

Flann O'Brien's
"At Swim-Two-Birds" and
the Post-Post Debate

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AS THE STUDY of contemporary literature becomes increasingly organized around the terms "postmodernist" and "post-colonial," critics have sought to articulate the relationship between the two in sharper and more meaningful ways. Initially, the two terms carved out distinct provinces both semantically and geographically. Postmodernism referred to a largely Euro-American aesthetic movement, while postcolonial described a field of critical inquiry more or less synonymous with Third World studies. The inadequacies of such a neatly divided schema quickly become evident: for example, the roster of post-colonies includes such "developed" countries as Canada and Australia. The old scheme also encourages a host of inaccurate conclusions, such as the idea that the literary innovations of postmodernism occurred only, or primarily, in the West.

This terminological state of affairs has generally given way to the notion that the two words overlap in meaning and jurisdiction. Recognizing instances of early postmodern innovation in the so-called periphery (Borges's fiction, for example), and of postcolonial conditions in the modern metropolis (Rushdie's multicultural London), critics now see the "post-post" question as a challenging theoretical project in itself.¹ In schematic terms, "postmodernism" has become a tool for identifying any contemporary text directed towards formal experimentation, while "postcolonial" describes texts that seem directed towards social engagement, especially the project of recounting and redressing imperial impositions. This kind of "post-post" distinction—signalled by opposed pairs such as aesthetics and politics, textuality and worldliness, play and seriousness—if held too staunchly, can

replace the old geographical binaries with equally brittle new ones. Post-colonial writing need not be in the vein of some Lukacsian “critical realism” in order to be politically engaged, nor does an experimental postmodernist form in itself disqualify a novel from such engagement. As Helen Tiffin points out, serious post-post scholarship makes an effort to complicate the “aesthetics vs. politics” formula and to acknowledge that the two terms indicate different *critical* orientations rather than a rigid literary taxonomy (vii). Still, even as the current scholarship explicitly seeks to conceive the two terms in a more supple relationship—as illustrated in the October 1989 issue of *ARIEL*—many critics maintain a strong interest in protecting post-colonial texts from absorption into the omnivorous grid of international postmodernism.

The chief task of this essay is to consider the consequences of such an absorption by examining a text located at one of the founding junctures of postcolonial postmodernism: Flann O’Brien’s 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The modern Irish novel stands out as a particularly rich site for gaining perspective on the post-post question, for decolonization and modernism coincide in twentieth-century Ireland (1922 saw both the founding of the Irish Free State and the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses*).² Combining features of metropolis and colony (Jameson “Modernism” 60), interwar Ireland also gave rise to a modernist literary experiment that bore the signs of an incipient postmodern form—the writing of Samuel Beckett. In the last 15 years, Flann O’Brien has gained increasing critical attention as another Irish innovator who finds a pathway out of what Rudiger Imhof calls the Joycean “cul-de-sac” and into a strikingly contemporary fictional form (28).

At Swim-Two-Birds provides a test case for the hypothesis that experimental, postmodern writing surfaces as much in peripheral or postcolonial zones as in the capitals of the Euro-American empires. However, almost all of the extant criticism reads the novel in strictly formal terms rather than in relation to its post-colonial context. It is easy to see why the postmodern reading predominates: from the opening page, with its three separate beginnings, violations of standard Aristotelian unity and narra-

tive ontology abound. O'Brien unleashes a firestorm of parodic languages and comic pastiche built on a story-within-a-story-within-a-story structure that is both intricate and unruly. Given its metafictional musings and relentless intertextuality, the novel could almost be taken as a manifesto for postmodern fiction.³

The postmodern approach to O'Brien, like the two other major strands of O'Brien criticism—one tracing Joycean influence, the other tracking O'Brien's relation to his Celtic heritage—can be enriched by attention to concrete postcolonial issues. Without such an account of O'Brien's cultural context, these other critical approaches have tended to operate independently of each other. For example, Eva Wäppling's scholarship provides useful knowledge about Irish legends, but does not use it to modify the formalistic premises of the postmodern approach. A specifically postcolonial reading of the novel makes it possible not only to update and clarify the terms of O'Brien's "Irishness" but to articulate them in relation to the narrative experimentalism of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.⁴

In trying to reclaim the "postcoloniality" of a now notoriously postmodern text, I am following the general argument of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin and of Sangari, who have warned that "postmodernism," as an international critical term, can blur significant differences among distinct literary cultures.⁵ Above all, such critics wish to avoid using the term "postmodern" as a First-World honorific for postcolonial texts. Many fear that the postmodern designation—especially insofar as it indicates an anti-referential aesthetic—strips postcolonial writing of its political teeth (Slemon 12; Hutcheon 150). For such theorists as Linda Hutcheon and Stephen Slemon, categories conventionally associated with postmodern aesthetics (irony, allegory) are equally relevant to postcolonial cultural politics. Hutcheon notes, further, that postmodern and postcolonial literatures share an interest in re-establishing contact (even if ironically) with histories that were abandoned by modernism or cut off by colonialism (152). And Slemon proposes that the use of "reiterative quotation"—a trope akin to postmodern intertextuality—has a special vocation in postcolonial texts. Here Jameson's postmodern pastiche meets Bhabha's postcolonial mimicry.

