

Katarzyna Szmigiero

University of Łódź

BETWEEN TWO LITERARY TRADITIONS
– THE WRITINGS OF FLANN O'BRIEN

Flann O'Brien is not a widely read or recognized writer. Few books on the twentieth century novel in English contain his name at all. If his name is mentioned, it is usually with deep regret that his early novels did not attract as much attention as they should have.¹ Anthony Burgess, for instance, admits that *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a masterpiece that "still awaits the general recognition that is its due."² Ironically, this statement is not followed by a more detailed analysis. Others mention his name in connection with Joyce and Beckett, but up till now his novels have mainly been regarded as a literary curiosity, a blind alley of modernism. One could wonder why Flann O'Brien has been so notoriously neglected as one thing is certain – it is not because his works lack artistic merits.

There are a number of reasons for this critical silence. In the first place, O'Brien's career as a novelist was full of unfavourable circumstances. His first book, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, was published in 1939, when people had more serious things to do than read experimental fiction. Moreover, most copies were destroyed when London was bombed. It was published again in 1960 and won immediate applause. In 1965 its author humourously commented

¹ It is worth mentioning here that Bronisława Bałutowa's *Powieść angielska XX wieku* is a pleasant exception, as she includes O'Brien (together with Samuel Beckett and Malcolm Lowry) in her chapter on postmodern writing and the anti-novel. Bronisława Bałutowa, *Powieść, angielska XX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1987), pp. 173–176.

² Anthony Burgess, *English Literature. A Survey for Students* (Burnt Mill: Longman, 1991), p. 228.

In the year 1939 a book curiously named *At Swim-Two-Birds* appeared. Adolf Hitler took serious exception to it and in fact loathed it so much that he started World War II in order to torpedo it. In a grim irony that is not without charm, the book survived the war while Hitler did not.³

Although O'Brien was able to make such jocular remarks about his first novel, the sense of disappointment caused by its "failure" never really left him. When his second novel, *The Third Policeman*, was turned down by Longmans Green, who did not want to take the risk of its publication, the embittered author abandoned novel-writing in English for nearly twenty years. He devoted himself to journalism, contributing a daily column to the *Irish Times* and sporadically to other papers. If he published something, it would be under a different pseudonym (the one he used as a successful *Irish Times* columnist) or in Gaelic, as if he did not want to be associated with the unfortunate Irish novelist writing in English: Flann O'Brien. When, in 1959, a second publisher became interested in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien agreed, but "considered himself lucky not to have anything to do with the republication."⁴ He also claimed he had not read the book again since 1939.⁵ However, encouraged by its success, he decided to begin publishing novels in English again. Unfortunately, he took the advice he received from Longmans and became "less fantastic," which brought him to restrain his natural inclination towards mixing grotesque, fantasy, and playfulness. His later novels are *The Hard Life* (1962) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), which is a changed version of *The Third Policeman*. These two novels earned O'Brien a reputation as a humourist. *The Third Policeman* was published posthumously in 1967. It presented a sinister vision of hell constructed according to the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics.⁶ In 1973 Patrick Power's translation of *An Béal Bocht* as *The Poor Mouth* appeared. These two novels enabled readers to see the true O'Brien – not only a comic writer but also a postmodern artist whose vision of the world "can never be obliterated by laughter."⁷

Another reason for Flann O'Brien's being relatively little known was his use of pseudonyms. He was, in fact, born Brian O'Nualláin (O'Nolan) but, in the beginning shied away from publishing under his real name (what

³ "Cruiskeen Lawn," *The Irish Times* (4 February 1965).

⁴ Eva Wäppling, *Four Irish Legendary Figures in "At Swim-Two-Birds." A Study of Flann O'Brien's Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 1984), p. 20.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁶ For further reading see: Charles Kemnitz, "Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions: A Relativistic Reading of *The Third Policeman*," *Irish University Review* 15 (Spring 1985): 56–72, and Mary A. O'Toole, "The Theory of Serialism, in: *The Third Policeman*," *Irish University Review* 18 (Autumn 1988): 215–225.

⁷ Eva Wäppling, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

would his university authorities have said if they had found out that O’Nolan, instead of studying, was engaging himself in “sparetime literary activities?”⁸) Later he simply could not because he worked as Private Secretary to successive Ministers for Local Government, and civil servants were not permitted to publish under their real names. Moreover, O’Brien liked pen names as they allowed him to adopt each time a different persona and often express totally contradictory opinions. Nevertheless, this posed a good deal of create confusion for readers and critics as they could not have suspected that Flann O’Brien the novelist writing in English, Myles na Gopaleen the novelist, playwright, and journalist writing either in English or Irish (occasionally in Latin, French and other languages, living and dead), and George Knowall the journalist writing for a provincial newspaper, were all the same person. Even now, when these connections have been made, critics tend to employ the pseudonyms, choosing the one which corresponds to the area of his literary activities under consideration. Thus, the fame due to one man is divided.

