

FLANN O'BRIEN'S IRONIC NATIONALISM

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas

December 2009

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Paul Cohen, Robert Tally and Steven Wilson for their patience and careful guidance throughout the entirety of this project. I would also like to thank my father James McCloskey, my mother Martha McCloskey and my grandfather Harold Davis for providing the inspiration and the practical advice I needed to complete this work.

This manuscript was submitted on December 9, 2009.

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I: THE POSTMODERNIZATION OF TRADITION

Like most works of art that challenge the limitations of convention, *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien, born Brian O'Nolan, was met with a disdainful and confused response when it was first published in 1939. Other than the warm reception from a small circle of O'Brien's enthusiastic fellow writers such as Graham Greene, Samuel Beckett and William Saroyan, the novel was critically dismissed as a disjointed but mildly amusing product of the struggle to fill the void created by Joyce's exile. Writing for the *Observer*, Frank Swinnerton wrote that the novel "reads as if it were the work of an Irish undergraduate" who was "uncertain of anything except his own humor and his own wish to produce a work of fiction" (qtd. in Cronin 92). This quotation suggests two crucial aspects of the kind of postmodern novel that would become prevalent in the 1960s and onward: structural uncertainty and a fore-grounded emphasis on the actual process of writing a novel. The first of these aspects can be seen in the fact that the postmodern novel tends to assert itself as an unstable, temporally uncertain, multi-faceted documentation of experience rather than a coherent and completed work; the second can be seen in the self-reflexive tendency of the postmodern novel to signify itself as a work of fiction rather than a textual representation of real life. The latter effect immediately becomes apparent as early as the second page of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where the first mention of the student narrator's uncle is followed with a separate description of him introduced with an italicized "description of my uncle" (2). This is one of many such

instances in the novel where the responsibility of the narrator to equip the reader with all of the information that is needed in order to follow the story is given a humorous treatment. Rather than add a brief digression to describe the character that has just been introduced, the narrator actually grants the story a full stop to provide a set of descriptive terms before resuming the story (in the case of the uncle we are provided with “red-faced,” “bead-eyed,” “ball-bellied,” among other terms). In this case, the compositional process of the novel itself is fore-grounded, in that a character is introduced into the story and the reader sees the author actually stop the story to properly describe that character.

Perhaps due to sketchy reviews and the fact that the literary public just wasn't ready to accept the kind of dense experimentation on display, the novel would initially sell just over two hundred copies of the first pressing. According to Declan Kiberd, a “somewhat paranoid” O'Brien would famously joke several years later that Adolf Hitler had started a war to interfere with the sales of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, even though “it required no fascist dictator, however, to slow its progress” (519).

It wasn't until the advent of postmodernism in the 1960s that the book came to be embraced as an early example of the metafiction that would become the structural focal point of work by writers such as Italo Calvino and Vladimir Nabokov. Although the work of these and many similar writers has achieved recognition in literary circles, the critical tendency to account for the multifarious play of voices, characters, and plot convention in O'Brien's novel purely in terms of the overbearing influence of Joyce and of Dublin in the 1930s is still seen. In fact, even as recently as February of 2008 this critical tendency was seen in John Updike's *New Yorker* review of the O'Brien novel collection published by Everyman's Library, in which Updike labeled *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a “rigorously

confusing” and “disdainful” work which was redeemed by its Joycean use of “archaic myth” and tendency to turn “the drab ordinary” of Dublin life “into a peculiar precision” (43).

This historical approach, which involves interpreting *At Swim-Two-Birds* in terms of the creative environment that fueled it, is particularly prominent in the biography of O’Brien written by his long-time friend Anthony Cronin. Cronin describes the time in which *At Swim-Two-Birds* was written as one in which the presence of Joyce loomed large and colored much of the critical reception received by O’Brien and many of his contemporaries. However, rather than simply swimming behind *Finnegans Wake* by producing works of a similar style and quality, O’Brien sought to bring Joyce’s innovations back home with an emphasis on strict adherence to both the Irish language and tradition that presided over what he saw as the indulgence of the Celtic revival. Writing about O’Brien during the period immediately following the Revival, Cronin labels him as “hostile to Synge,” “somewhat indifferent to Yeats,” and not particularly interested in “rather whimsical poetic realists such as Frank O’Connor and Seán Ó Faoláin who were looked on as the new movement” (58).

Cronin’s biography further examines O’Brien’s creative environment with a set of amusing anecdotes that inspired the comical absurdities in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. One example would be the mysterious letter on the subject of horse-racing that randomly shows up towards the end of the novel’s last of three openings:

When Sheridan showed (O’Brien) a letter from the Newmarket racing tipster who, like many others of his ilk, conducted his business by post, he found it intact in the next section of typescript that he was shown. The

same fate awaited a transcript of the Latin poet Catullus he had done of which Nolan requested a copy. (85)

The method of construction described here anticipates the poststructuralist view of a novel as an assimilation and intersection of existing texts without a foundation or source that exists beyond them. Although some may argue that this letter seems irrelevant to any of the narratives that comprise the story, the justification for it could be a postmodern one that allows for the incorporation of any text that happens to drift into the writer's constructive frame. Structurally speaking, this method of construction leads to an overall fragmentation where various texts intersect and disrupt each other without regard to temporal continuity. According to Jean-François Lyotard, a work that is born out of this creative process meets the necessary conditions of late-capitalism:

Eclecticism is the degree-zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. (120)

Even though Flann O'Brien was writing during a time when the level of eclecticism described above would not yet have been possible, the frame structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* seems to carry a similar level of eclecticism, with medieval Irish poetry intersecting a narrative involving a student from 1930s who creates another narrative involving a writer of the Western tradition. The fact that the narratives intersect each other without regard to linear structure or temporal order creates a feeling of schizophrenia that Fredric Jameson defines as "an experience of isolated, discontinuous material signifiers which

fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (119). Fragmentation is a necessary disruption in a late-capitalist world where fixed, totalizing concepts such as “identity” and “nation” are seen as remnants of Enlightenment thought that are no longer attainable. Patricia Waugh defines disruption through fragmentation as the “desire to destroy that which threatens to annihilate oneself” (191). However, as Waugh goes on to indicate, embracing those works that radically fragment as a response to late-capitalism ultimately serves to confirm its destructive potential. A version of self that is grounded in reactionary negation isn’t actually grounded on anything other than rebellious abstraction.

Following the tenets of postmodern thought, the solution is aesthetics: solace through artistic expression can act as the bridge towards a re-imagined self. If the ideal autonomy of the Enlightenment is no longer possible, an essential stage of the process of re-imagination is a consideration of the primary institutions that inform the self; the focus of this study will be the concept of “nation.” The work of Flann O’Brien presents us with a version of Irish essence that resists the totalitarian impulse that very often accompanies the concept of “nation.” Irony and fragmentation are used to thwart the stability that allows for this impulse, but not in a nihilistic manner that seeks to destroy any aspect of a uniquely Irish essence. In O’Brien’s novel *An Béal Bocht*, the phrase “truly Gaelic” is frequently used to describe a level of rural poverty bereft of the glory that so many cultural enthusiasts assume to be intrinsically bound up with it:

Due to both the fatigue caused by the revels and the truly Gaelic famine that was ours always, they could not be succored when they fell on the rocky dancing floor and, upon my soul, short was their tarrying on this

particular area because they wended their way to eternity without more ado. (442)

However, the fact that the novel was originally written in the Irish language by a student of Irish myth and literary history suggests that the nature of “truly Gaelic” is unknown to those Celtic Revivalists who frequently speak of such a thing. O’Brien’s use of the term “Gaelic” in this work is an example of how irony can be used to interrogate, disrupt and destabilize an existing concept of nation. However, rather than casting aside the concept entirely, O’Brien’s texts also can be read as a redefinition of the term “nation” that involves a reconnection with the emotion, energy and humor of Irish tradition as it has been preserved in literature. The most pertinent example of this effect is in *At Swim-
Two-Birds*, where the sorrowful verses of King Sweeny shine clearly through the fragmented surface of the clashing narratives. However, as I will discuss in the third chapter, the comically exaggerated presence of warrior-poet Finn MacCool distracts any sense of national pride that may stem from a deep reverence of Sweeny’s poetry. The same kind of irony is at work here; when the narrator tells us that Finn is “a hero of old Ireland,” he is then made to look more like a boastful buffoon (6).

Essentially, the type of nationalism that we can extract from Flann O’Brien’s work is inherently ironic in that it seems to reject the tenets of most nationalist movements. The Ireland of O’Brien’s novels is not a particularly glorious place superior to any other nation, far from it in fact, but it is a place that is rife with rich stories, vibrancy and humor that allow for a nation to be conceived through aesthetic experience. An artistically-conceived nation transcends the type of reasoning that justifies calls for superiority or cultural preservation by rendering the very concepts obsolete. In *At Swim-*

Two-Birds, national history is less a matter of that which sets Ireland against other nations as it is a matter of shared memory and feeling. This is seen by the manner in which Finn MacCool is introduced:

For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism. The bright square of the window was faintly evidenced at the juncture of my lids. [...] After an interval Finn MacCool, a hero of old Ireland, came out before me from his shadow. (6)

The literary portrayal of Irish tradition through an imaginative space is certainly not unique to O'Brien's work — it was arguably one of the defining aspects of Yeats' poetry — but what sets *At Swim-Two-Birds* apart is that tradition is preserved and represented in the context of a fragmented narrative that meets the conditions of late capitalism.

Naturally, one would assume that this would inspire critics to bring O'Brien back home by reading his texts within the context of Ireland's own late-capitalism of the twenty-first century, but this has not at all been the case.

Although the complex presentation of Irish tradition has been covered in great detail, the question of what can be made of O'Brien's use of tradition in the context of the twenty-first-century global economy has yet to be fully addressed. This is somewhat surprising given that questions about the effect of modernization have become prevalent in Ireland's artistic and intellectual community in the last two decades, where a division has been recognized between "Old Ireland," represented by rural customs, strict Catholicism, the traditional music of The Chieftains, and third-world status, and "New Ireland," represented by modern secularism, the pop music of The Coors, and urban lifestyles of affluence. Indeed, the tension between these two sides is a prominent aspect

of almost every medium of Irish art, whether in the fiction of John McGahern, whose novels explore the awkward and uncomfortable relationship between rural lifestyles and modern technology or the fiction of Patrick McCabe, whose stream-of-consciousness narratives often reveal a disturbing psychological intersection between old tradition and modern uncertainty or films such as 2006's *Once*, where the Irish tradition of song creates a union between two friends of international origin or even the music of Irish heavy metal band Primordial, who in the 2005 song "The End of All Times" spoke of the "empty words and dead rhetoric / of my sold and broken culture." This effect can even be seen in American literature such as that of Roger Boylan, whose 1997 novel *Killoyle: An Irish Farce* used an intrusive set of footnotes from an unknown narrator to frame the division in a deeply satirical manner:

Aren't they just like our own tweedy greeny crowd, with me old enough to remember Dev's Great Economic War when all we heard was prattle about snug cottages and gleaming hearths and a dear wee fairyland of a chaste, church-going, peat-powered Erin (no mention of the poteen, mind).
(84)

This quotation sets the division in a colonial context, with a reference to the Economic War between the Irish Free State and Great Britain of the mid-to-late 1930s. The comical language is clearly meant to poke fun at the type of fierce cultural assertion that acted as a response to Great Britain's centuries' worth of economic and colonial tyranny. This satirical notion is set in a modern context later in *Killoyle: An Irish Farce* when the same narrator states that he prefers "the old Ireland with its good manners and style and the clip-clopping of milk horses over the cobbles and the cairns of their dung steaming in the

morning light” over “today’s Eurovapidity and sterile unisexmindedness and two-car ranch houses” (208).