O'Brien's novel not only partakes of these various writing strategies but also brings to light the way metafiction itself—a well-known postmodern device—can assume a postcolonial significance. In a recent article, Kim McMullen uses Bakhtinian novel theory to analyze the “dialogic” form of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Her intervention is welcome for many reasons, not least of which is that a Bakhtinian vocabulary locates the novel's instability where it belongs: on the level of genre, not on the level of language itself. O'Brien's satire is clearly aimed at specific literary conventions rather than at some diffuse concept of language. Close attention to the postcolonial conditions that animated his parodic style will guide us away from reading the novel according to undifferentiated notions of linguistic or aesthetic indeterminacy (a misreading that casts O'Brien as a kind of poststructuralist *avant la lettre*).

At Swim-Two-Birds was written in the context of Ireland's struggle to establish a viable autonomous culture after a long period of tributary status within the British sphere. To place the novel in historical context, we need to recognize (at least) two phases of the colonial encounter between England and Ireland. In the period lasting from the turn of the century to the establishment of the Free State in 1922, Ireland continued to struggle for political autonomy from Great Britain. During this period, writers and other intellectuals presided over a national culture known as the “Celtic Revival” or, later, as the “Irish Renaissance.” These artists recovered and invented traditions, seeking to impart to the colony a rich cultural identity distinct from—and often in opposition to—the culture of the imperial power. Based largely on romantic and organic notions of Irishness, the resurgent national culture conferred heroic status on the generation of artists who shaped it. Yeats, of course, is the classic example of this phenomenon.

In the next phase, when Flann O'Brien's generation came of age, political independence was a *fait accompli*. Without the heroic anti-imperial cause, the tropes of the national culture hardened into tests of native purity, and the atmosphere became choked with the norms of authentic Irishness. Writers then had to contend with strict censorship laws and a xenophobic cam-

paign against such "outside threats" as Hollywood films, English radio, and continental avant-garde. Irish artists found themselves in a vexed position with regard to a national culture that both nourished and constrained them. These conditions, characteristic of what David Lloyd calls "the postcolonial moment," persist as long as Ireland struggles for cultural autonomy.⁶

Terence Brown sees the case of Flann O'Brien as clear evidence that 1930s Irish culture had become stagnant and parochial after its efflorescence in the early century. A narrow-minded readership, Brown suggests, consigned O'Brien to minor status as an un-Irish literary experimenter (181). The first printing of *At Swim-Two-Birds* sold fewer than 300 copies. Its true author, a civil servant named Brian O'Nolan, published the novel under the pseudonym Flann O'Brien—an alter ego that partially screened O'Nolan and enabled him to criticize his government's dogmatic cultural policies with relative impunity and satiric abandon. Under a second pseudonym, Myles na Gopaleen, he wrote a bilious column in the *Irish Times* lampooning the absurd pieties and nostalgic excesses of the Gaelic Revival; he was nearly dismissed several times for his intemperate opinions (Costello 92-96).

However, as any reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* quickly reveals, O'Brien had a deep knowledge of and admiration for Irish literature. He uses parody both to celebrate and to mock the myths of the Celtic twilight. By populating his novel with semi-comic versions of stock figures such as the ancient warrior and the magic fairy, O'Brien flouts the spirit but obeys the letter of literary nativism. When he describes the stringent tests of Irishness imposed by legendary chieftain Finn MacCool, he no doubt has in mind the purity standards of his own zealous contemporaries. A warrior wishing to "be accepted of Finn's people" faces the following ordeal: "For five days he must sit on the brow of a cold hill . . . if he cry out or eat grass-stalks or desist from the constant recital of sweet poetry and melodious Irish, he is not taken, but is wounded" (21). Such passages criticize the climate in which writers had to pour forth melodious Irish or sacrifice any claim to cultural value. The novel does not deny the value of the Celtic poems and epic cycles but points out the absurdities that follow

from a single-minded worship of the literary past. Rather than deliver aesthetic judgments, the parodies demonstrate the practical irrelevance of warriors and fairies to Irish cultural identity in the 1930s. Towards that end, O'Brien stages comic encounters between representatives of the epic world, for instance, Finn MacCool and representatives of modern Dublin. As the jest unfolds, the moderns grow more and more impatient with Finn's constant recitation of Irish legend, while Finn remains resolutely unaware of his companions and their unlovely literary tastes. Such encounters take full advantage of the incongruity between an officially Catholic, stoutly bourgeois Ireland and its cherished literary past populated by randy pagan warriors.

The humour of the text must, however, be understood within the frame of the two-phase history sketched above—within a cultural system that includes England. For although O'Brien did not wish to participate in the rabid nativism of the era, neither did he want to fully disavow the literary heritage of a still-young nation. Irony serves here not simply as a sign of postmodernist indeterminacy but as a tool for managing the ambiguous conditions of postcoloniality. Its double voice allows O'Brien to reject the restrictive norms of super-Irishness imposed from within *and* the unwelcome identity of sub-Britishness imposed from without. Commentaries on the novel have traced O'Brien's vexed reaction to the Celtic revival, but have not taken account of the revival's intimate connection to English culture. Overweening attachments to Celtic traditions in fact were fueled by the English expectation of—and demand for—Irish charm and whimsy. The deforming effects of the colonial encounter meant that certain practices and conventions, rooted perhaps in some "authentic" native culture, become part of a self-conscious repertoire of Irishness. We might call this effect "enforced provincialism" to indicate the persuasive power of the metropolitan audience's demand for an Irish culture that is quaint, picturesque, different.⁷

Flann O'Brien was a penetrating observer of this phenomenon. Throughout his career as a writer, he asserted—sometimes only implicitly—that the lingering influence of English culture played no small part in maintaining the power of the Celtic

twilight. In an *Irish Times* column, O'Brien, writing as Myles na Gopaleen, describes how the English imperial imagination cast the Irish first as frightfully backward, then as delightfully backward:

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. From that day the mouth corners of our smaller intellectuals (of whom we have more per thousand births than any country in the world) began to betray the pale froth of literary epilepsy. Our writers, fascinated by the snake-like eye of London publishers, have developed exhibitionism to the sphere of acrobatics . . . playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy.