When external reasons (those not caused by the nature of his writing as such) for O’Brien’s being little discussed by critics are concerned, it is worth mentioning Vivian Mercier’s theory on when Irish literature in English is popular outside Ireland.⁹ Although Mercier applies this theory to nineteenth century Anglo-Irish writers, his ideas also work for O’Brien. He claims that due to Ireland’s colonial status and poverty, Anglo-Irish writers could publish either in the United States or England. As publishing in America could bring fame but no royalties, Irish writers naturally turned to England. English publishers, however, decided to invest in Anglo-Irish literature only when the English audience was interested in buying books by Irishmen. Such interest was heightened whenever something was happening in Ireland. Uprisings, famines, emancipation and revival movements were the guarantees of commercial success for English publishers. Similarly, the Ulster troubles and IRA bombing campaigns created circumstances in which there was a need for Irish literature dealing with social and political issues. This need was satisfied by Northern Irish poetry. O’Brien’s books have been published in England since the 1960’s, but were never concerned with contemporary problems. Nearly all of his novels take place at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they always avoid direct comment on Irish-British relations.

Although the above described external circumstances have undoubtedly contributed to O’Brien’s inferior status in literature in English, there are

⁸ All quotations from *At Swim-Two-Birds* come from Flann O’Brien *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 9.

⁹ According to Vivian Mercier, *Modern Irish Literature. Sources and Founders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 35–64.

also other, more important reasons responsible for this exclusion, namely the nature of his writing. Every Irish writer using English is indebted both to the English (or, generally speaking, continental) and Gaelic literary traditions (as far as s/he knows them, especially the latter). The writers of the Irish Revival, for instance, managed to create a fusion of the two, combining modernist modes of writing with Irish mythological topics. O'Brien novels, however, are confusingly difficult to classify as they seem to be at the same time paying tribute to and undermining each of these two literary traditions. Keith Hopper, in *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*, distinguishes between two separate strands in the criticism dealing with O'Brien: the insular and the continental, respective to these two aspects of his writing.¹⁰ The insular strand concentrated mainly on biographical reminiscences, presenting O'Brien as a drunkard and second-rate writer envious of Joyce's success. He was pigeon-holed together with Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan, members of the supposed Dublin literary Bohemia. Anthony Cronin's books on O'Brien are the clearest example of this kind of approach. Continental criticism has focused on analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds*¹¹ as an anti-novel and a forerunner of postmodernism. For such critics as Rüdiger Imhof or Brian McHale, the fact that O'Brien was Irish was without any literary significance. They took no notice of the possibility that the native Irish literary tradition or the uniqueness of the Irish novel as a genre could have had any impact on O'Brien's technical experiments. Hopper's *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* was a turning point in the history of O'Brien criticism, as he tried to "show that the two traditions – the Irish and the international – are not mutually exclusive, and indeed find a unique point of convergence in *The Third Policeman*."¹²

In order to understand to what degree these two literary traditions shaped O'Brien's writings and the scope of his literary interests, one must analyse both his knowledge of them and his ambivalent attitude towards and use of them. Such an analysis is necessary to see how, against the background of these traditions, Flann O'Brien managed to find his own voice as a novelist and develop an independent style, which can be seen as anticipatory to such literary trends as postmodernism.

When O'Brien started his education and, later, his career as a writer, the political and cultural gains of the Irish Revival could be enjoyed. His attitude to the Revival, however, was hostile. This was due to several factors. In the first place, most adherents of that movement had been of

¹⁰ Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 18–21.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

Anglo-Irish ancestry, usually even descended from Protestant clergymen (W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, D. Hyde), while O'Brien was a Catholic, a native speaker of Irish, and a Gaelic scholar. On the one hand, these people had had enough money and learning to understand the necessity of reviving the dying language and heritage of ancient Irish culture; on the other hand, they often exhibited more enthusiasm than genuine comprehension. Yeats, for example, never learnt any Irish and even his spelling of Irish proper names was whimsical. They usually used bowdlerized translations as a source for their work and polished more crude elements of ancient stories.¹³ Their attitude to the rural population of Gaeltacht was best summed up by O'Brien:

They [Synge, Moore, Gregory, Martyn, Yeats] persisted in the belief that poverty and savage existence on remote rocks was a most poetical way for people to be, provided they were other people.¹⁴

Moreover, the language used by many writers of the Revival was meant to mime the speech of Irish peasants using English. This dialect of English, often called Hiberno-English, is heavily influenced by Irish syntax and includes Irish words, though Anglicized. It was indeed spoken in many rural districts, but its literary version, created by Synge and others, was an exploitation of the peculiarities of the peasants' speech and turned their language into a clumsy, ridiculous linguistic hybrid. This irritated O'Brien, who was a great stylist in both Irish and English, to that extent that he called it "homemade jargon"¹⁵ and parodied it in a play "The Bog of Allen," published in a students' magazine *Comhthrom Féinne*¹⁶. The three characters in the play are a married couple and a Bog-trotter. They exchange casual remarks in a hardly legible language while their house constantly sinks into a bog.

"The Bog of Allen" was written when O'Brien was only twenty; nevertheless, a similar tone of ridiculing the Revival can be seen in *The Poor Mouth*. Some gentlemen wishing to learn Irish go to the extremely poor village of Corkadoragha as "it had always been said that the accuracy of Gaelic (as well as holiness of spirit) grew in proportion to one's lack of worldly goods."¹⁷ They record the rambling of a pig at night, thinking

¹³ Vivian Mercier, *op. cit.*, p. 219-227. It is enough to compare the original versions of *The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* with plays about Dierdre by Synge, Yeats, and Russell, which are more romantic and genteel.

