tend toward a similar movement; they first tell of estrangement from the world and proceed to reconciliation with the world. The rebellious rejection of his uncle by the narrator gives way to contrition, and in a parallel way the young novelist decides to save Trellis from the vengeance of his characters and makes him pay attention to the person of his servant, as Sweeny had

reconciled himself with the church at the end of his life, dying in St Moling's arms. It is in fact possible to trace this thematic coherence as far as the very title of the novel, since "Swim-Two-Birds," in Irish mythology, is a place of reconciliation, where pagan and Christian worlds meet.

However, such rational stabilizing interpretations are only partially satisfactory. The apparently coherent image of reconciliation at the uncle's home is not so clear: the harmonizing synthesis we felt possible may not be reliable after all. Indeed the "happy ending" of the primary fiction appears only illusory when we consider all the irony it contains: throughout the book, constantly reiterated, we read that "truth is an odd number"; hence, if there is a coherence in the book, the reader can hardly regard as "truth" the emotions reported in a section which has an even number--the "tenth biographical reminiscence." Besides, the watch that the uncle has generously bestowed upon his nephew and which has allegedly moved him to feelings of contrition is only a secondhand one which does not even work properly, as the narrator informs us. Why does it not indicate the right time? And why does this Angelus ring at odds with the time on the watch? No answer is provided. If the fact that the narrator hears the Angelus is a sign that he can now perceive the call of the external world and has reintegrated social time, yet he will still be in another, personal timeframe because of the different time shown on his newly acquired watch. The ringing of the Angelus has thus a blurred significance.

Our interpretations are also made uncertain because of the shifting relationship between the narrator and his characters, which oscillates between sympathy and scorn. As a father-figure Trellis is the butt of a frantic aggressive delirium; but as an echo of the narrator he is also an object of sympathy. It is also difficult to know for certain where the narrator stands as regards the characters in Trellis's fiction: he is the one who gives them freedom, but he finally controls them; he claims democracy for characters, but himself acts as a god. The narrative position is hesitant and irresolute. Nor does one always know who owns the narrative voice. For instance the reader cannot assign any narratorial origin to the voice that describes the morning sun shining over the forest where the Pooka awakens in the "extract from [the narrator's] manuscript" (145). Who is the voice that expresses the ultimate conclusion? Who is the narrative voice reporting on the "private life" of Trellis's characters outside Trellis's control? Our uncertainty is complete when we reach the ultimate conclusion, which does not belong to any frame, which can be the author's as much as the narrator's. The text of *At Swim* refuses to be petrified in a final, definitive interpretation. The last conclusion offers an open field of possibilities, an elusive, potentially infinite multiplicity of interpretations which proclaims the hermeneutic indeterminacy of the whole book. Even if we decide that the book is about neurosis, we must admit that the cases of folly evoked in the concluding section are presented with question marks. The frontier between the meaningful and the meaningless is thus flimsy, and meaning ultimately recedes into no meaning. The reader is in an uncomfortable position, hesitating between what is possible and what is not, never reaching a single definitive answer. As the Good Fairy asserts, "Answers do not matter so much as questions . . ." (291).

"A satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham" (33). *At Swim* pretends to be a significant text and is the "sham" that the narrator has in mind when he explains his theory to Brinsley. The reader cannot expect anything but "sham," hence a world that is not reality, but which can trick him. For instance what can be taken for extravagant elucubrations has actually been borrowed from the text of *The Athenian Oracle*, an authentic eighteenth-century publication, whereas the reader is disposed to take as true a probably fictitious *Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences*, which nobody has yet been able to trace in any library catalog and which is likely to be a pseudoreference, like the entry concerning a certain Dr. Beatty which it is supposed to contain and which the narrator claims to plagiarize for the description of his character of Trellis (40). *At Swim* thus invites the reader to a game of hide and seek between fact and fiction, encouraging an atmosphere of confusion and doubt. Even the preliminary warning ("All the characters are fictitious . . .") is unreliable: the narrator and his environment have indeed many characteristics borrowed from the experience of Flann O'Brien/Brian O'Nolan. The readers' demand for codes, for clarity, is both exploited and ignored in traps and false leads. The readers of *At Swim* are caught at the unstable border between reality and fiction, illusion and sham, at the uncertain limit between linguistic habits that use language as representative and constitutive of a "hypothetical universe," as Umberto Eco calls the world of fiction, and a purely formal artifice ignoring representation and meaning. The text functions in two different directions at the same time, representationality and nonrepresentationality.

The title of the novel reflects the labyrinthine fluidity and hesitancy of the book it refers to. It is a translation, but not a limpid one. It is half-English, half-Irish, neither one nor the other, since it is the literal translation into English of the Irish place-name *Snam Da En*; it is English in its words, Irish in its structure, obstructing the apparent meaning of three words behind a structure which in English does not signify anything precise. If we turn to the Irish name it originates from what we find is the reference to mysterious amphibious creatures pertaining to both air and water, who furthermore are shapes into which two legendary "human" figures have been metamorphosed. The theme of the instability of things, the mutability of the real, is thus inscribed in the very title. The Greek epigraph conveys a parallel message, since those who can pierce the frontier of the language translate it into English as "all things stand apart and move into each other," indicative of the paradox of the whole book, which keeps delineating frontiers and loosening them, allowing transmigrations, confusing previously defined territories. It is possible to find in each individual section or fictional area in *At Swim* similar self-mirroring commentaries and metaphors signaling the slippery nature of the whole text--images of "Trellis" or "jungle," intricate interlacing on clerics' chasubles, "gauze-like wisps of vapour as they intermixed and thickened, . . . faces forming faintly and resolving again without perceptible delay" (68). *At Swim-Two-Birds* can thus be read as a collection of metaphors reflecting its own fluidity.

O'Brien's opposition to stable finite forms in the artifice of his first novel echoes the obsessions of the early twentieth century, following Darwin's transformism, with the sense of matter as a proteiform substance, expressed in an artistic discourse of transmutations and metamorphoses, in the liberation of vital energies. This Gothic,

anticlassical art has affinities with baroque and Celtic arts, both arts of abysmal flux, arts produced by civilizations on the edges of oceans, whether the expanse of the Atlantic or the wide seas of uncertainties of the post- Renaissance world, whose interrogations were not far from those of the twentieth century: confronted with scientific upheavals leading to a sense of an elusive, ever-changing reality, the twentieth-century artist projects sentiments of insecurity in front of a mysterious, apparently infinite universe which, instead of being predetermined by powerful, solid laws, appears in continual expansion and dilatation, a world of flow and change, never exactly the same, changing according to the progressive discoveries of science. O'Brien's art, while evidencing an ironic distance with its own effects, seems to be the product of this troubled vision, where the static and definite is replaced by the sense of an unreliable, chaotic world, no longer finite and stable. Hesitant as to its form, its genre, it encompasses several artistic discourses and sensibilities, at the unstable frontier between referentiality and nonrepresentativity, transcending the limit between the two most distant poles of abstraction and realism. Akin to the innovative vein that produced the tumultuous art of Schoenberg or Kandinsky it foreshadows, in the restlessness of its form, the destabilizing energies and hermeneutical uncertainties of the postmodernist novel, with its hybrid indistinct characters, the instability of its narrative frames, the migrations from one narrative frame to another, its loops, repetitions, erasures and mutations, and a general distrust as regards the language that is supposed to structure it.

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