Of course, such divisive tension is certainly not unique to Ireland, but perhaps the reason it is a much more prominent aspect of the country’s modern artistic production, at least when compared to other economically prosperous countries such as the United States, England and China, is that Ireland has had significantly less time to deal with the growing pains of economic and technological expansion. In fact, it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that Ireland was faced with the sheer immensity of “The Celtic Tiger,” the term assigned to the period of economic growth created by large-scale foreign investment and progressive industrial policies. The sheer amount of wealth generated by this period was enough to pull Ireland out of its longstanding poverty caused by a series of recessions and convert it into one of the European Union’s top-grossing countries, with Ireland second only to Luxembourg in per-capita gross domestic product. One of the results of this growth is that companies such as IBM, Google and many software companies moved into many of Ireland’s larger cities and brought plenty of new jobs with them. With the availability of corporate work came greater individual prosperity that can be seen in the massive shopping malls, expensive housing estates, and new motorways that have become prominent throughout the country, leading to many concerns about environmental and historical degradation. In 2003, Ireland’s Tara-Skryne valley, an archeological complex with a vast array of temples, tombs, and various other historical monuments dating back almost 5,000 years, was threatened with the possible development of a large motorway running directly through the complex courtesy of the Irish government. This proposition was met with outrage from the worldwide

archeological community in the form of a massive letter-writing campaign and an online petition comprised of almost 250,000 signatures. In a letter to the *Irish Independent* and *Examiner* composed by a group of twelve historians and archeologists, the language sounds strikingly similar to that of the artistic community's warnings of cultural degradation: the letter demanded that the complex be preserved because it "constitutes the heart and Soul of Ireland" in that "its very name invokes the spirit and mystique of our people and is instantly recognizable worldwide" (McKittrick). Obviously the advent of international corporations tends to alter the country's appearance in that many sections of its larger cities are gradually becoming virtually indistinguishable from other prosperous cities throughout the world. As Anne-Marie Hourihane observed in 2000, looking over one of Dublin's major roadways:

Mulhuddart, Clonee and Blanchardstown in the north and Clondalkin, Neilstown and Tallaght in the south have merged into an alternative city, an alternative country. Perhaps it is the way you look down on this landscape from the M50 that makes you feel you are somewhere else. Flat, sprawling, confused and centreless, west Dublin is now New Jersey. (18)

Hourihane isn't simply stating that Ireland is starting to look like America, she is stating that Ireland is beginning to take on the anonymous aspects of many American cities. The kind of generic facelessness that results from this homogenization ultimately serves to create a widespread plane of cultural neutrality. Binary oppositions that were once at the heart of Irish life, such as free/oppressed, peace/war, and most importantly the intellectual and artistic recognition of old versus new, have been painted over by the grey brush of economic progress. Internal difference has been corrected, resolved, and shelved

away in the interest of the unitary principle of efficiency: cheap hamburgers, cheap labor and cheap clothes all preside over what was once a set of competitions between local business owners. CEOs, real estate agents, bankers, presidents, shareholders and property managers have generated so much wealth that Ireland's current housing estates did not suffice; they did not embody the kind of cosmopolitan affluence that bypasses any sort of local affiliations towards a universal culture of wealth. This can be seen in Hourihane's description of the Carrickmines Wood, a multi-million-dollar housing estate recently created on the outskirts of Dublin:

As you look round the whole development from the Japanese-style pond, at the yellow apartments with palms on the top balconies, at the wide roads, you wonder where you are. It could be a holiday village in Southern Spain or perhaps Florida, rather than a housing estate in South Dublin.

(149)

In this era of faceless affluence, the tradition of old does not need to be overcome because an attempt to do so would require acknowledgment of it as a competitive force. Instead, tradition is thrown into a value system that reduces it to another unit of economic production: four-leaf clovers are painted on the walls of giant banks, stuffed leprechaun dolls with rosy cheeks line the shelves of tourist shops, giant posters of the faces of traditional Irish musicians adorn the walls of international music retailers in Ireland's shopping malls and video documentaries of Irish folklore legends blare through the television screens of bleary-eyed passengers on their flight to Dublin. As Hourihane indicates in this passage describing a recently constructed shopping mall on the outskirts of Dublin, even the literary community is not immune to this kind of representation:

Oscar Wilde has finally arrived. “Oscar Wilde at Liffey Valley,” says the sign at Eason’s newsagent and bookshop. Oscar is part of Eason’s promotion of Irish Writers, and there are pictures of the most famous ones hanging above the entrance to Eason’s on the Gallery, which is on the way to the Western Rotunda. (7)

Interestingly enough, this effect can also be seen in Hourihane’s description of the Carrickmines Wood estates, where each type of house has been named after a famous Irish writer:

There are seven different types of housing estates in Carrickmines Wood, and the most expensive type, the 1.2 million type, is called after Beckett, poor bastard. Then there is the Yeats, and the Swift. The Beckett, The Yeats, and The Swift are all included in the cul de sac on the left, and all vary almost imperceptibly from each other. (151)

It appears that Ireland’s literary tradition has been postmodernized, in the sense that it has been subjected to the market forces of late-capitalism.

However, as of 2009, the underbelly of this culture of faceless affluence was a public hit hard by recession. According to a report from *Guardian.co.uk*, 2008 saw the full retreat of the Celtic Tiger, with the global credit crunch plus a severe decline in the housing market causing unemployment to fall to a level that hasn’t been seen since the 1980s (Kollewe). The psychological impact of such a sharp economic decline is immense, especially considering the strong presence of foreign workers who migrated to Ireland during the economic boom of the 1990s. The reality of racial tension in such an environment has been proven with reports of attacks against Polish and Romanian

citizens in Belfast during March of 2009 (Meredith). Economic disparity combined with racial tension can act as a breeding ground for nationalist sentiment of the most dangerous sort. Indeed, Irish fascist groups such as Corrupt Eire (<http://ireland.corrupt.org/>) and Éire go Brách (<http://eiregobrach.ie/>) seek recruitment by lamenting the loss of Ireland's culture and employment at the hands of migrant workers. Although the solution to this deeply troubling phenomenon would require an entire study unto itself, this study will be advancing the notion that the work of Flann O'Brien can provide an ironic sense of nationalism that will become increasingly necessary in Ireland, as well as any other country that is hovering dangerously close to a "post-national" status due the pressures of global expansion and economic disparity.

At Swim-Two-Birds will be the primary focus in this study due to the dominant and dynamic presence of Irish tradition throughout the text; *An Béal Bocht* and *The Third Policeman* will also be examined to demonstrate how O'Brien's approach to satire calls for a much deeper connection with the energy of Irish tradition than what popular Irish literature had been able to produce at the time. In addition, through a postcolonial reading of *An Béal Bocht*, I will attempt to demonstrate how O'Brien built upon Jonathan Swift's technique of transcending the colonial binary to arrive at an ironic sense of national identity. What I hope to create by reading O'Brien's texts in this manner is a version of nationalism that is inherently ironic in that it is based more on aesthetic experience than on a totalizing concept. The root of this approach is Patricia Waugh's assertion that postmodernism must "embrace the aesthetic pleasure of local games with language instead of the imperialist pleasure of the universal concept" (6). The universal concept that this study will attempt to disrupt is Irish nationalism, as it is traditionally known,

with the aim of replacing it with an ironic nationalism that is aesthetically experienced through the energy, humor, and emotion of Irish tradition as it appears in the work of Flann O'Brien.

II: O'BRIEN, SWIFT AND POSTCOLONIAL IRONY

Speaking of Jonathan Swift, critic Carole Fabricant noted a distinction between writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and T.S. Eliot, whose writing is defined by factors other than “specificity of place,” and writers such as Swift who cannot be “separated from the shapes, textures, and political struggles of a particular land and landscape” (60). Flann O’Brien can easily be placed in the latter category, since his entire life, career, and literary subject matter remained ensconced in the specificity of Ireland, and Dublin in particular. Unlike fellow Irish-born authors Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, who would depart Ireland to become a part of the greater culture of European High Modernism centered in cities such as Paris and Zurich, O’Brien remained in Dublin occupying his post as a full-time civil servant, *Irish Times* columnist and single supporter of his large family. This is also the case with Swift, who maintained several prominent clerical positions in Ireland during the peak of his literary and political pamphleteering.

Thus, while James Joyce and Samuel Beckett were wandering around metropolitan Europe devoting most of their time to the refinement of their craft, O’Brien was fighting his way through the bureaucratic politics that accompanied the career of an Irish government civil servant in the early twentieth century. The fact that O’Brien never left home in the tradition of so many other Irish writers, going as far back as Richard Steele, meant that his work would ultimately be far more inextricably tied to the country

as a whole. According to a 2006 article posted on *The Times Online*, it was this insider status that helped set O'Brien apart from his literary peers:

While James Joyce and Samuel Beckett were natural outsiders, O'Brien's literary aspirations lost out as he sought a conventional (if disenchanting) suburbanite existence in conservative Ireland. For better or worse, in his life and work, O'Brien is probably more representative of the twentieth-century Irish experience than Joyce or Beckett. (Heaney)

In and of itself, this factor already adds a hint of irony to any discussion about O'Brien's place within the Irish literary tradition. Unlike many Irish writers who were known to harbor a savagely ambivalent relationship with their country of origin, such as Synge, Beckett, Joyce, and Swift, O'Brien chose to remain in Ireland throughout his life, and more specifically during the post-war period to remain embedded in Dublin's literary community amongst such prominent contemporaries as Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan.

The fact that O'Brien chose to spend most of his life in Ireland should come as no surprise to even the most casual reader of *At Swim-Two-Birds* due to its in-depth exploration of Irish myth and cultural history. The satirical manner in which this exploration is handled, particularly in the passages involving warrior-poet Finn MacCool, could easily lead most readers to assume that O'Brien is writing from a position of playful irreverence towards Irish tradition, but the fact remains that O'Brien was himself an ardent scholar of Irish literature and mythology during his time at University College Dublin. Scholars such as Eva Wapping, Caoimhghin O Brolchain, and Cathal O'Hainle have demonstrated that O'Brien's portrayals of Irish folklore figures such as Finn

MacCool and King Sweeney are very consistent with the manner in which these figures have been represented throughout Irish literary history. Thus, just as many of the narrative personas created by Jonathan Swift, “the Dean” and “the Drapier” for instance, became entwined in Irish poetry and culture of the eighteenth century, O’Brien’s writings are deeply rooted in Irish tradition through the prominent use of Irish folklore. A uniquely Irish literary essence such as this can only assert itself in a comparative sense; to try to understand this notion in terms of the Irish relation to British imperialism, critics in the field of Irish studies such as Declan Kiberd, Seamus Deane and M. Keith Booker have turned to postcolonial theory.

Although the exact origins of postcolonialism can certainly be debated, it seems generally agreed that Edward Said’s work *Orientalism* in 1978 was a starting point for examining the effects of imperial power structures on the canonization and reception of literature in the western world. However, as early as 1990, theorists such as Terry Eagleton were quick to remind us of the inherent problems in a theory grounded on what was essentially an oppositional politics. If the ultimate goal of postcolonial study was to provide a platform upon which the colonized nation could culturally assert itself as the center rather than the other, a certain provincialism is called for that is ultimately the basis for the imperialist ideology that created the need for the new platform to begin with. According to Eagleton, this is due to the fact that postcolonialism echoes those emancipatory movements that seek “to bring about the material conditions that will spell their own demise, and so always have some peculiar self-destruct device built into them” (26). Essentially, postcolonial study is a self-cancelling approach, in that its own success would render it obsolete and call for a new “post” approach that would reveal to what is

now being neglected through the canonization of postcolonial literature. This can be seen in scholars such as Fernando Coronil, who wrote that the literature of certain Latin American countries has been neglected due to those nations not sharing the oppressive colonial history of India or Indonesia. This neglectful tendency, combined with the return of the language of Empire as the official doctrine of many American foreign policy decisions, has contributed to the notion of postcolonialism as a largely deflated enterprise that cannot sustain its own relevance into the twenty-first century. Even Said himself chose to distance himself from what the approach had become shortly before his death in 2003.

However, it is important to remember that when theorists such as Eagleton were pointing out inherent problems in the postcolonial approach, they weren't so much calling for its early retirement as identifying points of emphasis that were necessary in order to sustain it as a field of study. The most significant of these points was the recognition of an inherent problem at the heart of any critical approach that wills for its own defeat by calling for an eradication of the divisions that made it possible in the first place. According to Eagleton, this problem results from the irony of an oppressed people who are "themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists" (26). The recognition of this irony must be accompanied by a sense of commitment, in that it can only come from the viewpoint of someone who is inside the colonial division, who lives the difference that keeps it alive and thus can eventually find a way to transcend it.

With this in mind, it quickly becomes apparent why Jonathan Swift was an early candidate for postcolonial study around the late 1980s when the question of the Irish/English colonial relations began to enter the field. Before that point, early

postcolonial works such as *The Empire Writes Back* had focused almost exclusively on the “Europe versus Other” dialectic, but it didn’t take long for scholars to notice that the same problems inherent in this dialectic can easily be found in relations between European nations where the imperial power structure operates in much the same way. According to Declan Kiberd, Swift can be viewed as the first postcolonial writer in that he was a member of the Protestant Ascendancy who became directly involved with the Irish working class (71). Robert Mahony supports this by asserting that “whether viewed as a facilitator of the nationalist struggle for freedom from Britain, or as a dissenting subaltern, Swift can be fitted into this Irish postcolonial model” (223). The term “subaltern” here should be understood as that branch of postcolonial study focusing particular attention on those among the colonized community who employ the language of the colonizer as a means of subverting the authoritarian structures of linguistic hegemony. The application of this notion to Swift studies is certainly unquestionable, in that he was arguably the first of a long-line of Irish-born writers including Oscar Wilde, Beckett, Joyce and O’Brien, who would leave their mark on the worldwide literary community with their own technically precise and pitch-perfect use of the English language.

The politics of language has always been a deeply contentious issue in the history of Irish literature, the nature of which easily fits within the parameters of postcolonial study. As far as back as the sixteenth century, the Irish began to feel the weight of English colonialists such as Edmund Spenser calling for the violent suppression of Gaelic language and culture through scathing pamphlets such as *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. Even the most casual observer of Irish life in the present day would undoubtedly

agree that these efforts were successful, with the proliferation of the English language throughout the island, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a group of artists sought to counteract these efforts with a widespread movement known as the Celtic Revival that was meant to both preserve and promote Irish language and culture throughout the country. This movement was centered in a set of districts in the West of Ireland known collectively as the Gaeltacht, where Gaelic is still predominantly spoken today. There is a strong and vibrant literary tradition associated with this area, most of which is directly connected to the oral storytelling and unforgiving rural lifestyles described in a set of autobiographies emanating from the small island of Blasket: *Peig* by Peig Sayers, *An tOileánach* by Tomás Ó Criomhthain and *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* by Muiris Ó Súilleabháin.