¹⁴ Flann O'Brien, *The Hair of the Dogma. A further selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Grafton, 1989), p. 102.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles. A selection of the earlier writings of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), pp. 40-43.

¹⁷ Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick C. Power (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 4.

it was a sample of obscure and poetic Gaelic, and patronize villagers for using words not found in any of Father Peter O'Leary's works. *The Poor Mouth* is also a parody of the autobiographies written by peasants from remote parts of Gaeltacht, which, though they often had more ethnographic than literary value, were popular and widely imitated. O'Brien was aware that the success of this type of writing and of the PQ (Peasant Quality) plays produced at the Abbey Theatre leads to a fossilization of subject and form and idealization of the Celtic past. In his own works, especially in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he used the genuine Irish lore acquired from the reading of medieval manuscripts and did not smooth it over to eliminate its original harshness.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the use of the Irish tale "Suibne Geilt" (The Frenzy of Sweeny) and other characters from Irish mythology is the compositional scaffolding around which the whole novel is constructed. Eva Wäppling in her doctoral dissertation analysed in detail the role of Irish mythological figures as narrative links between the three levels of the novel.¹⁸ Their use provides for a smooth transition from the surface fictive level (an anonymous student's writing a book on Trellis) to the more deeply embedded levels of Trellis's novel, and the independent lives of the characters employed or created by him. Since the tale of king Sweeny appears three times in each of the various levels of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, it gives the book coherence through a repetitive pattern. In the first version of the story, O'Brien uses Finn Mac Cool to tell the tale of Sweeny to contemporary characters. The story is a nearly direct translation from a seventeenth century Irish manuscript although it does not contain the climactic part of it.¹⁹ The interpolation of a medieval tale, told according to the Gaelic story-telling tradition, into a modern novel enables O'Brien to show the differences of ancient and contemporary literature.²⁰ The former was oral and anonymous. For this reason, the story-teller was not the author of the tale and did not impose his/her arbitrary meanings onto it. S/he could not, so to speak, force the characters of the tale to do what s/he wanted them to; the story-teller was obliged to respect their original of the story. "The novel," however, "in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic."²¹ Dermot Trellis is such an unscrupulous modern novelist, who compels his characters to do things contrary to their wishes and moral standards. Similarly, both Sweeny and Finn suffer from being written into a text by book-poets who "dishonour [them] ... for the sake of a gap-worded

¹⁸ Eva Wäppling, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 9, 53.

²⁰ P. L. Henry, "The Structure of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*," *Irish University Review* 20 (Spring 1990): 36-37.

²¹ *At Swim-Two-Birds*, p. 25.

story."²² Moreover, the modern characters do not understand the nobility of Finn's account of Sweeny's madness. They disturb him and interrupt his tale to express their opinions about Sergeant Craddock, Ireland's long jump champion, or to quote doggerel poetry by Jem Casey, which they prefer to Sweeny's laments. O'Brien accuses modern audience of having lost the ability to appreciate ancient prose and poetry. Only one character in the book, the poet Jem Casey although deprived of any talent himself is aware of the value of Sweeny's verse and forbids the cowboys to shoot him. His voice, however, does not balance the overall lack of understanding for Finn and Sweeny in the book. They stand for the great Irish literary tradition which is not properly apprehended by twentieth century audiences, who can only pretend to enjoy it, as Lamot, Shanahan and Furriskey do. They know that "Suibne Geilt" is an example of

the real old stuff of the native land, you know, stuff that brought scholars to our shore when your 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 today.²³

Although the average Irishman prefers to listen to a doggerel drinking song, he feels obliged to praise the native tradition as the cultural propaganda of the Revival taught him to do. Religion, the Irish language, and the literary tradition were the factors that distinguished the Free State from England, its former colonial oppressor.

Though most Irish writers using English tried to exploit these differences, the most famous of them did not. Joyce's resentment to the Revival movement and Irish Catholicism found an outlet in his conscious turning to continental literary traditions, and to nearly every European language besides Irish. O'Brien was a student of modern languages and had the opportunity to go to Germany on a short academic visit. His exposure to continental literature was thus wider than that of most of his countrymen had. He was also a polyglot, obsessed with the intricacies of speech. This made him more susceptible to the influence of Joyce's linguistic experiments.

O'Brien's writing is undoubtedly indebted, both stylistically and thematically, to Joyce. Both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are *Künstlerromane* dealing with Irish students of University College, Dublin, who are interested in literature and aspire to become artists. Both Stephen Dedalus and the unnamed student of O'Brien's are lazy and unwilling to attend classes. They prefer to hang around the city, engage in literary disputes and heavy drinking. Here, however, the similarities

²² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

end. The adolescent rebellion against the authorities ends for O'Brien's protagonists once he has successfully passed his examinations and received a gift watch from his uncle. As Henry Merritt puts it, "[the] gift ... represents an acceptance into the adult world the Nephew had apparently so long despised."²⁴ He manages to find his place in the world, while Dedalus chooses to flee, believing that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence.