(*Best of Myles* 234)

O'Brien sees the hidebound state of contemporary Irish literature as the direct legacy of a colonial history in which Ireland was yoked to England and made to play the role of superstitious country cousin.⁸ Moreover, O'Brien considered *At Swim-Two-Birds* a direct response to this indignity. In a letter to fellow Irish writer Ethel Mannin, he calls the novel ". . . a sneer at all the slush which has been unloaded from this country on the credulous English although they, it is true, manufacture enough of their own odious slush to make the import unnecessary."⁹ The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* delights in pointing out the inferiority of contemporary English literature (by contrast to Irish and American) (62); his explicit mockery of the English serves as a fictional comeuppance for the culture that relegated Ireland to satellite status.

O'Brien's canny insight into the role of the London publishers in maintaining English cultural influence anticipates the predicament of later post-colonial writers constrained to write for metropolitan audiences and to do so in European languages. Writing *At Swim-Two-Birds* in English was a conscious choice for O'Brien, who also published fiction and non-fiction in Irish.¹⁰ O'Brien's position in the Irish language debate was typically complex. He considered the hard-line Gaelic revivalists narcissistic and misguided in their attempts to dislodge English from its entrenched

place in daily life. As a pragmatist, O'Brien also thought it unwise to ignore the value of English as an international language of commerce and culture. On the other hand, he was a devoted scholar of Irish as a literary language. A 1942 letter to Sean O'Casey summarizes O'Brien's position: "I cannot see any real prospect of reviving Irish at the present . . . [but] it is essential, particularly for any literary worker. . . . It supplies that unknown quantity in us that enables us to transform the English language" (qtd. in Clissman 238).¹¹ *At Swim-Two-Birds* certainly demonstrates this principle, using Irish cadences and idioms to contort English into a "virtual creole" (O'Hehir 210). Finn MacCool, for instance, speaks in a rich dialect—almost a raw translation from middle Irish poetry (Wäppling 44). In this manner, O'Brien appropriates the English language for his own purposes while declaring his independence from the conventions of English literature.¹²

O'Brien's analysis of postcolonial Irish culture included his belief that an otherwise frank and earthy representation of bodily realities had been warped by the repressed and dandified English. Biographers Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp suggest that O'Brien wrote his 1941 parodic novel *An Béal Bocht* in part to mock certain ersatz rural Irish novels written in the prudish manner of the Victorians (77). Thomas Shea, too, places O'Brien within an Irish scatological tradition that is both pre-colonial and counter-English (91). *At Swim-Two-Birds* evinces sustained delight in slapstick violence and physical vulgarity. O'Brien described the novel as "a lot of belching, thumb-nosing and belly-laughing" with obviously gleeful speculation about the reactions of his "staid old-world publishers" (Jones 7). Like Joyce and Beckett, he regularly mixes descriptions of bodily function with moments of high erudition. Abstract literary digressions are interrupted by the intrusion of such base physical realities as pain, appetite, odour, vermin, vomit, and skin blemishes. According to Bakhtin, this kind of "low" humour is typical of a novelistic discourse that seeks to develop "a series of deliberately crude associations [with] the effect of dragging what is being compared down to the dregs of an everyday gross reality congealed in prose" (386). In Bakhtinian terms, O'Brien's pro-

grammatical flouting of Horatian decorum is not simply a sign of formal exuberance (that is, postmodernism) but the bubbling forth of a ribald and authentic popular culture. The text's anti-hierarchical urges, in this sense, are a postcolonial response to the literary pretensions of the English imagination.

O'Brien's satiric performance of "the witty celtic act" makes sense in light of his own analysis of English stereotypes and their ongoing effects on Irish literature. On the one hand, his comedy of the Irish body articulates a genuine cultural difference from English decorum; on the other hand, he uses ironic excess to show that vulgarity is a strong Irish trope only by dint of an asymmetrical cultural transaction based on caricatures. The novel declares its Irishness even in "the postcolonial moment," when the very meaning and content of Irishness have been altered and reduced by colonial discourse.¹³ Bakhtinian theory points to a connection between the novel's humour and its sources in Irish popular culture; the "low" comedy serves as a sneer at English (and English-derived) versions of Irish culture as crude but pleasingly "celtic."