According to Cronin, one of the effects of the Celtic Revival was that the Gaeltacht area came to be a haven for anthropologists and linguists throughout the world who were fascinated by what they saw there as the purity of the language and indigenous culture. The popularity of Gaeltacht literature and that of other English-writing revivalists such as Yeats, Synge, and Augusta Gregory drew attention to a particular kind of rural lifestyle that quickly became a subject of fascination for those whom Cronin labels as “more complex and cosmopolitan literary types” (125). Naturally, this area also became a wellspring for tourism, not just for travelers from other countries but for residents of Dublin who were looking to bolster the knowledge of their own history or who were simply looking for career advancement opportunities in the area of language studies.

Of course, in a manner strongly reminiscent of Swift, O’Brien was certainly not going to let this phenomenon escape his scathing cynicism. According to Cronin,

O'Brien was very familiar with the Gaeltacht life and culture, insofar as he was originally from the Strabane area, which is very near to Gaeltacht areas such as Donegal, and given his father's enthusiasm for Gaeltacht literature such as the novels of Seamas O'Grianna and for the Irish language in general (126). O'Brien maintained a familiarity with the literature of the area throughout the years, professing admiration for autobiographies such as Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*, and witnessed how it would become warped and reformatted to become fodder for various nationalist movements. When O'Brien began conceiving of a comic novel about the Gaeltacht, he had become aware of "how romantics, conservationists, and racialists can combine to stultify and degrade the objects of their enthusiasm" (Cronin 125).

The novel would be called *An Béal Bocht*; according to Patrick Power, who translated the novel into English after O'Brien's death, this phrase translates to "The Poor Mouth," a phrase meant to poke fun at those who emphasize their poverty or suffering in order to gain sympathy (491). The primary source of the novel's satire is the call for the preservation of a threatened lifestyle that was the core of the Celtic Revival. By the time the second page of the first chapter arrives, narrator Bonaparte O'Coonassa has uttered the phrase "will not be there again" twice and "will never be there again" once. This phrase or a slight variation of it appears almost every time a new character, object or concept is introduced, and at the conclusion of the novel when the narrator asserts that his "like will never be there again" (489). The frequency of this phrase serves to satirize the notion of the narrator being the sole survivor of a mostly forgotten era, arguably one of the defining characteristics of Gaeltacht literature.

Apart from that, every stereotypical aspect of Irish pastoral literature is mocked. The novel is set in a fictional village in the West of Ireland called Corkadoragha, in which it never stops raining and poverty is so rampant that the families are forced to share their small houses with farm animals. When a visitor to the narrator's house suggests that the family build a hut to alleviate this problem, they eventually reject the suggestion for the following reason:

When I, my grandmother and two of my brothers had spent two nights in the hut, we were so cold and drenched wet that it is a wonder we did not die straight away and we couldn't get any relief until we went back to the house and were comfortable again among the cattle. We've been that way ever since, just like every poor bit of a Gael in this side of the country.

(418)

The last sentence contains another primary theme of the novel, that suffering is an inescapable aspect of the life of a Gael; the phrase "truly Gaelic poverty" also appears with great frequency throughout the novel. Even when the solution to a particular problem should seem obvious, like where to put the animals for example, the characters seem unable to attain the level of self-realization that would allow them to escape the miserable condition that they have been consigned to. This notion can also be seen when Bonaparte asserts that "there was no good habitation for me" due to the fact that "it has always been the destiny of the true Gaels (if the books be credible) to live in a small, lime-white house in the corner of the glen" (416). This can be read as a self-reflexive critique of the limits of textual representation. The narrator sounds as if he is a frustrated character well aware that his destiny is merely that which is found in the books of Gaelic

tradition. However, rather than take that extra deterministic step towards trans-textual rebellion, he seems to have accepted the fact that he is forever trapped in a Gaelic cliché. The accompanying sense of resignation and surrender can be seen in the narrator's assertion that there will never "be any good settlement for the Gaels but only hardship for them always" (426). Other Gaelic clichés that come under fire include a family torn apart by alcoholism, with the narrator searching a milk jug for his father after being told that "he's in the jug," and the tendency of the English to arbitrarily impose their language as a means of controlling Irish abstraction when O'Brien writes that every schoolchild in Corkadoragh is given the name of "Jams O'Donnel" by the English schoolmaster (415, 425).

Critics have made the somewhat obvious connection between *An Béal Bocht* and Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach*, with its mournful narratives on the cruelty and poverty of pastoral life. However, since O'Brien had often professed an admiration for the novels of Ó Criomhthain and other literature of the Gaeltacht region, it would be a gross oversimplification to label *An Béal Bocht* as a parody meant to advance a singular purpose. The function of the satire is a complex one that reveals O'Brien's deeply ingrained sense of ironic nationalism.

First of all, it is of great significance that O'Brien chose to use the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen as author of the text. The only other time this name appeared was as the voice for his satirical *Irish Times* column known as *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Much like Swift was known to do, O'Brien created narrators who would ultimately advance certain intrinsic aspects of his texts, even though there was certainly no mystery as to who was actually behind the typewriter. Throughout the 26 years of the column, Myles used

scathingly precise language to launch daily attacks on many targets, among them simpletons, revivalists, and especially Dublin's group of language enthusiasts who seemed utterly fascinated with what they saw as the simple authenticity of the Gaeltacht lifestyle.

Rather than attempting a simple satire on the pastoral literature of the Gaels, O'Brien was intent on targeting those who attempted to mould it into a model that suited their own wayward purposes. Linguists who make a career out of dissecting and analyzing ancient dialects of the Irish language are mocked in the form of a gentleman from Dublin who "understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible" (433). In a night of drunken confusion, the gentleman records a series of pig grunts that he assumes to be Gaelic speech and brings them to a university in Berlin with the following result:

These learned ones said that they never heard any fragment of Gaelic which was so good, so poetic and so obscure as it and that they were sure there was no fear for Gaelic while the like was audible in Ireland. They bestowed fondly a fine academic degree on the gentleman, and, something more interesting still, they appointed a small committee of their own members to make a detailed study of the language of the machine to determine whether any sense might be made for it. (433)

Appropriately enough, the vehicle for this attack was a dense and fiercely traditional form of Irish that would have been understood only by native speakers and by the most ardent scholars of the language. According to Cathal O'Hainle, despite the many anecdotes and stories of O'Brien's poor attendance during his time at University College Dublin, the

classical form of Irish employed in this text and many others could only have been the result of years of close study (19). To demonstrate the effect of this deliberate attempt at alienating particular readers, Kiberd cites the fact that the novel was dedicated to R. M. Smyllie, one time *Irish Times* editor and dedicated member of the Protestant Ascendancy, who never managed to read it because “the only Irish known to Smyllie was whiskey” (500).

This elaborate practical joke ultimately suggests that, not unlike a majority of Swift’s work, the novel’s satire is deeply rooted in a complex colonial dialectic but delivered from a postcolonial perspective that mocks the myopic nature of a singular stance. Even the origins of the pseudonym itself, Myles na gCopaleen, stem from a colonial power struggle that was taking place on the stage during the Victorian era. According to Kiberd, the name first appeared in an 1860 play by Dion Boucicault called *The Colleen Bawn*, where it was assigned to a typical example of what would later become known by many commentators as stage Irish folly, or simply “paddywhackery”: a drunken, dishonest, hilariously clueless buffoon who served as “the living antithesis of Victorian respectability” (498). Although Boucicault was himself born and raised in Ireland, the choice to characterize Myles na gCopaleen in such a way undoubtedly fits within the satirical model of Irish that had become commonplace in British theatre at that time. O’Brien made no secret of his severe distaste for such characterizations, particularly as he saw them in the plays of Synge. Around the time that Synge had become popular, rarely was the man’s name even mentioned in the presence of O’Brien without being met with a scathing indictment of some sort, particularly with regard to *The Playboy of the Western World*. According to Keith Hopper, his main problem with Synge was that he

had taken the stage folly Irishman and replaced him with his own exaggerated version in a limp gesture of reacquisition (29). Writing in his column under the name of Myles, O'Brien suggested that the result of this process was that laudable tendency of a nation's people to relax into shells of identity that merely represent parodies of themselves:

We, who knew the whole inside-outs of it, preferred to accept the ignorant valuations of outsiders on all things Irish. And now the curse has come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge's plays. They talk and dress like that, and damn the drink they'll swally but the mug of porter after the long nights after Samhain. (235)

Essentially, what has happened is that the Irish people have lost touch with themselves, to the extent that they must borrow exaggerated versions of their own identity from an outside source to fill some personal vacuum.

Whether or not one fully accepts O'Brien's indictment of Synge, it should be clear that O'Brien chose a much different approach to try to win back the Irish identity from the throes of imperial mockery. In doing this, he did precisely what Swift did when creating the narrator of his work *The Drapier's Letters*; he reached into the colonial dialectic and borrowed what was needed from both sides to effectively advance an argument deeply rooted in personal conviction. Swift bypassed his role as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy to speak from the viewpoint of the drapier, a member of the Irish working class who criticized both British economic imperialism and Ireland's lack of awareness of the enormity of it. O'Brien chose to take Myles na gCopaleen, a character that had been used to mock the Irish in front of British audiences, and make

him an articulate, insightful, and scathing critic of all that was wrong with the Celtic Revival, both in terms of how it was received and the motives that lay beneath it. After all, the Gaeltacht writers whom O'Brien admired were simply skilled storytellers, not pawns in an agenda to help stimulate tourism and language studies. In a manner that once again echoes Swift, if we are to establish a colonial dialectic between England and Ireland, it becomes difficult and almost irresponsible to attempt to position O'Brien on either side.

However, one crucial difference between the postcolonial irony of Swift and that of O'Brien is that Swift's contribution to the cause of Irish independence is mostly within the political and economic sphere. Naturally, this means that his work can easily sustain relevance in the twenty-first century, in that the passionate arguments for self-sufficiency comprising *The Drapier's Letters* and *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* can easily be read today as a methodology of resistance against those multinational corporations seeking to homogenize local economies. However, there are limits to how far this concept can be applied in the cultural sphere, mainly because most of Swift's work lacks the cultural grounding that would naturally place it within the tradition of nationalist literature. Although his work undoubtedly helped contribute to the attitudes that lay behind the quest for Irish sovereignty, his arguments maintained a universal quality divorced from the Celtic tradition that would later come to inform most of O'Brien's writing. According to Robert Mahony, Swift's contribution to Irish nationalism is of a largely rhetorical nature, in that he inadvertently equipped future revolutionaries with the kind of language and argumentative tactics that were the results of his effort to "assist those of his own settler, colonizing stock to see their own interests

as distinct, almost diverging, from those of Britain” (223). Of course, this is not to suggest that the work of Swift was divorced from any sort of uniquely Irish quality; indeed, one only need consider those examples among his poems that borrowed from the rhymes and the rhythms of the Irish language or that spoke of the crude joviality of Dublin street life. Despite the admirable level of authenticity achieved in these poems, they lack the postcolonial sophistication of works like *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* that could carry the message of cultural assertion on into the twenty-first century.

This, of course, should not be read as any sort of criticism or judgment against Swift’s work. Speaking purely in terms of authorial intention, Swift was not one who necessarily sought a deep connection with Gaelic literature, at least not to an extent that would be reflected in most of his work; nor did he ever feel drawn towards the simplicity of a singular stance, on any issue. Neither did O’Brien, of course, but at least in terms of what can be called “the Irish question,” his views still shine clearly through *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht*. As will be discussed in the third chapter, *At Swim-Two-Birds* features the medieval Irish warrior poet Sweeny speaking a note of pure emotion amidst the disharmony of the underlying narrative; the latter work demonstrates what happens when an honest literature born out of heartfelt struggle is placed into the hands of ideologues with a wayward agenda. However, before either of these works can safely be placed within the nationalist tradition, a complete refinement of the concept of nationalism is required. As discussed in the previous chapter, nationalism carries with it a justifiably negative connotation in literary criticism due to its tendency towards a romanticized or essentialist view of national identity. This tendency often comes in the form of a direct appeal to the reservoir of folklore and mythology that lies at the heart of

the colonized nation, as well as a literary glorification of an essence that defines one nation against all others. There is already a hint of irony in such a relation where the national identity of the subject is dependent upon the oppression of the other. Some might respond to this problematic relationship by turning inward with a relentless kind of self-mockery, but this kind of cultural deprecation doesn't really bring a nation any closer to being able to define itself in a way that transcends the colonial binary. The preferred solution would be to step inside the difference, allowing equal critical access to either side, and thereby to locate that transcendent point at which a nation can define itself against all others. Swift accomplished this in *The Drapier's Letters* by exploring the universal doctrine of self-sufficiency, but his arguments lack the cultural foundation that can lead a nation back to its own well of tradition. O'Brien, on the other hand, transcended the colonial dialectic with scathing attacks against all sides, but did so using Gaelic language and folklore extending directly from Irish literary tradition.