There are also other correspondences between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Joyce's writings, teasing intertextual references that might be overlooked on the first reading, or attributed to coincidence. For the relatively large number of them, however, they cannot be accidental. The opening of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which the narrator is chewing bread and "retires into the privacy of [his] mind," resembles the opening of the last chapter of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen does exactly the same.²⁵ Similarly, the passage in which young Stephen contemplates the character of a kiss is mocked by O'Brien, who gives the definition of a kiss according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Such examples could be multiplied, and prove that O'Brien consciously is referring to Joyce's writing, often nearly quoting phrases word for word. This could be an attempt to balance the stylistic borrowings from Joyce (mainly the technique of collage of various registers and sources) and to show that, despite these imitations, O'Brien was no blind follower of Joyce. He might also have been trying to distance himself from his own admiration for the master.

As was discussed above, O'Brien was embittered by the lack of success of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. When the book was republished, its connections with Joyce, an established literary genius by then, were immediately noticed. Moreover, the cover of the new edition featured Joyce's opinion on O'Brien – "a real writer with the true comic spirit."²⁶ It infuriated O'Brien as he had the impression that his novel was at last being read not because the audience found it good, but because Joyce had said it was funny. Moreover, he did not like the late writings of Joyce, which he thought bordered on excessive formal experiments. He also did not approve of the wild critical applause Joyce was then receiving. In his article on *Finnegans Wake* he distinguished between those who claim "[it] is just a cynical leg-pull which [Joyce] spent seventeen years in compiling" and those belonging to a

²⁴ Henry Merritt, "Games, Ending and Dying in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*," *Irish University Review* 25 (Autumn/Winter 1995): 308–317.

²⁵ Compare *At Swim-Two-Birds*, p. 9–10 and James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1992), p. 188.

²⁶ According to Eva Wäppling, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

type of literary scientist who festers in the over-endowed American universities – who allege it is the veritable apocalypse of the under-mind, a map of the floor of the soul, the anatomy of sleep and dream, a dissection of fate and destiny.²⁷

He surely did not identify himself with the latter. He took his revenge on Joyce in the same way the characters of *At Swim-Two-Birds* punish their oppressor and in the way medieval Irish bards did – he wrote him into *The Dalkey Archive* as a bigoted old man who wants to join the Jesuits and never wrote any of those dirty, blasphemous books attributed to him. He did not like his writing being associated with Joyce as it made him, as Hopper put it, “a kind of poor man’s Joyce.”²⁸ Joycean modernism certainly had a very strong impact on O’Brien, but he managed to take from it what suited him and to develop it in a different direction, a direction announcing postmodernism.

It is in connection with postmodernist metafiction that O’Brien’s novels have recently been rediscovered. From a mere imitator of Joyce, O’Brien has been promoted to a position of the forerunner of postmodern fiction. Indeed, many features of his writings which were earlier neglected or simply labelled as “fantastic” were noticed and analysed. The most important of these were his use of metalepsis or breaking the boundaries between various narrative levels, and zone-building techniques.

Classifying O’Brien as a postmodernist, no matter how vaguely this term is usually defined, creates certain historical problems. According to John Mepham, postmodernist fiction can be defined in historical, philosophical, ideological (pedagogic), and strategic terms.²⁹ Historically speaking, postmodernism could be defined as a “movement away from, or rejection of, some aspects of modernism.” It would continue the modernist critique of realistic writing but by different means. This definition can be applied to O’Brien’s novels, as they were written in reaction to Joycean modernism, but it does not explain why certain means or strategies were employed by O’Brien to defy modernism. In the case of other postmodern writers, the use of certain strategies can be explained by the impact of poststructural philosophy, which stressed that “‘meaning is undecidable’ and that ‘reality is constructed in and through language’.” This clarifies the pedagogic function of postmodern narratives which aim to “unsettle the readers sense of ‘reality’” by means of metafictional strategies, creating uncertainty about the ontological status of both the literary text and the world it is supposed to represent. The main difference between metafiction and conventional

²⁷ *The Hair of the Dogma*, p. 154.

²⁸ Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁹ John Mepham, “Narratives of Postmodernism,” in: Edmund Smyth, ed., *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B. T. Barsford 1991), p. 138. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this essay.

fiction is that reading metafiction imposes on the reader the suspension of his or her knowledge about reality as the work constitutes a reality of its own. In traditional fiction the knowledge about the world fosters understanding of the text.

For sheer reasons of chronology, O'Brien's writings and their connection with postmodernism cannot be rooted in the same sources as other postmodern narratives, as only O'Brien's link with modernism is undisputable. His postmodernism results from the meeting of two literary traditions: modernism, and the native Irish tradition – including the unique heritage of the Anglo-Irish novel. Thus, many features characteristic for postmodern fiction – such as the use of real-world historical personages, creation of an ontologically different world, zone-building, metalepsis, use of lists, catalogues, numbers, unusual words, and the use of myth – can be traced back to the tradition of medieval Irish literature. Since O'Brien was a Celtic scholar and knew the native tradition well, the correspondences between his novels and the Irish literary tradition cannot be accidental. This connection seems justified since most of the prominent novelists writing in English and practicing self-reflexive fiction (James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, Iris Murdoch) either were Irish or had some connections with Ireland. Although Steven G. Kellman, for instance, notices this common Irish background, he nevertheless points to French writing as the inspiration for both the self-begetting novel and the anti-novel in English.³⁰ It would be more appropriate and natural, however, to look for the source of influence in Ireland.