O'Brien uses the stock character of the lazy, learned Irishman to similar effects. Just as the English-Irish encounter resulted in an imagined opposition between the "civilized" mind of the English and the comic body of the Irish, it also produced an opposition between the rationalized work ethic of the modern metropolis and the "erudite irresponsibility" of the backward Irish.¹⁴ Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or Beckett's Murphy, O'Brien's unnamed narrator is described with a certain ironic affection. His artistic and bohemian values mark his resistance to the philistinism of the responsible English bourgeoisie; however, his squalid and pretentious habits suggest an undeniably rueful and self-conscious satire of the Irish artist.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, displays of random erudition take on an extreme gratuitousness, with the narrator (and others) spewing forth learned facts and performing literary acrobatics for no apparent reason. This kind of self-generating and self-perpetuating discourse violates all standards of economy and tight construction. It violates, in other words, a doctrine of novel-writing that had become, via Henry James, almost gospel

in Anglo-American letters. The loose construction and experimentalism of *At Swim-Two-Birds* have a decidedly postcolonial function beyond that of formal derring-do: they challenge the conventions of the English novel, particularly the realist aesthetic of Leavis's Great Tradition.¹⁵ While it would be difficult to argue that *any* formally experimental novel or "anti-novel" has in mind the overturning of a specifically English tradition, O'Brien certainly understood his own efforts in that way. He wrote to Ethel Mannin: ". . . you may be surprised to know that my book is a definite milestone in literature, completely revolutionizes the English novel and puts the shallow pedantic English writers in their place" (qtd. in Jones 6). Intrusive narrators, "self-evident shams," and long digressive yarns—all of these constitute a rejection of the modern, rationalized novel in which artifice is concealed and all elements are clearly motivated. Further, insofar as the text borrows its open-ended narrative structure from older Irish genres, it needs to be understood not only in terms of some trans-cultural postmodern impulse but also as the recuperation of specific local conventions. In similar fashion, postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amos Tutuola, and Tahar ben Jelloun have borrowed from traditional storytelling techniques to stretch novelistic form in self-conscious and digressive ways.

In elaborating the link between O'Brien's formal acrobatics and the ground of postcolonial Ireland, Bakhtinian theory again provides a useful analytical method. As McMullen suggests, the text's rich parodic energies seem to make it an ideal example of the novelistic discourse described by Bakhtin. *At Swim-Two-Birds* mimics linguistic conventions at all levels, from the organized protocol of literary genres to the impromptu patterns of everyday speech. In precisely this sense, the novel is an arena for the linguistic diversity that Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." Its dizzying array of voices includes the coded dialects of the race track and pub, the officious song of the bureaucrat, the rigid parlance of the legal system, the affected moralism of bourgeois uncles, the heavy rhythms of a shipwreck ballad, the pedantic drone of arcane scholarship, and the archaic chant of the rural mystic. Bakhtin suggests that novelistic discourse is likely to appear

where two or more national languages intersect and "throw light on each other" (12); the bilingual zone of the colonial encounter, then, should be especially fertile ground for heteroglossic literature.¹⁶ In the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, heteroglossia allows O'Brien to cast comic and corrosive skepticism at both Irish myths and English novels. As we have seen, the appeal of Bakhtinian theory for the study of postcolonial fiction in general, and its relevance to this text in particular, rests on its strong articulation of the role of "unofficial" culture in novelistic discourse. In the postcolonial context, Bakhtin's terms uncover the way that novels can harness the energies of local traditions, turning them against the literary hierarchies of the colonizer within the frame of a canonical form inherited from the latter.

However, although a Bakhtinian critical vocabulary usefully emphasizes the social and political implications of the novel form, it may not always "do the right thing" for postcolonial studies. A full reading of Bakhtin and O'Brien should not only consider how the theory reveals the text but how the text resists or modifies the theory. One potential problem lies in the propensity of critics to consider Bakhtin's dialogism tantamount to a politically inflected deconstruction aimed at "monologic" imperial discourse. But of course, as Homi Bhabha has shown, imperial discourse is rarely monolithic or monologic.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the discursive liberation that Bakhtinian theory seems to promise, the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds* shows that even a highly parodic text does not always overcome the cultural predicaments of postcoloniality.

The chief risk in the application of Bakhtinian heteroglossia to this novel and to other postcolonial texts is that it opens the way to postmodern readings that emphasize the free play of languages without acknowledging that these discursive raw materials have been altered by a history of colonial influence. The postmodern-Bakhtinian reading, in other words, encourages the claim that linguistic and generic free play in the novel can overturn inherited structures of cultural stereotype and linguistic cliché. However, even if O'Brien's text can use parody to expose the absurd and shopworn nature of stock Irishness, it cannot give free rein to an authentically local or unofficial liter-

ary culture, for that culture already has been made officially and permanently quaint, already has been bought and sold (in England), its authenticity at once undermined and over-determined.

McMullen uses Bakhtinian tools appropriately to read O'Brien in relation to Irish cultural politics, but her analysis of an open-ended "colloquy" comes to emphasize a more postmodern, indeterminate meaning for the novel. As suggested in the foregoing discussion, I think we can locate the source of this shift within Bakhtinian theory itself. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism shuttles somewhat ambiguously between an account based on particular historical circumstances and an account based on general linguistic instability. Of course, Bakhtin's own difficult situation within the Stalinist Soviet Union probably accounts for the rhetorical finesse with which he sometimes dissolves cultural criticism into purely linguistic analysis. But the formal elements of Bakhtinian analysis should not be conceived of apart from his social and historical theories. Taken alone, they can underwrite a postmodern reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds* that does not fully account for the implications of O'Brien's postcolonial context.¹⁸