However, O'Brien was no strict nationalist as much as he was an ironic nationalist. To take the example of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one need only look at how differently two prominent figures in Irish folklore are represented: although the exiled warrior-poet Sweeny was depicted with a sober sense of reverence, Finn MacCool appeared in a much more humorous and exaggerated light; both of these depictions are directly tied to how those figures have traditionally been represented. The difference here is crucial, and it shows that O'Brien was neither a postmodernist poking fun at the old guard nor a modernist lamenting the modern world's tragic disconnect from the well of tradition. His was a far more dynamic approach that called for each respective element of folklore to be represented in a manner conducive to his overall textual purpose. However,

this integration was handled in a sophisticated manner that elevates both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* above works of satire. One can easily draw a parallel between the exploitation of the Gaeltacht lifestyle to stimulate tourism during the early twentieth century and Dublin's postmodern integration of traditional Irish myth and literary culture to stimulate tourism in the twenty-first century. Although the knee-jerk response to this problem could easily come in the form of a lament about the gradual death of Irish tradition and culture, this is an impulse that also can easily lead to totalitarianism.

As briefly mentioned in the first chapter, Patricia Waugh's definition of postmodernism as a way to avoid the totalizing aspect of fixed concepts is useful in this sense. If parody is the ideal postmodern form, then *An Béal Bocht* is a postmodern work that uses satire to disrupt and destabilize the concept of Irish nationalism. However, the novel also answers Waugh's call for an appeal to aesthetic experience in its overall emphasis on a distinctively Irish sense of humor. When a gentleman named Sitric begins to express suicidal urges due to the fact that "all that's laid before me at mealtime is hunger itself and I don't even get salt with that," Bonaparte reminds him that "you're a Gael and that it isn't happiness that's in store for you" (455-6). This is one example among many in the text where the distinctively Irish trait of good humor through hardship is foregrounded. O'Brien's brother Ciaran O'Nuallain labels this humor as "fun for the sake of fun -- like the playfulness of a puppy" (107). When viewed in the context of postmodernism, mere play can be seen as another disruptive method of asserting a preference for aesthetics over the totality of Irish nationalism. In a similar sense, *An Béal Bocht* can be read as a disruption of the binary oppositions that both inform and frustrate the limits of postcolonial study. While a postcolonial reading may suggest that the novel's satire is

complicit with imperial stereotypes of Gaelic life, this discounts the fact O'Brien maintained an appreciation for Gaeltacht literature and sought to express it through a language that would have been lost on most non-Irish readers. Furthermore, O'Coonassa's recognition of the fact that his life is being governed by literary clichés seems to transcend the colonial binary in the call for a new mode of expression and representation of tradition. The irony that fuels these disruptions will become increasingly necessary for nations seeking to define themselves against the hegemony of corporate influence in a manner that bypasses the dangerous consequences of nationalism.

III: SWEENY IN THE THREES: TRUTH IS AN ODD NUMBER

“Sweeny in the Trees” is the name Flann O’Brien had submitted to the Longman publishing house as his preference among a list of alternates for the title of the novel that was originally submitted under the name of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The final decision to keep the original title was made by the publishing company, much to the dismay of O’Brien, who would grow weary of it in later years (Cronin 88). One can only speculate why this decision was made, in that the selected title is a relatively obscure reference to *Snámh-dá-éin*, the ancient monastery on the River Shannon that appears once in the novel as one of the resting places of King Sweeny during his flights of madness.

Nevertheless, O’Brien’s preference for the title “Sweeny in the Trees” is significant. The phrase itself appears only once, in the conclusion spoken by an unidentified narrator who hadn’t appeared anywhere in the novel previously. The tone is strikingly sparse and ominous:

Sweeny in the Trees hears the sad baying as he sits listening on the branch, a huddle between the earth and heaven; and he hears also the answering mastiff that is counting the watches in the next parish. Bark answers bark till the call spreads like fire through all Erin. Soon the moon comes forth from behind her curtains riding full tilt across the sky, lightsome and unperturbed in her immemorial calm. (237)

The emotional impact of this passage is one of the most striking elements of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. It is an impact that is felt only in those other two sections of the novel featuring Sweeny's mournful lamentation about being condemned to a life of exile in the trees. The fact that the emotional poignancy of Sweeny's poetry shines so clearly through the complex web of narratives is a direct appeal to a purely aesthetic version of Irish tradition that transcends the binary limits of nationalist thought. These passages allow the moving journey of an important figure in Irish literary history to be directly felt rather than indirectly recognized.

The passage above marks the exiled warrior poet Sweeny's third appearance, the context of which is a conclusion that deliberately foregrounds the finality of the number three. The sentence that concludes the novel tells us of the German man who "cut his jugular with a razor three times, and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye" (238). Perhaps O'Brien thought this horrific death triad was the only conceivable way to end a novel that began with not one but three separate openings. As early as the first paragraph we are simply told by the unnamed student narrator that "one beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with" (1). By the time the conclusion arrives, each of the novel's three main narrative layers has all but evaporated: the author created by the unnamed narrator, Dermot Trellis, has already been overtaken by his characters, thus terminating the novel he was working on; the narrator himself has already passed his exams and seems prepared to exit the dream-state world born out of the collegiate boredom that served as his creative wellspring. Essentially, the only voice left at the conclusion of the novel is that of the person who is actually behind the typewriter, Brian O'Nolan himself, and he is clearly fulfilling his

authorial duty to somehow end all of the madness so that we can all get on with our lives. Indeed, it would seem that with this conclusion O’Nolan had seemingly wiped his hands clean of the whole project and wanted nothing to do with it, even going so far as to label the novel “juvenilia, public nose picking” in later years (qtd. in Cronin 247).

However, this is not to suggest that O’Brien’s mission with this conclusion was a kind of textual eradication; although Sweeny’s final appearance follows the triplicate pattern, he is very much alive in the conclusion, almost as if O’Brien were trying to prove that the everlasting quality of the legend can surpass even his own attempts at authorial closure. The effect of the final lines concerning Sweeny is to cement the same presence that he occupies throughout the novel and throughout the whole of Irish literary history: he is the mournful watcher perched high in the trees, waiting, yearning for an escape from the malediction that has destroyed his rich and vibrant life as a king. For a novel that has justifiably earned the reputation of being firmly rooted in the Irish comic tradition, this is really serious stuff. In a postmodern play of various clashing discourses and scathing parodies, Sweeny’s presence is the one element of the novel that is allowed a solemn tone of striking emotional clarity:

The thorn-top that is not gentle
 has reduced me, has pierced me,
 it has brought me near death
 the brown thorn-bush

Once free, once gentle,
 I am banished for ever,

wretch-wretched I have been

a year to last night. (68)

These verses appear in a story told by Finn MacCool, another famous warrior-poet borrowed from Irish folklore, to Paul Shanahan, a character created by author Dermot Trellis, himself a creation of the unnamed student narrator. The unambiguous and intense tone of sorrow expressed in passages like this stand in stark contrast to the heavily satirical humor that comprises most of the novel's other narrative layers. However, the interwoven quality of the novel does eventually serve to place Sweeny directly in the middle of the juvenile conversations that take place between Trellis' characters, but the comical tension arises entirely out of the juxtaposition between the wisdom of ancient poetry and the clueless nature of modern proletariats, rather than from any kind of comical interpretation of the one character who has been spared the pangs of O'Brien's satirical temperament, Sweeny himself. To quote Declan Kiberd, the novel's parodic structure "proceeded from the basis that there was one thing about which he could never feel satirical and that was Sweeny's nature poetry" (506).

Apart from the uncharacteristically serious treatment, the Sweeny passages are also remarkable in how closely they adhere to the seventeenth-century manuscripts that appeared under the title of *Buile Suibne*. This text officially marked the introduction of King Sweeny into the literary world, although some historians speculate that the story itself may have maintained a purely oral existence since the ninth century. Although there are some theories connecting the story to an actual king listed in the Ulster historical records, it is generally assumed that Sweeny's existence is purely confined to literary and imaginative realms. In 1913, another important pinnacle occurred in the literary life of

Sweeny when J.G. O’Keeffe translated the original manuscripts into English. It is widely believed by scholars such as Eva Wapping and Caoimhghín O’Brolcháin that O’Brien had access to this translation and made use of it, although his familiarity with the ancient poetry of the Irish language was well-documented in his Master’s thesis at University College Dublin on the subject of Celtic nature poetry. According to Cronin, the strict nationalist stance maintained by O’Brien’s father meant that all of his children were well-versed in Ireland’s stories of old, both in terms of what was on the shelves and what was told to them (21).

Although research done by scholars such as Wapping and O’Brolcháin has successfully located many of O’Brien’s original sources for the Celtic poetry sections of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the very simple question of why O’Brien elevated Sweeny onto a pedestal of textual privilege has yet to be sufficiently addressed, the one exception being the insightful work of Declan Kiberd, who suggested that the novel’s fragmented structure is a lament for the purity of the spoken word:

No longer can the members of an entire community feel themselves represented by a single utterance: instead, the written literature of modernity has fragmented into specialisms. [. . .] Perhaps the greatest sadness of all may be found in the fact that the Gaelic poetry that once bound a people together as listeners is now the sole preserve of Celtic scholars. (504)

Therein lies the real thrust of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. While there has been a great deal said about the novel’s intensely comic character and multitude of narrative innovations, what seems to be lost is how it represents in Irish tradition, what is actually being said amidst

the chaos. Kiberd suggests that O'Brien was mindful of how the significance of early Celtic literature was being lost in a sea of language specialists, academics, and cultural enthusiasts; no longer was the bard able to seize the attention of the masses with ancient stories of struggle and hardship that would ultimately serve to unify them. To compensate for this, O'Brien rescues Sweeny from the hands of specialists and allows his voice to be heard clearly above the racket of modern life.

Kim McMullen has suggested that the incorporation of the Sweeny passages is the result of O'Brien's choice to directly engage Irish myth rather than observe or comment on it from a distance.¹ This idea is given its arguably most literal interpretation in the novel when Sweeny falls down from the trees and instantly earns the sympathy of both the Ringsend cowboys and the more modern of Dermot Trellis' character creations, thus entering into what McMullen labels as a postmodern dialogue with tradition.

Following this line of thought, we arrive at a view of Flann O'Brien as no more than a helpless and hopelessly objective scripiter who can only pass on what he inadvertently absorbs. This notion of the author as tactful arranger rather than omniscient creator anticipates the practice of authors of the Oulipo movement, such as Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, whose writing would deliberately foreground composition as a mechanical rather than a creative process. This is clearly shown early in the novel when the student narrator eschews the very nature of literary creation:

Characters should be interchangeable between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literatures should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating

only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should largely be a work of reference. (20)

Here O'Brien seems to anticipate the poststructuralist notion of a literary work as no more than an intersection of existing texts without a source that exists beyond them.

However, attempting to pursue a poststructuralist reading would be too nihilistic for a novel as inextricably tied to tradition as *At Swim-Two-Birds*. O'Brien's next book, the posthumously published novel *The Third Policeman*, would ultimately prove far more conducive to such critical techniques, in that he would strip any obvious ties to Gaelic tradition to create a horrifying work of science fiction that read as a mockery of both academic obsession and the traditional rural Irish murder mystery. With another unnamed narrator and with the use of another bag of metafictional as well as supernatural tricks, the novel's potent dose of literary sorcery proved far too much for contemporary publishers, which was unfortunate in that it arguably represented the peak of his writing abilities.

Nevertheless, with *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one can never fully divorce the traditional element in a manner that allows us to make the bold leap into cultural ambiguity. There may be no effective way to refute the theory that O'Brien incorporated the Sweeny passages just because they happened to be near him or happened to have randomly entered his mind at the time, thus becoming entangled in the web of various narratives that comprise the novel, but to reintroduce the question of why Sweeny plays such a crucial and unique role in the novel can point us to a very clear and intrinsic sense of purpose. O'Brien wanted us to be mindful of such things, otherwise he would not have chosen a title from the Sweeny epic as a way of summarizing the novel in the mind of the

reader who has yet to open the book. Even though the Sweeny passages make up a relatively small portion of the novel when compared to the other dominant narrative layers, O'Brien clearly wanted the reader to be mindful of the Sweeny figure as one area of certainty in the novel's unquestionably uncertain and difficult terrain.

This is a simple fact that seems to be lost in the analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* offered by critics such as M. Keith Booker and Keith Hopper. While useful in allowing us new ways to understand the novel and others of its kind, these readings seem to bypass what could be called the real heart of the novel in their pursuit of a fixed critical reading. An example of this effect would be Kim McMullen's insightful reading of the novel as a complex and fierce interrogation of Irish tradition written in a time directly after independence, when the nation was in need of such a re-evaluation. This idea can easily sustain relevance in the twenty-first-century global economy where Ireland is once again in need of a way to define itself against the cultural hegemony of corporate influence, but it is simply taken too far with the assumption that this interrogation is based on a plurality of narratives in which "none of these discourses are privileged; none has the last word" (36). To the contrary, King Sweeny is allowed the last word in that he is the only one allowed to speak with both emotion and clarity in the novel's conclusion, one of the many times throughout the novel in which he is allowed to do so. To be fair, McMullen does not make a distinction between Finn MacCool and King Sweeny when speaking generally about O'Brien's integration of Irish epics, and her arguments could easily be applied to MacCool specifically.