One of the most striking examples of postmodern technique in O'Brien's writing is his use of James Joyce as a character in *The Dalkey Archive*. The use of actual people is a characteristic of the historical novel, where, however, their characters and actions are presented according to our knowledge of history, or at least probable to it. Historical personages often appear in postmodern narratives but usually vary from their prototypes. Thus, Linda Hutcheon calls this type of postmodern writing "historiographic metafiction," as it "contradict[s] familiar historical fact, ... mingl[es] the realistic and fantastic modes, and ... flaunt[s] anachronism."³¹ O'Brien's presentation of Joyce contradicts familiar historical facts indeed. In *The Dalkey Archive*, James Joyce has not died in France. He comes back from exile and settled temporarily in Skerries, where he works as a barkeeper. He has never heard of *Finnegans Wake* or written *Ulysses*, "that dirty book, that collection of smut."³² He does not even know that this "por-

³⁰ Steven G. Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel* (London: Macmillan Press 1980), pp. 78, 80.

³¹ Patricia Waugh, *Practicing Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), p. 152.

³² Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 165.

nography and filth and literary vomit" has been published and made him famous.³³ He is a shy, humble man who writes pamphlets for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland and saints' lives. The James Joyce of *The Dalkey Archive* has very little in common with the real Joyce. In historiographic metafiction, such a discrepancy between the historical and the fictitious would be explained as a deliberate breaking of the ontological boundaries between the two worlds, a violation of the conventional expectations of the readers. O'Brien's depiction of Joyce does not merely aim at being an "ontological scandal, arising from an 'illegitimate' mingling of worlds."³⁴ His main purpose is to take revenge on Joyce by mocking him. Thus, *The Dalkey Archive* is more a satire on Joyce, written according to the tradition of the medieval Irish satire, than a postmodern historiographic metafiction.

Satire was a very important genre in medieval Ireland. It was aimed at a specific person, seldom at a group or a particular vice. Because it was believed to have magical power, the satire was a powerful weapon for a known *fili*. It enabled him to take vengeance on his enemies or blackmail people unwilling to submit to his will. It was better to yield to the *fili*'s wish than to be satirized by him. The *fili*'s spell could "cause facial blemishes, or even death," while the insulting nickname he gave his enemy would cling to him forever.³⁵

According to the typology of the Irish satire given by Vivian Mercier in *The Irish Comic Tradition*, the basic types of *áer*, or satire, are: *aisnéis* (declaration), *ail* (insult), and *aircetal* (incantation).³⁶ O'Brien's presentation of Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive* is an example of *ail*, or insult. O'Brien, like a medieval *fili*, revenges himself on Joyce by immortalizing his caricature in literature. The characters of *At Swim-Two-Birds* choose the same punishment for Trellis, who, in fact, is a student's projection of his uncle. They also take advantage of another magical genre, eulogy, when Orlick presents the working-class characters, Lamot, Shanahan and Furriskey, as intellectuals. Such an interplay between different sets of characters belonging to various fictive levels, and violation of the borderline between the world of the novel and the real world is, of course, one of the most characteristic features of postmodern writing, called metalepsis. While for other postmodernists the reason for using metalepsis would mainly be to provoke readers used to realistic modes of writing, O'Brien adapts the Irish tradition of satire and incorporates it into a modern novel.

O'Brien himself and his characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* resemble medieval Irish poets in their power to satirize. Trellis's habits of writing

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

³⁴ Patricia Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

³⁵ Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 106.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

also seemed to be modelled on the method of composition typical of Irish poets. According to Williams, they composed lying in bed in complete darkness to increase their concentration.³⁷ Some narrators in postmodern fiction, especially Samuel Beckett's Malone and Molloy, share the medieval bards' preference of beds to desks or tables. Kellman refers to them as "horizontal narrators."³⁸ Their being supine is not aimed at helping concentration but stands for their inability to participate in life and to establish relationships with other people. Trellis, however, wants to work more effectively but also rejects human company. At the end of the novel he realizes he "ha[s] done too much thinking and writing, too much work."³⁹ He differs from Beckett's narrators as he feels the need to quit his passivity and self-imposed alienation.