Beyond the fact that a critical application of Bakhtin may lead to the occlusion of some abiding postcolonial effects, *At Swim-Two-Birds* resists in its own terms the model of the Bakhtinian novel. In that resistance, the novel also uncovers a subtle synthesizing strain within the fold of Bakhtinian dialogism—one that postcolonial writing is particularly likely to expose. Bakhtinian theory is known mostly for its explicit emphasis on carnivalesque, even entropic, verbal energies, but the dialogic novel of Bakhtin implicitly depends on a formal balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Bakhtin typically describes the dialogic novel as "uniting on one plane" the various languages it contains (292). In the absence of that unifying single plane, the discursive energy of heteroglossia would render the text incoherent. The Bakhtinian novel, then, is a dynamic form—an "arena" for the struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien looses the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia beyond the point imagined by Bakhtin, throwing off the usual formal balance. The novel's multiple narrative planes in some ways serve to defuse its "dialogism." After all, the various lan-

guages of O'Brien's generically mismatched characters do not so much encounter each other as pile up around each other. O'Brien deliberately eschews the formal coherence necessary for a true dialogic encounter among languages—a fact that is reflected thematically within the interpolated narratives. Finn and Shanahan, for example, recite and counter-recite rather than converse. Finn even prescribes punishment to Shanahan for interjecting his blather into the "honeywords of Finn" (101). When synthesis does occur, the results are unfortunate, as in Shanahan's fusion of Jem Casey's doggerel and Sweeny's lyric (112). The force of the novel's parodic mission, in other words, seems to be directed *against* a dialogic form that would in any way synthesize Irish voices.¹⁹ In its stead, the novel offers a catalogue of languages and styles accumulating in sequential, repetitive, and open-ended patterns that never quite coalesce or conclude.

Why would O'Brien resist the unifying and condensing possibilities of "dialogue" in favour of the loosely sequential catalogue? Seamus Deane argues convincingly that O'Brien refuses to integrate the text's heterogeneous styles because he distrusts the mechanisms available to effect such a synthesis: metaphysics, psychology or the high Joycean aesthetic (196-99). But the text's determination to avoid synthesis should also be understood as an allergy rooted in distinctly postcolonial conditions. If O'Brien is suspicious of any one thing more than the modernist abstractions cited by Deane, it is the concept of Irishness. The idea of unifying his novel's heteroglossia into one melted pot of "Irishness" would have been anathema to O'Brien. He resists knitting the voices together into dialogue—or even arraying them along a single narrative "plane"—in order to forestall any claims to national representativeness. The question of a novel's ability to represent its nation has become a particularly fraught one in postcolonial studies. Critics have long argued against the presumption that postcolonial or "Third-World" texts are involved, by intention or effect, in the prickly business of national representation.²⁰ Many postcolonial writers, including O'Brien, resist the tendency of readers to see them as straightforward "voices of the nation." In fact, as McMullen points out, O'Brien questions not only his own but anyone's attempt to "claim the last word on 'the Irish'" (81).

In Bakhtinian terms, O'Brien's avoidance of national synthesis is simply the novelist's usual resistance to epic consciousness. Dialogic novels pose heteroglossia against the evocations of national essence that are a central feature of the traditional epic. Such a description seems adequate to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, wherein "flourish parody and travesty of all high genres and of all lofty models embodied in national myth" (Bakhtin 21). However, by reading O'Brien against the grain of Bakhtin—as catalogic rather than dialogic—we are reminded that Bakhtinian theory in some way recuperates *for the novel* the epic function of national representation. For Bakhtin, the novel stands in dialectical—not oppositional—relation to the epic. It both cancels and preserves features of the epic, including the tacit claims of national representation. To read postcolonial novels with Bakhtinian tools, then, means conceiving of them as post-epics that, even if they do not necessarily allegorize the nation, serve as a literary container for the range of national languages (and by extension, for the range of groups and classes within the nation). As Timothy Brennan points out, Bakhtin sees the novel as a parody of the epic "in its nation-forming role." Yet even when the novel's mode is parodic, it has tended to play the historical role of "objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life," thus becoming a "contemporary, practical means of *creating* a people" (Brennan 49-50). In an extreme effort to avoid precisely this historical role, O'Brien extends his novel's parodic mission beyond the point licensed by—or explained by—Bakhtinian dialogism. *At Swim-Two-Birds* uses its metafictional and digressive disunity to resist what was, in postcolonial Ireland circa 1939, an almost unavoidable interpretive fate: being read as a unifying and objectifying document of Irish national identity.

O'Brien's absurdist plotting serves to short-circuit any claims to encyclopedic totality—or even dialogic synthesis—in his text. He deploys anti-representational (postmodern) techniques in order to declare his novel's anti-representative stance towards Ireland. As we have seen, O'Brien was scandalized by the images of Ireland so long purveyed by English and Irish mythic consciousness. By generating a conspicuously partial and idiosyncratic catalogue of Irish voices, *At Swim-Two-Birds* refutes the notion

that anything as complex and shifting as "Ireland" could be represented in its fullness. Thus O'Brien is not so much heir to an epic tradition transformed into fiction as the inventor of a willfully fragmentary postcolonial form.