As noted in the first chapter, one of the most recognizable aspects of *At Swim-Two-Birds*' postmodernity is the manner in which it lays bare its own creative process;

this is as true for the integration of Irish myth as it is for the descriptive terms that accompany the introduction of each character. When the student narrator introduces the MacCool passages, we are told that they are intended as a “humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology” (6). This, of course, isn’t O’Brien speaking; it’s the student narrator telling us about the way that he is planning to integrate Finn MacCool into the novel he is writing about Dermot Trellis. However, since the language is directly tied to the composition of fiction, this statement could easily be read as an example of that postmodern tendency to address the reader directly, albeit in an indirect manner. Since this indication appears so early in the novel, one can also read it as an attempt to put the reader in the right frame of mind to properly absorb the manner in which Finn MacCool is integrated not just into the section that follows but into the novel as a whole.

And of course, the section that follows does not disappoint in this regard, in that it reads like a playful parody of mythical exaggeration. This is hinted at in the third of the novel’s openings after we are told that Finn is “a man of superb physique and development” whose thighs are “as thick as a horse’s belly, narrowing to a calf as thick as the belly of a foal” and whose backside “was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass” (2). This tendency is carried further in the descriptive passage that follows when we are told that “the mouth to his white wheyface had dimensions and measurements to the width of Ulster” and that he had “enough eye-cloth to cover the whole of Erin” (9). This comical exaggeration takes on a more self-absorbed quality when Finn boasts of being a “better man than God,” and promptly validates this claim with the fact that he “could best God at ball-throw or wrestling or pig-trailing or at the honeyed discourse of sweet Irish with jewels and gold for bards” (12). The traditional

duality of the warrior/poet hinted at here is given the full satirical treatment when Finn speaks of the great burden that must be taken on by those who wish to be counted among his people:

Two young fosterlings he must carry under the armpits to his jacket
 through the whole of Erin, and six arm-bearing warriors in his seat
 together. If he be delivered of a warrior or a blue spear, he is not taken.
 One hundred head of cattle he must accommodate with wisdom about his
 person when walking all Erin, the half about his armpits and the half about
 his trews, his mouth never halting from the discoursing of sweet poetry.

(11)

According to Declan Kiberd, these passages can easily be read as “undergraduate comedy” which is intended as “an exaggerated imitation of the Victorian translatores” employed by Standish O’Grady in the Finn stories that were included in *Silva Gadelica*, his collection of Irish folklore stories published in 1892 (506). Gaelic scholars such as Cathal O’Hainle support this assertion with the notion that O’Grady’s translations are the real focus of O’Brien’s parody, rather than the myth itself.

Thus, we return to this focus on authenticity that seems to be at the heart of so much of O’Brien’s writing. Although the Finn passages are themselves undoubtedly humorous, the ultimate thrust of the humor is based on the notion that O’Grady’s translations are even more ridiculous in that they were meant to be taken seriously. Indeed, as Sue Asbee points out, O’Brien’s satirical exaggerations are much closer to reflecting that which has kept the Finn historical cycle alive and imminently recognizable to modern readers, particularly in comparison to other early Irish cycles that descended

into irrelevance while the Finn cycle continued to grow increasingly ridiculous and deliberately overblown (42).

However, following this line of thought, it is still crucial to understand the difference between how O'Brien chose to present Sweeny and how he chose to present Finn within the context of the novel. To begin with, Finn is literally "chosen" by Dermot Trellis, the author created by the student narrator, to protect the innocence and fidelity of the character Peggy due to Finn's reputation for strength and honor. Although the first mention of Finn in the novel is of a more ethereal nature, it's in his first actual appearance that we see he has been lifted from the well of tradition to serve a purpose that directly stems from authorial intention. Sweeny's first appearance, by contrast, is a far more natural occurrence that speaks directly to the purely oral existence of Irish history that precedes written literature. Following a prompt from Conan, it is Finn himself, or "Mister Storybook," as he is affectionately dubbed by the characters with whom Dermot Trellis places him, who brings the Sweeny epic into the mind of the reader. Although Sweeny does eventually achieve physical tangibility within the novel's narrative framework, his first appearance is in a purely historical context that exists independently of the narrative thus far.

However, once again, the function of this method of representation is purely an ironic one, in that this oral existence is physically represented to the reader through the same format that would eventually override and replace it, written literature. This problem is itself addressed by Finn in the language of postmodern self-reflexive critique when he laments the fact that he is "without honour in the breast of a sea-blue book" and "twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web," going

on to wonder who would have the nerve to “dishonor the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story?” (13). As Anne Clissman pointed out, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is itself a book-web, in that “all the threads run into each other and are connected to each other in an intricate and diverse pattern” (90). One can almost interpret this as Finn speaking directly to the author about why he would rather not be utilized as one among many narrative layers of a complex and “gap-worded” metafictional novel. So if this is so clearly a self-implicating gesture, why would O’Brien choose to include it? Well, apart from the self-depreciative tendencies that have been well-documented throughout his career, this passage can easily be read as proof of the everlasting and transcendent power of Irish tradition, almost as O’Brien’s way of reminding us that the stories of Finn MacCool and King Sweeny will outlast any sort of textual representation, whether in his own novel or that of Standish O’Grady. The attempt to limit such an immense figure to the confines of text is an inherently futile gesture, and O’Brien’s way of reconciling this problem is by flaunting a postmodern mode of self-awareness; the limits of the textual mode of representation are a part of the representation itself.

Speaking of the Sweeny story, this self-reflexive critique of the written form can be seen early in the story when Finn tells us that Sweeny was so infuriated by the presence of the priest on his land that “he did not rest till he had snatched the beautiful light-lined psalter from the cleric and put it in the lake, at the bottom” (64). It was this symbolic act that began a string of events eventually leading to the malediction that drove Sweeny to the flights of madness comprising the remainder of the story. However, despite this anti-textual gesture, Finn tells us shortly thereafter that the psalter was returned to the cleric “unharmful, its lines and its letters unblemished” (64). Thus,

however one may wish to rage or even lament the limits of textual representation, those limits are inescapable in an age in which written literature has replaced the oral story as a means of preserving tradition and presenting it to a mass audience. This transcendent power of Irish folklore is also enhanced by the fact that Sweeny is alive in the novel's conclusion, after the book seemingly commits suicide with the previously-mentioned death triad, and with the hilarious contrast between the epic power of the Sweeny story as told by Finn and the proletarian poetry of Jem Casey that interrupts and eventually cancels it. When Shanahan, one of Dermot Trellis' character creations, interrupts Finn's story to speak of Casey's poetry, he provides an elaborate description of a tough, ignorant, proud member of the working class who preferred to spend his time getting his hands dirty with a pickaxe than in any classroom. Once this description is complete, Shanahan's return to the tales told by "Mister Storybook" for the sake of comparison reads like a satire of that forced sense of obligation some people feel towards the tradition of their own country:

You can't beat it, of course, said Shanahan with a reddening of the features, the real old stuff of the native land, you know, stuff that brought scholars to our shore when the men on the other side were on the flat of their bellies before the calf of gold with a sheepskin around their man. It's the stuff that put our country where she stands to-day, Mr. Furriskey, and I'd have my tongue out of my head on the bloody roots before I'd be heard saying a word against it. But the man in the street, where does he come in? By God he doesn't come in at all as far as I can see. (76)

Indeed, the last sentence here is an example of the ultimate indictment against stories of folklore, that they lack relevance and any point of connection to the struggles and burdens of contemporary life. O'Brien seems to be suggesting that his indictment is usually made by people who read literature only on a surface level, who would dismiss a story about a medieval king driven mad without considering it may have symbolic significance that can transcend the limits of time or place.

Ironically enough, despite the purely satirical nature of Jem Casey's poetry, it has survived to achieve an almost iconic status that stands above any other of the elements O'Brien worked with in this novel or any other, even appearing in places such as the Dublin Writers Museum and the walls of his namesake pub in Boston as the sole representation of his body of work. Of particular interest to many is "The Workman's Friend," a set of quatrains detailing how alcohol helps offset the struggles of the working class, each ending with the phrase "A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN." The real irony is that Casey's poetry sections are clearly set up as a foil for Sweeny's melodious lays; the easily accessible subject matter and simple rhymes of modern proletarian poetry are meant to stand in sharp contrast to the depth of Irish folklore. Despite this, and even despite the fact that Finn is clearly agitated at having been interrupted, it is Casey's poetry that eventually wins over the crowd and completely overshadows the Sweeny story. Kiberd correctly asserts this can easily be read as O'Brien's lament that ancient poetry no longer has the ability to captivate a mass audience to the extent that simple poetry driven by a unitary political agenda can in contemporary Ireland.

Once again, O'Brien demonstrates his respect for tradition, this time by not allowing the defeat to be anything more than a temporary setback. Rather than merely being allowed another mention, Sweeny's presence in the novel is strengthened even further when he is granted the gift of physical tangibility in his next appearance. Not only this, but he is allowed a temporary escape from the exile that is the subject of so much of his mournful lamenting. The background for his return is one that is fraught with yet more layers upon layers of fiction: Pooka MacPhellimey and Good Fairy, two characters borrowed from Irish folklore, and Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews, two cowboys borrowed from the Western writer William Tracy, himself a creation of the unnamed student narrator, and Jem Casey, have all decided to venture out to The Red Swan, a hotel in which the author Dermot Trellis lives with the characters he has created for his novel. The aim of this journey is to rescue and eventually claim the soul of Orlick Trellis, a child conceived out of Dermot Trellis' rape of Sheila Lamont, a creation of his with whom he immediately fell in love.

After these characters hear a rustling in the trees above them, a voice emanates from the sky that is "querulous and saddened with an infinite weariness" (133). After quoting a few more verses detailing the sadness of his exile, Sweeny falls to the ground, and the first one to come to his aid is his former rival in the quest for the attention of the masses, Jem Casey. After kneeling down towards Sweeny, we are told that Casey was "pouring questions into the cup of his dead ear and picking small thorns from his gashed chest with absent thoughtless fingers, poet on poet, a bard unthorning a fellow-bard" (135). The delicate and sober phrasing on display here leaves no mystery as to where O'Brien feels respect is due, whether from the fellow poet or from the reader. This

relatively simple idea remains remarkably consistent throughout the many clashing discourses and narratives that comprise the novel's structure.

Apart from the gift of physical presence, Sweeny's second appearance is also allowed to be subtly woven into the comical dialogue that represents the real spirit of the novel to most readers. Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who published his own version of the Sweeny epic under the title of *Sweeney Astray*, remarked in the introduction to the poem that O'Brien's incorporation of the Sweeny epic was "equal parts depressing and hilarious" (2). Writing for the *New York Times*, Brendan Kennelly also noted the dualistic nature of the characterization, which "makes us laugh aloud even as we are touched with pity." This effect is most prominent when Sweeny is allowed his one chance to partially and briefly depart his world of suffering to participate in the game of cards transpiring among the characters as they wait in the Red Swan hotel. When asked how many cards he would like, Sweeny replies that he would like "a bed of sorrel, acorns and nuts and cresses thick, and three cards" (152). Finn is also allowed only one chance to interact in such a manner, and his remark is similar in its only partial acknowledgment of the modern world that exists outside of the folklore that allows for his perpetual life. When Shanahan first starts in with the Jem Casey verses, Finn angrily opposes the interruption of his story, declaring that "the man who mixed his utterance with the honeyed words of Finn was the first day put naked into the tree of Coill Boirche with nothing to his bare hand but a stick of hazel" (73).

Thus, despite how radically different Finn and Sweeny appear in the novel, the pattern is consistent: they exist ensconced in their own worlds, departing only briefly to remind the reader of their vibrant and sustained life in the literary world. The fact that

this approach allows for a dynamic and multi-faceted view of Irish tradition and exemplifies O'Brien's deeply ingrained sense of ironic nationalism. In terms of political ideology, Sweeney's mournful poetry in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be interpreted as a lamentation for the loss of old ways and heritage that is often at the heart of nationalist movements. However, Finn's presence frustrates this possibility with comical boasting and bloated verse that isn't near as glorious as it purports to be. In this sense, the presence of Finn MacCool utilizes what Patricia Waugh defines as "disruptions from within" that destabilize the concept of nationalism (5). O'Brien is using his extensive knowledge of Irish myth to disrupt the stability of Irish nationalism so that it cannot achieve the status of political ideology.

IV: O'BRIEN'S LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE

Speaking of the role that literature played in the Irish resistance to English imperialism during the eighteenth century, Edward Said noted that Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke and Jonathan Swift all filled a crucial role in helping to forge a discourse of Irish resistance (223). The language of this discourse was, of course, English, the implication being that the work of these writers contributed to a literary version of "Hiberno-English," the term typically assigned to the dialect of English spoken in Ireland. The contributions of these writers, as well as J.M. Synge and W.B. Yeats in the following centuries, would contribute to the creation of an English language of resistance that played a prominent role in the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

As a whole, most critics tend to avoid reading Flann O'Brien's texts in the context of a discourse of Irish resistance, particularly the nature of the national identity that can be gleaned from examining his use of language. An exception would be M. Keith Booker, who gave *At Swim-Two-Birds* a political treatment without arriving at a conclusive stance, or Carol Taaffe and Kim McMullen, who both have read O'Brien's work in terms of the energy of the Irish sovereign state that had been officially declared just two years before *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published. Apart from that, O'Brien criticism tends to assume a general depoliticization as an essential condition of his texts. This is certainly understandable since Irish politics were only directly addressed when

O'Brien was writing under the name of Myles na gCopaleen. However, an examination of O'Brien's use of language as an element of nationhood, particularly his insistence on allowing expressive space to both Irish and English, can help us arrive at a multi-faceted, dynamic view of Irish tradition. In addition, an analysis of the nationalist impulses underlying the use of language in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* can reveal a concept of nation based purely on essence and the imaginative capacity of the reader. This postmodern concept of nation combines with the Irish/English duality to portray an ironic sense of nationalism that resists the impulse towards a unitary sense of pride.