Another postmodern feature exploited by O'Brien is building zones. The zone (or the heterotopian space of the fictitious world, as Brian McHale defines it using concepts derived from Michel Foucault) is the place where the novel is situated.⁴⁰ It may differ from the world we live in geographically or historically. It may be a world similar enough to ours to evoke comparisons, but at the same time ontologically different enough to create confusion. O'Brien builds an intertextual zone in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where characters from different literary works live together. A more intriguing zone, however, is created in *The Third Policeman*. This world is seemingly ordinary and normal although "everything [there] seem[s] almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made."⁴¹ The true horror of the place, however, arises from its being governed by rules of physics which are no longer Newtonian, that is, familiar. It is constructed according to new theories of physics, those of serial or parallel universes, and relativity. As O'Brien wrote in a letter to William Saroyan, "not even the law of gravity holds good" there.⁴² It is a world in which some colours and shapes or surfaces cannot be named or described since human language has not developed terms for them. Men go mad there as they experience things so unusual that their hitherto existing knowledge of the world proves insufficient. Postmodern science-fiction narratives often build similar zones as they help to stress the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction.⁴³ They make the readers feel uncertain about the nature of the world and the relationship between language and reality. Moreover, postmodern zones defy the central

³⁷ J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition* (trans. Patrick K. Ford, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 162.

³⁸ Steven G. Kellman, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³⁹ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, p. 216.

⁴⁰ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 44-45.

⁴¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 41.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 207.

⁴³ Brian McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

axioms of realistic writing, such as the existence of a "positively determinable world ... governed by some coherent scheme of rules."⁴⁴ This world is external to the text and the aim of the text is to represent it while postmodern zones exist only in the text, via language. The world depicted in these zones is not referential.

The zone which O'Brien creates in *The Third Policeman* has a referent though not in the real world. It resembles the dream (or nightmare) countries of Celtic voyage poetry, *immrama*. The most famous of them were "Voyage of Bran Son of Febal" and "Voyage of Máel Dúin's Boat". The protagonists of these stories visited strange countries, sometimes even settled in them. These countries were often island paradises where there was no suffering, old age or death. Despite this eternal joy, people did not find happiness there but boredom and longing for the human world. The Parish and Eternity in *The Third Policeman* share many features with the promised lands of *immrama*, the most important being the relative time-flux. In Eternity does not pass at all, while in the Parish a few days correspond to sixteen in the "real" world of the narrative. Similarly, when Bran comes back from his voyages to Ireland, the people on the shore tell him he is just a legendary hero from the past; one member of his expedition sets his foot ashore and instantly changes into dust. O'Brien, as a Celtic scholar, knew the *immrama* tales. He mentions the story of Maeldoon in *The Poor Mouth* and might have modelled the zone of the Parish and Eternity on the countries presented there. Keith Hopper even notices certain similarities between the narrator of *The Third Policeman* and Maeldoon himself:

both protagonists share the same sins of pride; both journey to Hell and strange lands where they experience visions, hallucinations, and dreams; both are haunted by dark murders.⁴⁵

All these parallels suggest Celtic origins for the zones of *The Third Policeman*.

Another postmodernist feature prominent in O'Brien's work is the use of mythical material. According to Imhof, the use of myth may serve various purposes in postmodern fiction.⁴⁶ It may give a structural skeleton to the otherwise fragmented tale, while at the same time stressing the twentieth century writers' inability to say anything new or original. Postmodern writers may either point to a myth as an universal and timeless form, or parody its fossilized conventions. The critics are not unanimous in their opinion's about O'Brien's attitude to myths. Some argue Finn and Sweeny are degraded in *At Swim-Two-Birds* since other characters treat them and

⁴⁴ Christopher Nash, *World-Games. The Tradition of anti-Realist Revolt* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 8.

⁴⁵ Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

⁴⁶ Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary Metafiction. A Poetological Study of Metafiction in England since 1939* (Heidelberg: Winer, 1986), p. 142-147.

their stories with contempt, or, at least, neglect. Others claim that only the medieval Irish characters are presented with sympathy in the novel. Moreover, the mythical conventions are not ridiculed in the book though it may seem so on the surface; it is the modern audience that cannot understand the beauty of the myth that is mocked. The latter approach to O'Brien's use of myth appears to be more appropriate because it is coherent with his views on literature and the native Irish heritage.

The functions of myth typical of postmodernism do not exploit all of the reasons for which O'Brien uses mythical material. Celtic literatures were characterized by „the obstinate conservatism of the tradition,” as J. E. Caerwyn Williams put it.⁴⁷ Both language and the subject did not vary much, no matter when or where a poem was composed, whether it was thirteenth century Scotland, or seventeenth century Ireland. The writers of the Irish Revival referred to that thematic uniformity, partly to continue the tradition, and partly to stress the separate character of Anglo-Irish literature. Later novelists, who also felt the need to cut themselves off from the traditions of English fiction, usually turned to continental writing for inspiration. For instance, Joyce's literary relationships were with Ibsen, Vico, Dante, Dujardin, and Homer. He chose classical myths to act as skeletons underlying *Ulysses* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, seemingly rejecting any connections with the Irish novel or native tradition.⁴⁸ O'Brien's mythical characters are taken from Gaelic literature, showing they may do equally well as Dedalus or Ulysses. His use of mythological material, thus, is multifunctional. It is simultaneously a homage to medieval Irish literature – the universality of its themes and the beauty of its artistry, and polemics with Joyce's snobbery and selectiveness in his choice of “suitable” literary relationships.