Up to this point, I have refrained as far as possible from mentioning Joyce, not only because his relation to this novel is a matter of much critical comment but also out of a wish not to anger the ghost of O'Brien (who once declared that further comparisons to Joyce would make him "froth at the gob" [qtd. in Asbee 24]).²¹ But the comparison is unavoidable, for *Ulysses* seems to embody the synthetic national totality that can pervade even a manifestly dialogic novel. O'Brien's parodic attacks on Joyce generally have been understood as the foot-stamping of a frustrated apprentice unable to better his literary master. The question of Bakhtin and the "national voice," however, suggests that there is a more substantial criticism of Joyce retrievable from the writing of O'Brien. The postcolonial perspective provides a new way to analyze O'Brien's relationship to Joyce, beyond the initial recognition of influence and anxiety, and beyond the latecomer's antagonism for the modernist high aesthetic.²²

O'Brien's revisions of Joyce, that is, stand as a postcolonial writer's rejection of totalizing texts that make claims of national representation. It should be noted from the outset that the most frequent targets of O'Brien's anti-Joyce commentary are Joyceans (adoring Americans above all). O'Brien's charge that Joyce holds inappropriate claims to speak for the Irish derives not so much from claims made by or in Joyce's texts as from claims made *about* them. Nonetheless, O'Brien's writings imply that Joyce's exile made him susceptible to abstract or stereotypical thinking about Ireland.²³ Only at a remove from the daily life of Dublin, this line of criticism suggests, could Joyce fashion the verisimilar details of an Irish setting into the over-arching aesthetic harmony of *Ulysses*. The concluding passage of *At Swim-Two-Birds* slyly mocks the final sentence of Joyce's "The Dead"; here the barking of curs (rather than a blanket of snow) "spreads . . . through all Erin" (314). O'Brien's critical purpose is concentrated in this line: a simultaneous tribute to and parody of Joyce, ironizing a moment from *Dubliners* when Ireland appears in

symbolic unity. By 1939, the Dedalian aspiration to forge the conscience of the Irish race, though perhaps intended ironically, had become a prophecy fulfilled: Joyce's fiction represented Ireland to the wider world. His international modernist triumph was inimical to O'Brien's cold insistence on contemporary Irish particulars. For O'Brien, any text understood to be representative of Ireland was likely to contain the banal caricatures of the Celtic Twilight (and thereby of imperial England). In his disapproving eyes, even Joyce, once fixed and institutionalized in the Anglo-American canon, becomes just another source of Irish stereotype.

At Swim-Two-Birds also comments parodically on Irish "spokesmen" through the character of mad Sweeny, whose story clearly resonates in the context of postcolonial Ireland (McMullen 80). In the original legend, Sweeny angers a Roman priest by pitching his psalter into a lake—an act of native pagan resistance to the foreigner's sacred text. In retaliation, the priest turns Sweeny into a raving, naked, poetic tree-dweller. Sweeny embodies the effects of cultural colonization diagnosed so clearly by O'Brien—the stereotypical reduction of the Irish to a backward peasantry with a wild streak and a silver tongue. Curiously, O'Brien's text omits a crucial portion of the Sweeny narrative. In the original version of the poem, Sweeny re-embraces Christianity at the hamlet called Snàmh-dà-én, or Swim-Two-Birds (Wäppling 62). In O'Brien's version, however, Sweeny simply passes through the village in the space of a single, deadpan sentence (95). Except for a few desultory signs of religious contrition, O'Brien's Sweeny remains defiant, cursed, pagan. What, then, is the significance of the novel's title if nothing happens "at Swim-Two-Birds"? The phrase refers to the site of an absent conversion, a non-betrayal, a non-capitulation by the Irish poet-king. By deliberately revising the legend, O'Brien stages a subtle protest against the gravitational force of European culture and announces his difference from Joyce, whose master work interpolates the sacred texts of classical Europe.

Of course, as I have indicated, the Joyce in question is more the projection of a critical industry than a writer of complicated texts. In many ways, *Ulysses* seems as sequential and catalogic as *At*

Swim-Two-Birds; it is certainly no behemoth of cultural homogenization.²⁴ Still, *Ulysses* has become the great encyclopedia of modern Irish experience. More importantly, its heteroglossia unfolds under the formal discipline of allusive and metaphorical correspondences. The Joycean episodes gain order and structure from the synthesizing device of the *Odyssey*, while O'Brien's accumulate with unsystematic and digressive momentum. The Homeric substructure provides Joyce with a unifying device—the Bakhtinian narrative “plane” that makes *Ulysses* a post-epic novel. By contrast, *At Swim-Two-Birds* uses an unstable multiplaned form to create his anti-epic catalogue of Irish voices.

O'Brien seeks to avoid the mantle of the representative “national writer” through his aggressive pursuit of metafiction and his active discouragement of hermeneutical approaches (compared to Joyce's coy invitations). He adopts two separate and in some sense conflicting approaches to the problem of “speaking for Ireland” in the postcolonial, post-Joyce moment. On the one hand, *At Swim-Two-Birds* makes claims for a kind of empirical Dubliner authenticity—the sound of modern Irish voices that can only be heard when the nativist and colonial stereotypes are stripped away. On the other hand, the novel's self-consciously farcical structure and parodic use of stock Irish characters makes it even less referential or naturalistic than *Ulysses*. The illusion of randomness cultivated by O'Brien provides striking contrast with the profound authorial control asserted by Joyce. O'Brien's central criticism of Joyce—whom he sometimes called “the fuehrer” (Jones 5)—was that Joyce maintained an almost tyrannical control of his materials (Deane 199). As the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* remarks: “the novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic” (32-33). O'Brien, by contrast, tries to undermine the idea of the novel as an utterly finished work or as the efflux of a solitary genius's unerring vision. He claimed he could easily replace whole passages of his novel with “a few pages of the Berlin Telephone Directory, 1919 edition” (qtd. in Asbee 49).