According to Edward Hirsch, Flann O'Brien was of the group of urban Catholic intellectuals, starting with James Joyce and extending to poet Patrick Kavanagh, who were disdainful towards what they saw as the creation of an artificial Irish identity at the hands of Anglo-Irish Protestants such as J.M. Synge. This identity typically involved the aesthetic embrace of the Irish peasant and glorification of the accompanying rural lifestyle as the embodiment of purity, traditional folklore and national pride. As Hirsch demonstrates, this conception of a purely Gaelic people unaffected by the plague of modernity was a mostly imaginative affair that starkly contrasted with the reality of the nineteenth-century Irish countryside:

The thirty years between 1860 and 1890 saw a major reordering of the rural class structure. The countryside was permanently altered by the dominant growth of small-farmer proprietorships, the relentless decrease in population in the wake of the famine, and the virtual destruction of a viable Gaelic-speaking community paralleled by a significant growth in English-literacy rates. (1117-8)

Essentially, the goal of Celtic Renaissance writers such as Yeats and Augusta Gregory was to re-imagine the Irish identity, and an Irish peasantry dependent upon the land and the native culture seemed an ideal starting point, partially because they represented an imaginative space that both preceded and existed independently of large cities:

By mystifying an ancient, unchanging folk life, removed from the harsh realities of land agitation and social conflict in the countryside, they could treat the peasant as a romantic emblem of a deep, cultural, pastoral, and significantly anti-commercial (or nonmaterialistic) Irish life. The Revival writers believed that cities, especially English cities like London, represented modernity and commercialism, whereas rural areas, especially the landscape of western Ireland, were free from commerce and materialism. (1122)

The effect of this glorification was of such immensity that one would be hard pressed to find a major Irish writer of the twentieth century who has not sought to demythologize this image; Hirsch cites the harsh realist novels of John McGahern, the gritty archeological physicality of Seamus Heaney's poetry and the arrogant anti-pastoralism of Joyce's *Dedalus* as just a few examples of how the project to re-inscribe a more authentic vision of Irish identity was one of the most prominent themes of Irish cultural discourse in the twentieth century. One culmination of these efforts was the foundation of the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980, which sought to aggressively interrogate revisionist patterns of nationalist thought that have arguably been the source of so much of the political turmoil in Northern Ireland (Deane).

Naturally, Flann O'Brien's role within this process of demythologizing is of a complex and multi-faceted nature. O'Brien's Irish-language novel *An Béal Bocht* was the most obvious attack on the nationalist attitudes that prevailed in the Celtic Renaissance, particularly the notion of an intrinsic glory in a life of rural destitution. Hirsch suggests that the novel is also O'Brien's attempt to dig deeper into the authenticity of Irish country life to rescue the peasant figure from what O'Brien saw as an artificial characterization created by both Synge and Victorian playwrights such as Dion Boucicault, while still foregrounding the ridiculous nature of the vicarious urban obsession with rural poverty.

In a more general sense, O'Brien's brother Ciaran O'Nuallain notes a difference between those specifically Irish elements that appear in the work of Yeats, referred to as "strange flowers from another garden," and those that appear in O'Brien's work in a much purer and less fragmented manner (106). The implication seems to be that O'Brien was not interested in the brief and random historical reference that comprises a great deal of modernist literature; he would rather include entire sections of the Finn or Sweeney cycles within a thread of narratives. The specifically Irish elements that O'Brien chose were not intended as codes to potentially unlock a Celtic shadow world to those students willing to apply the appropriate level of critical analysis; instead, they appeared in their most blatant, accurate and potentially obscure form. In a much-publicized exchange with Irish novelist Ethel Mannin, O'Brien defended himself against Mannin's charge of "willful obscurity" by asserting that *At Swim-Two-Birds* is "a definite milestone in literature" that "puts the shallow pedestrian English writers in their place" (qtd. in Asbee 20). Although one could easily speculate that this declaration was made with tongue

planted in cheek, it nevertheless indicates that O'Brien was writing against the prevailing notions of literature at the time, and felt that potential bewilderment on the part of the reader was a necessary condition for a rich and vibrant literature.

Whether or not this dialectical comparison seems a fair assessment of the work of Yeats, it offers the possibility of dividing O'Brien's work between Irish and otherwise. Whether considered in terms of a single work or the body of work as a whole, the division can help us understand the manner in which Flann O'Brien's ironic nationalism operates. Speaking further on this issue, Ciaran O'Nuallain notes that his brother's precise and pitch-perfect usage of the English language was noticeably "hard" and free of the "Celtic mist" that surrounds the prose of other Anglo-Irish writers; this was because O'Brien used whatever language he happened to be writing in a manner that "suited his purpose" (106). If this is the case, then how are we to define the purpose that lay behind O'Brien's use of English? One way that this question can be answered is by gaining a clearer understanding of the division between Irish versus otherwise, starting with the reason why O'Brien insisted on this division in the first place.

The most pertinent example of this division within a single work is *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where translations of medieval Irish are placed directly next to dry narratives from an unnamed college student. As in the work of Vladimir Nabokov, these narratives are a classic example of what happens when the English language is approached secondarily; it is used as if borrowed, as if a sense of propriety has yet to be ingrained. This overtly clinical tone can be seen when emotional reactions are described with a sense of personal detachment:

A growing irritation in various parts of my body led me to examine my bedclothes and the discovery of lice in large numbers was the result of my researches. I was surprised and experienced also a sense of shame. I resolved at the time to make an end of my dissolute habits and composed mentally a regime of physical regeneration which included bending exercises. (41)

This section also hints at the kind of excessively drawn-out quotidian detail that informs most of the narrative:

I rarely undressed and my inexpensive suit was not the better for the use I gave it, but I found that a brisk application with a coarse brush before going out would redeem it somewhat without quite dispelling the curious bedroom smell which clung to my person and which was frequently the subject of humorous or other comment on the part of my friends and acquaintances. (3)

This delightful embrace of the inherently trivial would see its most logical extension several decades later in the novels of Samuel Beckett, who also approached the English language secondarily by translating his novels from French into English. The fact that the subject matter is given such intensely analytical treatment suggests a narrator who has mastered the English language but isn't quite sure what to do with it. On a deeper level, the emotionally neutral quality of the language can be read as a refusal to accept the language as a principal means of expression. Anthony Cronin suggests a compelling reason for this: the language used in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is itself dead, as if all of its expressive possibilities have been exhausted (106).

Placing this notion into a specifically Irish context, one arrives at the possibility that the language is dead, sounds unnatural, and seems to have been translated from Irish. After all, unlike Synge, Joyce, or Yeats, O'Brien was not a native English speaker. According to Ciaran O'Nuallain, both he and his brother's introduction to the English language and subsequent interest in writing came about through reading English-language novelists such as Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and H.G. Wells, rather than through time spent with their father's massive collection of texts from the Gaelic League (42). It's important to remember here that prior to the Celtic Renaissance, Irish-language novels had not yet become widely available; according to O'Nuallain, the Irish texts that the brothers had access to were enjoyable but not in a way that made them want to write (43). The implication is an important one for the overall development of both O'Brien's writing and that of his contemporaries; unlike Irish-language modernists such as Máirtín Ó Cadhain, O'Brien saw the English language as a literary vehicle through which a uniquely Irish voice could be asserted. Since the language first appeared to him in English novels, it could be theorized it was at that point that O'Brien began to conceive of producing literature of his own. However, rather than completely forsake the traditional Irish stories he knew so well, or compromise the integrity of them by amalgamating them into his English prose style, O'Brien opted to include the stories in *At Swim-Two-Birds* in a translated, historically accurate form. Of course, it could be argued that if O'Brien was so intent on including these stories, why translate them at all? Well, apart from the obvious resistance that would have undoubtedly come from publishing houses, one has to take into account the fact that including entire sections in the Irish language would have thrown off hordes of potential readers outside of Ireland; readers

who were unfamiliar with the Irish language would have completely missed the emotional thrust of the Sweeny poetry that is arguably at the heart of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Extending this division of Irish versus English into the concept of nation, we see that Flann O'Brien's Ireland is a place where the proliferation of the English language is both accepted and artistically integrated. However, rather than represent this linguistic amalgamation in the Irish realist convention in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien opted to include translations of medieval Irish poetry and dry English prose as two narratives that randomly intersect in a postmodern play of discourses.

Moving over to the furthest possible end of the non-Irish spectrum of O'Brien's body of work brings us to *The Third Policeman*. Apart from the general recognition that the novel's bleak landscape seems to resemble the midlands area of Ireland where O'Brien spent part of his life, most critics simply ignore the Irish question and dive directly into the novel's complex narrative techniques and empirical challenges. While the significance of this criticism should not be understated, as a whole most critics have yet to take the additional step that involves placing the novel's postmodern stylistic and structural advancements back into the context of Ireland, particularly in terms of how the novel operates in the context of nation described earlier. This is not at all surprising and not particularly problematic, in and of itself, due to the fact that the "Irishness" of the novel is very deliberately de-emphasized, especially compared to O'Brien's other major novels and journalistic work.

One noteworthy exception to this critical tendency is Hugh Kenner, who mentions being rather overwhelmed with the "queer world" of *The Third Policeman*, in contrast to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which was merely a "queer book" (96). Even though there is no

mention of Ireland as the story's setting, Kenner states that if we can accept what seems to be offered by a few of the verbal cues (the mention of Parnell on the opening page, for example), then both the narrator and the reader find themselves in "a very peculiar Ireland indeed" (99). What makes Kenner's reading in this regard so remarkable is that he locates several of the novel's noteworthy characteristics directly within Irish tradition and history, but in a manner much more deeply ingrained than a surface reading may indicate.

The first element of Irish peculiarity that Kenner notes is written into the title itself, in that the policemen are actually referred to as such and not as the "garda" name that became common after the formation of the republic; in fact, other than the presence of a few Irish names, there are no Irish words to be found at all, and overall no real evidence of the progress of the Gaelic League; Kenner sees this as a general depoliticization that paints the landscape as "a very unsettling place" (100). Taking this notion further, Kenner interprets the lack of political awareness, the rigid simplicity of policemen who are only concerned with bicycle theft, and the child-like artificiality of the landscape descriptions as greater elements of the "plausible cartoon of Ireland" that O'Brien has created for us (101). The last factor mentioned has at least been noted by other critics; Keith Hopper reads the fact that the narrator is never quite convinced that the landscape around him is real as a kind of postmodern recognition of the limits of textual representation. Most critics base these ideas on the baffling description that accompanies the narrator's first encounter with the police barracks:

About a hundred yards away on the left-hand side was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted as an advertisement on a

board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child. (266)

If the narrator's complaints about the artificiality of his setting are in some sense directed at the man behind the typewriter, then one instantly recalls Finn MacCool complaining to the same man in *At Swim-Two-Birds* about being trapped within the confines of a "gap-worded story" (14). In both examples, an inherent recognition of the limits of literary representation allows the text to achieve a level of reflexivity that had become common in the postmodern era.

In a broader context, the fact that the narrator isn't quite convinced of the actuality of the landscape can easily be read as a critique of the kind of pastoral realism advanced by Irish writers such as Frank O'Connor and Seán Ó Faoláin, among many others. Consider this passage, in which the narrator isn't fooled by an authorial attempt to create a perfect landscape:

My surroundings had a strangeness of a peculiar kind, entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has never been before. Everything seemed almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made. Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing or of being confused with it. (253)

Here the language of self-reflexivity comically illustrates the fact that, no matter how much faith an author may have in the beauty and perfection of the landscape that is being described, there is still no way to escape the mimetic function of a text, whether it purports to be "realist" or not. By presenting a narrator who simply doesn't buy it,

O'Brien seems to be suggesting that the reader as well shouldn't buy into any author's attempt to realistically describe a landscape.

The root of this skeptical response to realist literature can be seen in O'Brien's many documented assaults on Irish realist convention. Using a variety of pseudonyms, O'Brien would frequently target forced sentimentality, cozy provincialism and the glorification of peasant life. The latter was arguably the focal point of *An Béal Bocht*, with the narrator's frequent assertion of "the choicest poverty and calamity" (436). According to Cronin, even O'Brien's long-time drinking buddy Patrick Kavanagh came under attack when his poetry was first gaining recognition in Dublin, due to its intensely rural subject matter (108-10). O'Connor himself was not spared the pangs of O'Brien's attack; the controversy that surrounded the Abbey's production of one of O'Connor's plays, largely the result of O'Brien sending in letters to *Irish Times* under various names, was of such great public amusement that it led to O'Brien being offered his own column (Cronin 107). From this new pulpit, O'Brien would continue to launch attacks on the literary rural tradition under the guise of Myles na gCopaleen, particularly "stuff about country funerals, will-making, match-making — just one long blush for an innocent man like me, who never harmed any of them" (qtd. in Hopper 29). As noted in Chapter Two above, Myles na gCopaleen is a name lifted from Dion Boucicault's Victorian play *The Colleen Bawn*. O'Brien's choice to use this name was just as significant for his column as it was for the other voice that he assigned it to, the narrator of *An Béal Bocht*. In both cases, the thieving but lovable drunken buffoon from Boucicault's play has been converted into a sophisticated cultural critic with acidic wit and a vitriolic sarcasm that spared no one.