O'Brien often employs such postmodernist features as catalogues and lists, which disturb the traditional linear reading of a text. Catalogues change the physical word arrangement on the page and remind the readers of the nonliterary discourses of scientific manuals or telephone directories. They trouble the conventional expectations of what a novel is, or should be. According to McHale, a catalogue structure can be defined as “words disengaged from syntax.”⁴⁹ Placing words side by side may have comic effects, but, in any case, it destroys their referential character. Some of O'Brien's lists are alphabetical charts, which even more clearly “underlines

⁴⁷ J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Joyce was, in fact, heavily influenced by the tradition of the earlier Irish novel, and “many of the celebrated innovations in [them] were actually introduced by such immediate predecessors and contemporaries as Moore, Stephens, and Ó Conaire.” See: James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel. A Critical History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1988), pp. 127–178. Quotation from Cahalan, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁴⁹ Brian McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

the essentially arbitrary ordering of the world into conventional, methodical categories."⁵⁰ The list of Trellis's vices, the chart presenting Shanahan, Lamot and Furriskey's contrastive features in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the catalogue of possible names of the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, Martin Finnucane's occupations and the meanings of a bulbul in the same book can be regarded as mere Sterne'sque jokes. But not all of O'Brien's lists are simply comic linguistic experiments. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* he includes a long incantation of Finn's, which reads like a list:

I am a bark for buffeting, said Finn.
 I am a hound for thorny paws.
 I am a doe for swiftness.
 I am a tree for wind-siege
 I am a windmill.
 I am a hole in a wall.⁵¹

This catalogue imitates the medieval Irish charm meant to secure a long life, called *Cétnad n-áise* or "Song of Long Life"; in this charm the speaker "is identifying himself with the whole of creation."⁵² Its function is magical. O'Brien adopts the charm into his novel as the first of the lists in the book. Most of the lists that come later are, in fact, modelled on the charm; the charm's magical function can be extended to them. Most O'Brien's catalogues deal with abortive attempts at naming or classifying. The narrator of *The Third Policeman*, however, escapes such classification as his name (and the name of the student in *At Swim-Two-Birds*) is never revealed. According to Sue Asbee,

[w]e name things, and people, in order to "know" and thus exert control over them. Countless legends and folktales turn on the hero's need to discover his adversary's name in order to tame or neutralize the adversary's influence. O'Brien's protagonist elude us because we do not know what to call him.⁵³

Although some of O'Brien's lists seemingly stand out from the narrative and appear to serve only comic purposes, their connection with medieval Irish charms and folk beliefs suggests that they differ from the catalogues used by other postmodernists. Their aim is not to bewilder the reader trained in traditional fiction, but to add shamanistic elements to the novel.

When magical aspects of O'Brien's fiction are analysed, his use of numbers is worth mentioning. The text of *The Third Policeman* includes a great deal of numerical data, most of which seems to be irrelevant to

⁵⁰ Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁵¹ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, p. 15.

⁵² J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵³ Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), p. 23.

the narrative. This echoes the postmodernist principle of including in the text extraneous pieces of information, often of a nonliterary character. In postmodern fiction, numbers are viewed as conventional symbols, the meanings of which are even more difficult to grasp than words. In Hopper's opinion, "most numbers in this text (*The Third Policeman*) are fictitious and purely self-referential."⁵⁴ He claims that

[t]he only number in the novel with any narrative relevance is the number three, which earns it significance both as a structural motif and an intertextual "magic" symbol.⁵⁵

This number is supposed to represent the narrator's search for his identity, and his discovery that he is "the 'child' as it were of the union between text and author (that author represented by the dark-god of the novel, the third policeman)."⁵⁶ Though scholarly, Hopper's argument seems forced and far-fetched. A more plausible explanation is offered by Clissmann, who links O'Brien's fascination with numbers – as expressed in the conversations between the Pooka MacPhellimey and the Good Fairy in *At Swim-Two-Birds* – to Celtic numerology.⁵⁷ Both Celtic numerology and the theory of numerals discussed by the Pooka and the Good Fairy are coherent systems, in which every number stands for something. Some ideas expressed by the Good Fairy are taken directly from Celtic beliefs. For instance, the Good Fairy's opinion that "it is a great art that can make a fifth Excellence from four Futilities"⁵⁸ may remind us of the magic stone of Lia Fail, which was placed in Tara to mark the centre of the world. The centre of the world was, in Celtic mythology, the fifth, hidden direction springing from the four overt ones. As "each even number is not felt to be complete without an addition of a further unit," each narrative level is completed by adding an embedded story, and each evil "even" act or vice is balanced with a good "odd" one.⁵⁹ Celtic numerology helps to explain some compositional aspects of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and a use of numerals which might otherwise seem to impede reading (as this kind of usage often does in other postmodernist narratives).

Postmodernist texts often include nonliterary discourses and seldom-used words. The aim of this strategy is to expose the stylization and literariness of the language used in the narrative. The excessive exposition of language constantly reminds the reader of the fictitiousness of the plot, while the invisibly transparent style of the realists was meant to foster belief in the

⁵⁴ Keit Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

⁵⁷ Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 147.

⁵⁸ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, p. 110.