However much O'Brien's anti-referentiality propels the novel away from Joycean systems and into postmodern formlessness, *At Swim-Two-Birds* should not be understood as an example of purely indeterminate or “carnavalesque” writing. As we have

seen, the text's energetic play has purposes beyond the postmodernist overturning of literary convention—among them a postcolonial writer's wish to avoid presenting his culture in reductive terms. Postmodern readings of O'Brien have tended to overlook the way that the text holds its own anarchic possibilities in check. Formal and ontological play are contained, literally and figuratively, by a realistic frame story about the misadventures of the student-narrator. In this way, the novel's illusion of uncontrolled discursive layering is anchored by a comprehensible and referential sequence of events. In the final episode of the frame narrative, the student reconciles with his uncle—an indication perhaps of O'Brien's willingness (in contrast to Joyce) to operate within Irish culture, not on it. The novel's determination to stay within the frame of Irish culture means that it will neither abandon its native literary heritage nor ignore the fact that its tropes have been altered and romanticized by the colonial encounter. O'Brien promises no easy reversal of the postcolonial condition through either Bakhtinian heteroglossia or postmodern exuberance.

Moreover, the novel's madcap reel of genres and languages always takes place under a cloud of self-suspicion. Where a thoroughly postmodern novel would exhibit unqualified delight at this topsy-turvy metafictional world, O'Brien seems to consider it all with a scrupulous sense of logic. In fact, the more fantastic the novel becomes, the more literal and exacting the logic—even fictional cows must be daily fed and milked by the author. Although there is undeniable comic delight in the novel, O'Brien arranges the extended violations of Horatian decorum in order to demonstrate the ultimate value of proper perspective on the various genres of literary and non-literary language. Accustomed by his long-running newspaper column to act as an arbiter of correct usage, O'Brien was a secret didact—though his lessons are more aesthetic than ethical. In an unpublished notebook, he wrote: “[The artist] must head the common people to an appreciation of taste, decency and fair play” (Jones xxviii). Rather than announce that “anything goes,” O'Brien establishes strict guidelines for sane literary practice and for realistic, non-programmatic understandings of Irish cultural identity.

Finally, then, and despite his eagerness to criticize the dogmatic control of both realist and modernist novelists, O'Brien implicitly acknowledges the necessity of an authorial guiding hand. In the interpolated narratives, the cession of authorial control quickly leads to absurdity. O'Brien attacks conventional novels, but cannot break free of their basic ontological structure as long as he makes even small concessions to the apparatus of literary meaning and reference. Like Beckett, O'Brien reaches the logical limit of his own fictional project. Beckett's struggle to find a post-humanist subjectivity produced *The Unnameable*, a vigorous attempt to evacuate meaning and authority from the novel. Just as O'Brien's narrative *geste* reaches the point of meta-fictional vertigo, Beckett's more properly philosophical attempt to dissolve narrative voice into the "not I" approaches "the babble of psychosis" (Lloyd 51). Contemporaries and compatriots who push their fictional efforts to extremes, Beckett and O'Brien raise new questions about the early sources of postmodernism. Most critics, including Imhof, Clissman, and Cronin, attribute their experimental drive to the towering influence of an already-experimental and ironic literary precursor: Joyce. However, just as David Lloyd and John Harrington recently have re-examined "the Irish Beckett," it seems appropriate to evaluate O'Brien's aesthetic anew in postcolonial rather than postmodern terms. As we have seen, it is the struggle to avoid speaking for Ireland in the stereotypical language of imperial/national myth that drives O'Brien (and perhaps Beckett too) into the comic and irreverent explosion that has traditionally been identified as postmodern.

If *At Swim-Two-Birds* does constitute an important fictional innovation, it still remains within many of the formal boundaries established by the realist-modernist novel. For this reason, it has sometimes been described as a stunted, self-thwarting or "proto-postmodern" novel. We might think of it as a realistic novel whose protagonist happens to be a postmodern writer. O'Brien imagines the parodic destruction of a certain narrative tradition, but does not actually destroy it. In the transitional zone of late modernism from which *At Swim-Two-Birds* emerges, the "new novel" can be described but not enacted. Meanwhile, faced with the binaries of a postcolonial culture — Irish and English, provin-

cial and metropolitan, quaint and modernized—O'Brien's parodies neither establish a systematic, synthetic new brand of Irishness nor do they explode the concept of Irishness altogether. His writing captures the history of discursive back-and-forthing in colonial and postcolonial Irish culture, the history of an absurd and grimly comic game in which his novel, despite its intricate and energetic bending of the rules, is still trapped.