However, as Keith Hopper points out, it is worth noting that Boucicault himself had lifted the name from Gerald Griffin's novel *The Collegians*, in a gesture of reacquisition that involved placing the comic figure Myles out of the English setting of the novel back into the context of Ireland (30). One can certainly speculate that O'Brien was clearly unimpressed, especially when one considers that the repositioning of the stage-Irishman was one of the main sources of O'Brien's contention with Synge. As Hopper points out, it is important to remember that O'Brien's opposition to Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* was not in league with the nationalist sentiment that inspired the riots following the play's original production. O'Brien didn't feel that his own cherished people had been portrayed in an unfavorable light, but he did feel that Synge's portrayal of the Irish spoke more to English stereotypes than how they really are.

Hopper is correct in asserting that O'Brien wanted readers to be mindful of *Playboy of the Western World* while reading *The Third Policeman*, at least in the first chapter. The novel begins with a very stripped-down colloquial kind of description of a murder committed by the narrator, and in traditional storytelling fashion, immediately moves into a vague description of the narrator's life as a background to the story; the name chosen for the narrator's murder victim, Old Mathers, clearly resembles Synge's murder victim Old Mahon. However, this is where the similarities end; in a manner reminiscent of Milton's approach to *Samson Agonistes*, O'Brien wanted to evoke a story that would have been familiar to his readers only to call attention to the manner in which he deviates from it.

This naturally brings us to the final aspect of Kenner's reading of *The Third Policeman*. Whereas most critics seem to feel that the novel surrenders its Irish elements

after the first chapter, Kenner takes a much closer look at the language at hand to demonstrate that O'Brien used his extensive background and knowledge of the Irish language to extend the expressive possibilities of the English language as used by the narrator:

The book's verbal mannerisms, in short, seem contrived to demonstrate a pressure of Irish usage, notably *learned* Irish usage — middle Irish, early modern Irish — upon the English that furnishes its dictionary. This is to be carefully differentiated from the stage-Irish of Boucicault or Somerville and Ross or even Synge where characters, unlearned but newly arrived into bilinguality, achieve marketable charm by inadvertence. (103)

To illustrate this point, Kenner cites the verbal constructions that rely heavily on the adjective and the noun and the elaborate riddles based on the “slipperiness of the Gaelic Lexicography,” such as the conversation with Policeman MacCruiskeen detailing the various possible meanings of the word “bulbul” (102). Kenner's distinction between this approach to Hiberno-English and the kind of English sentences flavored with Irish syntax (or, as O'Brien's brother might put it, “Celtic mist”) featured in the work of the playwrights mentioned above is crucial in that it shows O'Brien was seeking his own mode of expression. From a nationalist perspective, it might seem like Kenner is suggesting that *The Third Policeman* is more authentically Irish than the work of the playwrights he mentions. However, can this really be said about a work that doesn't appear to be set in Ireland or even contain any immediately recognizably Irish characteristics? If the Irish essence of *The Third Policeman* is manifested through the structure and character of the language, then there is an inherent irony in the fact that the

language itself is not only English but a version of it that is entirely removed from the Hiberno-English featured in popular Irish literature of the twentieth century.

There are other subtle ways that an Irish essence manifests itself throughout the text. During one of the sections in which the narrator is struggling with the empirical challenges presented by MacCruiskeen in the barracks, we are told that he tries to maintain his sanity and stay calm by whistling two songs, *The Old Man Twangs His Braces* and *The Corncrake Plays the Bagpipes* (283, 285). The tradition of song is one that has featured prominently throughout Irish history; stories of personal hardship, love, and political struggle are captured in songs that have survived since long before the advent of recorded music. This phenomenon is certainly not unique to Ireland, but perhaps what makes traditional Irish music unique in the western world is that it's still a vibrant part of daily life throughout the country. Indeed, fiddle tunes, instrumental jigs, and lyrical ballads that have existed for centuries can still be heard every day in pubs, house parties and even street corners amidst the noise of contemporary city life.

Thus, O'Brien's choice to posit two traditional songs as the single source of stability in the narrator's terrifying journey is noteworthy. Of particular significance is that, as far as this study can conclude, the songs don't exist. O'Brien is essentially asking the reader to create a sound to associate with the songs rather than search the memory banks to recall an existing referent. Including a reference to a nonexistent source can be read as a subtle jab at the modernist tendency, among Joyce and Eliot especially, to overwhelm the reader with an abundance of literary and historical references that are integral to a concrete understanding of the overall text. However, on a deeper level, the brief mention of these songs staves off the impulse towards an overtly nationalistic

romanticism that is very often tied to traditional music. Throughout the history of nationalist movements, in Ireland and elsewhere, traditional songs are used to drum up a feeling of communal heritage and unite a people against a common enemy (consider the role of Dominic Behan's *The Patriot Game* in Martin McDonagh's play *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*). This is not to suggest an inherent danger in traditional music, but the point remains that a reference to a nonexistent song frustrates the possibility of a specific nostalgia or patriotic feeling that could distract from the otherworldly quality of the text. However, *The Old Man Twangs His Braces* and *The Corncrake Plays the Bagpipes* certainly sound like they *could* be old Irish tunes. O'Brien is evoking an Irish essence by appealing to the reader's imaginative capacity rather to anything directly associated with an existing concept of "nation." In an amusing historical twist, a composer named Django Bates decided to pay tribute to *The Third Policeman* in 2008 by writing *The Corncrake Plays the Bagpipes* for the London Sinfonietta. Staying true to the original context of the song title, Bates sought to create "a jig whistled wonkily by a very frightened man" (Bates). The appeal to a general Irish essence through the use of nonexistent song titles negates the call upon a reservoir of traditional music that is tied to national heritage. In this sense, O'Brien's text resists the nationalist impulse to evoke an Irish essence by asking the reader to recall a specific song; thus an Irish essence is created through a resistance of the conventional modes of doing so with regard to traditional music.

A similar effect is created in the same chapter when MacCruiskeen speaks of a mystical box that contains "the brass thing with straps that I found on the road one night near Matthew O'Crahan's" (283). What this strange contraption is or what exactly the

name implies is unknown, but the sound of the name itself enhances a uniquely Irish essence in accordance with the obscure sense of humor that drives the novel as a whole. The prioritizing of signifier over signified also anticipates the postmodern concept of a literature centered on and entirely dependent upon the reader; whatever connotation the reader wants to assign to the name Matthew O’Crahan determines what will be made of the policeman’s comment.

Returning to the concept of a discourse of resistance, it becomes clear that O’Brien’s language was not so much resisting English imperialism as it was the popular modes of literary expression that were available at the time. The emotional neutrality of the English prose in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be read as a resistance to the practice of infusing the English language with the energy of Irish tradition; however, this very practice is used for the translations of Irish medieval poetry that also appear in the novel. The fact that these diametrically-opposed approaches are included in a single work can be read as both an acceptance of the presence of the English language and as a resistance to the notion that a text had to reflect a singular stance on any issue, be it Irish nationalism or any other. In *The Third Policeman*, the reference to nonexistent sources and the textual critique of realist literature both suggest a resistance to rely on the provincial modes of Irish realism that were prevalent at the time.

V: JOYCE, O'BRIEN AND NATIONAL TRADITION

If O'Brien can be grouped together with Joyce and Beckett in the grand trilogy of twentieth-century Irish novelists, it quickly becomes clear there are certain crucial elements that separate O'Brien from the other two writers. The most immediately apparent is that he exempted himself from the tradition of self-exile that would define the careers of not just Joyce and Beckett but a host of other Irish writers since the seventeenth century. Although this alone would suggest that O'Brien's work exists in an entirely different cultural sphere from that of Joyce, the presence of Joyce was arguably one of the most significant burdens on Flann O'Brien's literary career. Because O'Brien was a resident of Dublin who was writing just thirty years after one of the most significant novelists of the twentieth century, the comparisons to Joyce's body of work were inevitable. Adding to this effect are Joyce's words of praise that have graced what seems like every single edition of O'Brien's work, labeling him as "a real writer with the true comic spirit." As reported by biographer Anthony Cronin, when mutual friend Niall Sheridan recommended *At Swim-Two-Birds* to Joyce, he responded that he had already read it with a magnifying glass at a time when he had all but given up on contemporary literature, ultimately labeling it as "a really funny book." The immense effect of these relatively simple words of praise is still felt today; although Joyce's praise undoubtedly continues to generate interest in O'Brien's work, it also perpetuates the unfortunate critical tendency to see his novels only in terms of their similarities to Joyce (as briefly

noted in the first chapter, this is as true now as it was when *At Swim-Two-Birds* was first published, as indicated by some of the reviews that accompanied the 2007 release of O'Brien's novel collection).

This critical tendency was clearly a source of frustration for O'Brien, whose desire to have his own work viewed outside of Joyce's massive shadow was echoed as late as 2004 by contemporary Irish writer Roddy Doyle (Chrisafis). When Irish novelist Ethel Mannin made the mistake of commenting on the Joycean elements of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien responded with the assertion that the book has "nothing in the world to do with James Joyce" (qtd. in Asbee 20). After Timothy O'Keeffe reprinted *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1959, O'Brien famously wrote to the publisher that if he heard the word "Joyce" again, he would "surely froth at the gob" (qtd. in Asbee 24).

As in the work of Jonathan Swift, however, the plurality of various writing personas should act as a warning against framing O'Brien's views into simple dialectical categories; this is as true for O'Brien's position on Joyce as it is for his views on Irish tradition as a whole. Consider, for example, how throughout his career O'Brien never seemed to want to change the subject when the question of Joyce arose. In fact, Joyce was consistently present throughout most of O'Brien's writing, especially in his contributions to the *Irish Times* under the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen. The overall impression of these writings is a perception of Joyce as a writer who squandered his gifts with a hopelessly self-obsessive version of art, who caved in to the pressures of international fame, and most significantly, whose importance is greatly misunderstood and exaggerated by scholars around the world, particularly in America.

Although Myles' tendency towards a language of deliberate arrogance might lead one to suggest that the mention of Joyce was meant to perpetuate an air of literary pretentiousness, these views of Joyce remain consistent throughout most of O'Brien's writing. The most blatant example of this is in *The Dalkey Archive*, where a fictionalized, devoutly Catholic Joyce denies authorship of *Ulysses*, writing it off as the work of "various low, dirty-minded ruffians who had been paid to put this material together" (176). The satirist's revenge has thus been enacted. The implication is that the excesses of *Finnegans Wake* and the sheer outlandishness of the scholarship that accompanied *Ulysses* humiliated the Joyce of *Dubliners* to the extent that he had to fake his own death. The latter point is echoed by primary character Mick Shaughnessy when he complains of the "stupid" American books that have been written about Joyce (103); the first point is one that can be found in the Myles canon:

His attempted demolition of language was his other major attainment.

What would you think of a man who entered a restaurant, sat down, suddenly whipped up the tablecloth and blew his nose on it? You would not like it — not if you owned the restaurant. That is what Joyce did with our beloved tongue that Shakespeare and Milton spoke. (qtd. in Powell 59)

Implicit in all of this is a gesture of reacquisition, in that it appears as if Myles is trying to bring Joyce back to Dublin and essentially rescue him from a kind of deification at the hands of literary scholars. Indeed, under the name of Myles, O'Brien would praise Joyce and Yeats as "the only two Irish literary figures of the last century who were men of genius" and who claimed that *Ulysses* could be understood by anyone with "intelligence, maturity, and some knowledge of life as well as letters" (qtd. in Powell 52, 55).

According to Keith Hopper, O'Brien was confronted by two massive towers upon his entrance into the literary world: the Celtic Twilight and the legacy of Joyce. In choosing to pursue an artistic mode of his own that involved an interrogation of the limits and conventions of narrative technique, O'Brien opted to lean towards the Joycean side of this dialectic. Carol Taaffe supports this notion:

With the battle lines so plainly drawn, Joyce was becoming an important piece of cultural currency. Whatever the reservations O'Nolan later professed towards modernist writers, it was surely a more attractive prospect to be identified with the sophisticated, 'modern' successors to the revival generation, than with faded imitators of past glories. (17)

If O'Brien sought to leave his own mark on literature by in some sense creating his own version of the Joycean model, it would seem that Joyce's exile and eventual literary direction was a source of great disappointment for O'Brien and his contemporaries; as Myles put it in 1943, Joyce "left Dublin the better to libel it" (qtd. in Powell 51).

Before the publication of *The Dalkey Archive*, the most explicit manner in which O'Brien had directly addressed the issue of Joyce was in an article entitled "A Bash in the Tunnel" published in a special issue of *Envoy* magazine. The title refers to the central joke of the piece: Joyce is like the drunkard who sneaks into a railway car at night to steal a bit of liquor, locks himself in the bathroom and passes out, only to wake up in a different part of town:

But surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody else's whiskey, being whisked hither and

thither by anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word, ENGAGED? (206)

A general resentment towards the exiled artist seems written into this joke; it almost reads like the lamenting of those long-time fans of the musical group who chose to sacrifice the integrity of their art by leaving home in the pursuit of international fame. While this gesture seems inherently nationalistic, O'Brien was certainly not the kind of patriot who would attach a feeling of resentment to the act of emigration alone. The implication is more that Joyce simply lost his way after leaving Ireland, a sentiment that is interspersed throughout his fiction.