⁵⁹ Anne Clissmann, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

“reality” of the plot and characters. McHale writes about such a narrative which is so lexically difficult that “words compete for our attention with narrative contents . . . , and it is not clear which level wins out in the end.”⁶⁰ The language of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* is artificially complex, inflated and pseudo-scientific. This, of course, reflects the literary ambitions of the novels’ narrators. But it can also be interpreted as an allusion to the elaborate syntax and obscure language used by medieval Irish filid. It was called *bélre na filed* (language of the poets) and “its most prominent feature was intentional obscurity of speech.”⁶¹ O’Brien was fond of rarely-used words and enjoyed exhibiting his erudition in his novels and “Curiskeen Lawn” articles. As a student, he practiced writing bombastic sentences which were completely meaningless, but appeared scholarly and elaborate. In this aspect he resembled the medieval poets and story-tellers.

Motifs of madness and cruelty are often used in postmodern novels. The use of insane narrators enables the writer both to present the world from a new and strange perspective and to shake traditional beliefs about reality. Detailed descriptions of cruel tortures or murders shock the readers and, at the same time, pacify that shock as the readers must remember that what they are reading is only fictive invention of the writer’s mind. Thus, sympathy for the nonexistent victims or disgust at nonexistent violence is redundant. O’Brien exploits similar themes (the ill-treatment of Trellis and Sweeney’s mutilations in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the murder of Old Mathers in *The Third Policeman*), but in his case they are used not to shock the reader but to allude to the cruelty presented in old Irish tales – especially in the *bruidhean* tales – as well as the macabre humour of the hero-tales.⁶² Also madness, especially of a poet, was a popular subject in Celtic literatures. King Sweeney has his counterpart in King Goll or Welsh Myrddin Wyllt.

O’Brien’s novels have often been classified as anti-novels or metafictional narratives. Indeed, they can hardly be said to have plots; the protagonists are more like puppets than fully developed characters; and the whole narrative abounds in digressions and comments on the art of novel-writing. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is, in fact, a book about writing a novel. Because of its metafictional character, it has been compared to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and André Gide’s *Les Faux-monnayeurs* – novels seen as precursory to postmodernist fiction about fiction. Nevertheless, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Anglo-Irish novel and shares many intricacies with this genre as it was developed in Ireland. Cahalan

⁶⁰ Brian McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁶¹ J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁶² Vivian Mercier, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–23, 63–66.

enumerates the following features, typical of the Irish novel: "a loose, rambling approach to plot," "the preponderance of fantasy and attention to wild, bizarre details," and strongly drawn narrators.⁶³ According to Cahalan, all these features are due to the strong influence of the storytelling tradition, in which the tale was centred around an anecdote, or a series of anecdotes interwoven into one main story. In the oral tradition, the personality of the storyteller is very important and always imprints itself on the tale. Moreover, it is natural for the storyteller to include digressions and comments on the process of telling itself, by means of which s/he maintains contact with the audience. Also: the Anglo-Irish novel developed in different social, economic and political circumstances than did, for instance, the English novel. It was not connected with the rise of a stable middle class and so did not focus on the manners of this class. Instead, it depicted an uncertain world by means of confusing plots, unreliable narrators, and the use of the supernatural to balance, or replace, an unpleasant reality.

Weak yet complex plots, strong narrators, breaking the boundaries between the fantastic and the probable, and digressive remarks about writing are characteristics of Anglo-Irish fiction; they also feature in many postmodern texts. The complexity of interplay between various narrative levels, so common in metafiction, is a feature not only of Celtic literatures but also of Celtic visual arts. Clissmann compares the Chinese-box structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* to ornaments in medieval Irish Manuscripts:

The interconnections and cross-references make it as difficult and as complex as an illustration in the Book of Kells. Like the animals who are coiled round and round themselves and who are eventually seen to be eating their own tails, the themes and structures of the book turn round and back on themselves, so that an unravelling of the threads is a hazardous and difficult venture.⁶⁴

Thus, what seems most avant-garde in postmodern fiction, was, in fact, known to Celtic literature hundreds of years ago.

Flann O'Brien's writings can be classified as postmodern as they employ such postmodern strategies as metalepsis, zone-building, catalogues, and pastiches of other literary genres and non-literary discourses. However, they differ from postmodern metafiction in one aspect. While, metafiction demands from the reader the suspension of his or her knowledge of reality – that is of the external world – O'Brien's novels do not defy the external world; rather they replace it with a reality known from medieval Irish literature. Metafiction does not mirror the world, but O'Brien's writing imitates, both in terms of content and composition, the mythical and

⁶³ James Cahalan, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

⁶⁴ Anne Clissmann, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

historic world of medieval Irish literature. It is not, as postmodern writing tends to be, self-reflexive. Though fictive, it has a referent, which constantly informs the narrative.

The writings of Flann O'Brien are both very traditional and very avant-garde. His experiments outstripped the development of the novel: though published in the 1960's, they were written twenty years earlier. His postmodernism, however, can be fully understood only by taking into consideration the two traditions to which he was indebted. The modernist tradition, as a reaction to the realistic fiction of the nineteenth century, is one of them. The second is the tradition of native Irish literature. From modernism he inherited an interest in linguistic experiments and the use of collage, while the medieval Irish tradition inspired him in terms of theme. He was also fascinated with the relationship between text, author and external world in Celtic literature.