Even though O'Brien is quoted above as angrily denying any sort of Joycean influence in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, there are a few strikingly apparent similarities between the novel and particular elements in the work of Joyce. Since the novel is widely accepted as a play of various satirical discourses, it is safe to assume that O'Brien was well aware of these similarities and that his frustration was based more on being read in light of, rather than against, the work of Joyce. According to Sue Asbee, remaining mindful of Joyce while reading *At Swim-Two-Birds* shows "fundamental differences in the two writers' approaches – a good reason in itself for considering Joyce and O'Brien together" (23). On a surface level, the similarities between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*'s Stephen Dedalus and the unnamed narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* are blatantly obvious; both are young college students with a strong sense of literary and philosophical curiosity who are brought to life in a narrative that is meant to chart their intellectual development. Although both narrators take solace in close friendships, they also seem to harbor a sense of alienation from the primary institutions that govern the early stages of

life, particularly family and academia. As Asbee points out, however, there is great significance to be found in each narrator's respective response to this alienation. Whereas Dedalus flees from the oppressive nets of Catholic Ireland towards a life of exile, O'Brien's narrator merely reconciles a troubled relationship with his Uncle by passing his exams and chooses to stay in Ireland. Each respective character's fate rather blatantly parallels the course of each writer's life; Joyce fled Ireland for Paris at a very young age, whereas O'Brien never left (22-3). However, the manner in which this biographical parallel is expressed in the two works is drastically different in that O'Brien's narrator is nameless. This deliberate omission seems like a gesture of depersonalization, in that O'Brien wanted to remind the reader that the narrator is a purely fictional construct and not the glorified version of the author's younger self embodied by Stephen Dedalus. The preference for anonymity clearly pokes fun at the notion of creating a literary martyr; on another level, however, the divergent character paths also seem to mock the idea that the isolated artist must abandon his surroundings in order to fully develop his craft.

This notion also seems written into the Finn MacCool sections of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which strongly resemble the mock-heroic descriptions of Cyclops in *Ulysses*. The humorous effect of both sections is strikingly similar, in that they both satirize the tendency towards exaggerated descriptions of glory and physical strength that comprise a great deal of mythology and traditional storytelling. In fact, O'Brien seems to suggest that an exile from Irish tradition isn't a necessary condition for the full expression of this idea. In this sense, the Finn sections in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be read as a subtle critique — or possibly even resentment — towards Joyce's entrance into the culture of European High Modernism.

Although *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* both carry an undeniably Irish quality, they both emanate from a state of expressive universalism in which Irish tradition is one voice among many. In *Ulysses*, the Dublin street life of Leopold Bloom is the stage for an expression of an unprecedented level of historical, cultural and literary consciousness. While *At Swim-Two-Birds* is based on a similar setup in which the life of a Dublin college student is used as a platform for narrative exploration, Irish mythical figures such as Finn MacCool and Sweeny are given the primary role in O'Brien's work that is reserved for Homer in *Ulysses*. With the primacy of the individual consciousness in *Ulysses*, modernism had been both defined and concluded and the stage had been set, particularly with the "Circe" chapter, for a new form that would bring literature into the "post" stage. Beckett chose the opposite direction by creating a literature of silence, ignorance and cultural vacancy; O'Brien chose to remain in Ireland, in both a biographical and a literary sense, and seek a new mode in which to preserve and represent Irish tradition. Joyce would answer this call himself by moving from the waking consciousness to the dream-state with *Finnegans Wake*.

This, of course, should not be read as a suggestion that O'Brien is the more "authentically Irish" of the two writers, especially considering the extent to which Finn would re-emerge in *Finnegans Wake*. The suggestion is rather that the works of O'Brien are more conducive to the postmodern expression of tradition that has been the focus of this study. Admittedly, the savage indignation toward Ireland that can be read in many of O'Brien's works can also be found in the work of Joyce and even Swift. What separates O'Brien is the expressive and culturally-specific aspect of his work. Indeed, two of O'Brien's works that emerged from the post-Joyce period, *An Béal Bocht* and *The Third*

Policeman, would see O'Brien escaping the Joycean mold to call for a much different sort of connection to Irish tradition than Joyce had sought. After Joyce had departed the conscious world to express his knowledge of Irish tradition in the idiosyncratic, amalgamated, trans-cultural dream-language in *Finnegans Wake*, O'Brien continued to reach further into the well of tradition by composing an entire novel in the Irish language.

If fragmentation and language play are primary tools for subverting the authority of totalizing concepts, then *Finnegans Wake* can be said to demolish all existing concepts that govern the self, including "nation." But what is left after the demolition? While the postmodern answer may be that we should be content to build upon the ruins, I would argue that some form of essence must remain before this reconstructive project can begin. The concept of nation cannot be resuscitated because it cannot be allowed to die, especially not when identity itself is at risk of being absorbed by the late-capitalist market forces of global expansion. The solution is to embrace those works that allow for a context in which the concept of "nation" can be re-imagined through aesthetic experience. This can be done using Sweeny's mournful poetry in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the satirical Irish humor in *An Béal Bocht*, or the general Irish essence evoked by the use of imaginary referents in *The Third Policeman*. Although some may argue that the spectral presence of Finn MacCool in *Finnegans Wake* might provide a similar aesthetic context, his existence is still confined to the surreal mode of expression that comprises the novel; he doesn't achieve the clarity amidst the noise of clashing discourses that he does in *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

Indeed, it is true that there has been ill-usage to the men of Erin from the book-poets of the world and dishonour to Finn, with no knowing the

nearness of disgrace or the sorrow of death, or the hour when they may swim for swans or trot for ponies or bell for stags or croak for frogs or fester for the wounds on a man's back. (16)

The desperation here stands in sharp contrast to the humorously boastful tone of just a page earlier:

Or where is the living human man who could beat Finn at the making of generous cheese, at the spearing of ganders, at the magic of thumb-suck, at the shaving of hog-hair, or at the unleashing of long hounds from a golden thong in the full chase, sweet-fingered corn-yellow Finn, Finn that could carry an armed host from Almha to Slieve Luachra in the craw of his gut-hung knickers. (15)

The dualism at work here is crucial in that Finn's dynamic characterization is indicative of a vibrant and multi-faceted version of Irish tradition. The literary incorporation of tradition will always call for an assessment of the conditions in which each writer is inadvertently placed; this is an unfortunate inevitability of the postmodern era, but it need not be seen as a debilitating factor. The solution involves an interrogation of existing forms of representation in terms of their capacity to express the transcendent power of tradition.

When critics such as M. Keith Booker and Kim McMullen read the frequent interruption of medieval Irish poetry sections in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a sign that no discourse is privileged above any other, they appear to dismiss the possibility of interpreting O'Brien's landscape as a place where Irish tradition is allowed to speak with clarity amidst a postmodern play of narratives. This is entirely removed from the

modernist tendency to lament the loss of tradition by observing and praising it from a distance. If O'Brien shared T.S. Eliot's view of tradition, his mode of expressing it was of a much different nature, in that he opted to bring folkloric figures directly into the context of contemporary life to demonstrate the nature of our relation to them. When Shanahan sarcastically refers to Finn as "Mister Storybook," the impression seems to be that stories of Irish myth have lost the ability to command attention and resonate with the public that they once had (73). The problem is not so much that people no longer appreciate the stories as it is that they have lost the ability to emotionally identify with them. This is seen in Shanahan's summary of Sweeny's recitation as "bloody nice" poetry about "the green hills and the bloody swords and the bird giving out the pay from the top of the tree" (76). O'Brien's take on Sweeny's poetry is clearly much different, as is seen by the sober tone of regret and sorrow that is felt in the poetry that he includes:

O God that I had not gone
 to the hard battle!
 Thereafter my name was Mad—
 Mad Sweeny in the bush

Watercress from the well at Cirb
 is my lot at terce,
 its color is my mouth,
 green on the mouth of Sweeny

Chill chill is my body

when away from ivy,
 the rain torrent hurts it
 and the thunder. (69)

There is nothing even remotely satirical about this poetry. It is clearly more than “bloody nice” stuff; it carries an emotional impact that can be felt in whatever context it may appear. The fact that this poetry is able to achieve such clarity amidst the clash of disparate discourses suggests that it can function in much the same way amidst the clash of various streams of mass media that comprises daily life in Ireland’s larger cities.

Booker’s and McMullen’s readings also neglect the possibility that the poetry interruptions are intended as a self-reflexive critique of the existing literary forms available for the representation of an Irish essence. Whether in Finn’s complaints about poetic misrepresentation, Bonaparte O’Coonassa’s sad recognition that his life of suffering is destined by Gaelic texts, or the unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman* expressing skepticism about the reality of his fictional landscape, O’Brien’s characters very often seem to be reaching beyond textual boundaries to call for a mode of representation that allows for a full expression of their being. However, in an irony that runs through the whole of O’Brien’s work, the fact that these characters have achieved self-awareness means that they have been granted the expressive capacity that they openly seek.

It could also be said that these characters are seeking a more authentic level of representation for themselves, but since taking on this study I have learned that the notion of authenticity is far more complex and problematic than I had assumed. My initial intention was to use the work of scholars who were far more familiar with Irish myth and

literary tradition than myself to demonstrate that O'Brien's work contains a more authentic representation of tradition than the Irish novelists he is often grouped with. While I still retained this idea as the basis for further analysis, I quickly learned that authenticity as its own literary end is one of the notions that would find its way into O'Brien's satire, particularly in *An Béal Bocht*, as seen in this speech given at a Gaelic cultural gathering:

Gael! He said, it delights my Gaelic heart to be here today speaking Gaelic with you at this Gaelic feis in the centre of the Gaeltacht. May I state that I am a Gael. I'm Gaelic from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet — Gaelic front and back, above and below. Likewise, you are all truly Gaelic. We are all Gaelic Gaels of Gaelic lineage. He who is Gaelic, should be Gaelic evermore. (441)

This can obviously be read as an assault on the Revivalist notion that Gaelic culture was in and of itself anything worth celebrating. Indeed, the unitary embrace of national heritage for its own glorious sake is not only farcical but it's also a totalitarian impulse that can have potentially dangerous consequences. As in O'Coonassa's recognition of being trapped in a Gaelic cliché, the target of the satire in the passage above is not so much a particular type of literature as it is the manner of its public embrace as the stuff of national tradition. Writing under the name of Myles about the popularity of Synge, O'Brien would often complain of this artificiality in a bitingly sarcastic tone:

We in this country had a bad time through the centuries when England did not like us. But words choke in the pen when one comes to describe what happened to us when the English discovered that we were rawther

interesting peepul ek'tully, that we were nice, witty, brave, fearfully seltic and fiery, lovable, strong, lazy, boozy, impulsive, hospitable, decent, and so on till you weaken. (234)

Written into this passage is an underlying tone of genuine anger that is prevalent throughout most of O'Brien's writing. It is regrettable that in the course of this study, writers such as Synge and Joyce are so often mentioned in a negative manner, but O'Brien's dismissal of these writers is crucial to understanding the position from which he often wrote. The implication should certainly not be that an Anglo-Irishman such as Synge wasn't *allowed* to write works set in, or simply about Ireland; indeed, O'Brien never seems to have taken issue with fellow Anglo-Irishman Yeats' overtly Irish subject matter. The implication is that Synge should have chosen a more authentic vehicle for this expression than the stage-Irish Paddy of English convention (this argument would resurface almost a century after Synge's time in accusations against playwright Martin McDonagh).

This opposition is essentially rooted in nationalism. However, as I have hoped to demonstrate, Flann O'Brien's nationalism is an inherently ironic one in that it isn't really a nationalism at all, at least in the traditional sense. The fragmented narrative in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, complex parody of *An Béal Bocht* and language play in *The Third Policeman* are all subversive tools that meet the conditions of Patricia Waugh's "disruptions from within" in that they destabilize the concept of nation as a basis for political ideology (5). In addition, each of these works contains an aesthetic appeal to a uniquely Irish essence: the mournful and melodious verse of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the bleak humor in *An Béal Bocht* and the use of imaginary songs as a source of stability in *The Third Policemen*.

Considering together such seemingly disparate elements as internal disruption and aesthetic essence suggests a version of nation that is far more an experience than a concept. Irish identity as it is portrayed through the poetry of Sweeney is something that can be genuinely felt, rather than merely recognized, by anyone, regardless of racial, ethnic, religious or cultural origin. Homogeneity need not be seen as a necessary qualification for the artistic experience of a national tradition. This is certainly as true for Ireland as any other country. In the United States for example, the history and traditions of the Latino and the Native American population, to suggest two examples among many, can be ingrained into a shared cultural memory occupying equal space with stories of the Old Western tradition. The literature of Tomás Rivera and Natachee Scott Momaday can be read as representative of a communal American identity and a way to experience various aspects of American tradition.

As the pressures of global expansion and economic disparity continue to diversify populations in countries such as Ireland, the need to define a national tradition in a manner that negates any concept of racial homogeneity will become increasingly important. With its direct gateway to the authenticity of experience, literature such as that of Flann O'Brien will play a crucial role in the formation of an ironic sense of nationalism that can be applied and sustained in countries throughout the world.

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