NOTES

- ¹ The argument that postmodern and postcolonial literatures share the same cultural vocation is increasingly common, though it needs to move beyond the vague contention that the two jointly challenge the canons of modernism and imperialism. The further elaboration of post-post allegiances depends on establishing specific and persuasive links between modernism and imperialism. For an example of how that project might proceed, see Slemmon. Nigerian critics Chinweizu et al. have in effect fused the political and aesthetic impositions of colonialism with their term "euro-modernism." African writing that refuses the literary standards of Euro-modernism is thus automatically both postmodernist and anti-colonial. Meanwhile, Gauri Viswanathan has opened another route by investigating the historical co-establishment of British colonial power and English literary institutions in India.
- ² This historical conjunction provides Enda Duffy with the point of departure for his analysis, *The Subaltern Ulysses* (U of Minnesota P, 1994).
- ³ Among book-length studies which emphasize the stylistic innovations of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the context of a trans-cultural postmodernism, see Clissman; Cronin; Imhof; and Shea. For a recent article emphasizing formal analysis rather than postcolonial contextual analysis, see Cohen.
- ⁴ The value of a historically informed approach to *At Swim-Two-Birds* was first suggested to me by Michael Valdez Moses; I would like to thank him for his insights and commentary on this research. I would also like to acknowledge Gregory Dobbins and Nigel Alderman for their useful suggestions about the manuscript.
- ⁵ Anthony Appiah, too, warns against the universalizing assumptions of postmodernism as they apply, for example, to African art (356). Of course, as Arun Mukherjee points out, the term postcolonial itself can erase relevant differences such as race and gender *within* the formerly colonized world (5).
- ⁶ For more on Irish nationalism's shift from "counter-hegemonic" to "hegemonic" concept, see Lloyd (3). The two phases described here are also visible in other postcolonial cultures. In Africa, for example, the celebratory nationalist literature of the 1950s and 1960s generally gives way to more ironic and skeptical writing in the 1970s (Appiah 349).
- ⁷ This pattern of cultural influence is at the crux of postcolonial studies. In a variety of settings, the metropolitan powers and their "literary tourists" created a demand for native authenticity, freezing the colonized culture into a repetitive costumed performance of its own stereotypes. This effect is one of the main ways that cultural alienation and attenuation persist even after political independence. But the issue is a complex one: the fetishization of "quaint" practices may in fact protect some elements of native cultures against the incursions of modernizing colonial institutions. In addition, modern imperialism not only had the effect of "enforced provincialism" but also its opposite: cosmopolitanism, or the opening of cross-fertilizing exchange between Europe and its cultural satellites.

- 8 In his 1941 novel *An Béal Bocht*, O'Brien (as Myles na Gopaleen) satirizes the idealized versions of rural life largely produced by urban literati and consumed by English readers. Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) makes a similar point about Irish poets serving up "gaelic prosodoturfy" to their English city cousins. For more on the effects of "the English market" on Irish culture, see Lloyd's discussion of Daniel Corkery, a contemporary of O'Brien's and equally keen observer (43).
- 9 This letter, dated 14 July 1939, is from the Morris Library Collection at Southern Illinois University. It is reproduced without comment in Jones's *A Flann O'Brien Reader* (6).
- 10 By 1944, however, O'Brien phased the Irish language out of his *Irish Times* columns, claiming that no one in Dublin understood it correctly (*Best of Myles* 277). His move from the native language to a strategic use of the "colonial" language has been famously reversed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who began in English and moved to Gikuyu. Ngugi also seeks to overcome the "snake-like eye" of international publishing by writing for local theatre audiences rather than for cosmopolitan novel readers.
- 11 In the *Irish Times*, O'Brien describes Irish as the more rigorous language, comparing its "steely latinistic line" to the loose, fragmented nature of English (*Best of Myles* 282). O'Brien's suggestion that Irish play the role of high literary language to English's demotic or merely commercial "patois" neatly inverts the usual hierarchy of language use in colonial encounters.
- 12 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin praise such strategies of linguistic appropriation as mature "syncretism" on the part of postcolonial writers (38-44). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a unique power accrues to members of an ethnic/cultural minority who can establish a strategic, transformative presence within a major-language literature (16-19).
- 13 O'Brien's predicament vis-à-vis Irishness recalls the terms of the Négritude debate in postcolonial Africa. The writers of the Négritude movement, eager to reinvest value in native African identity and local cultural practices, developed a discourse of inherent and authentic racial essence. Critics of the movement such as Wole Soyinka argued that Négritude simply reinstated the binaristic thinking of the colonizer and trafficked in European-derived stereotypes. O'Brien tacitly acknowledges that the celebration of Irish essences is an English habit and adopts a strategic-ironic stance in playing to/on the stereotypes.
- 14 Matthew Arnold played a key role in ratifying English notions of the sentimental, melancholy, and charming Celt. For more on his contribution to the overburdened tropes of Irishness, see Riordan.
- 15 Here, O'Brien follows Joyce, who, according to Ulrick O'Connor, once said: "It is my revolt against the English conventions, literary and otherwise, that is the main source of my talent" (O'Connor 143; qtd. in Eagleton).
- 16 Moreover, the era of modern decolonization would seem to give rise to the historical conditions that Bakhtin identifies as conducive to novelistic discourse. Timothy Brennan provides a useful discussion of Bakhtin's notion of decomposing "verbal and ideological systems" (including that of late imperial Rome) as they relate to disintegrating European empires (54-55). M. Keith Booker proposes that the bilingualism of the postcolonial writer (e.g., O'Brien) grants special access to the power of dialogic writing.
- 17 Furthermore, as Lloyd cautions, if we think of Bakhtinian dialogism only as a means for dismantling colonialist binaries, we may paper over the heteroglossia internal to the postcolonial nation itself. Similarly, Mukherjee warns that an indelicate application of the dialogic concept to postcolonial literature can serve to perpetuate the simplistic binary model of centre and periphery (6).
- 18 For more on the relevance of Bakhtin's Soviet context to postcolonial studies, see Van Toorn 96-97.

- ¹⁹ If an emphasis on the synthesizing or unifying vocation of the dialogic form seems tendentious, it is in an effort to recover the complexity of Bakhtin's position from loose readings of the dialogic novel as carnivalesque freedom or postmodern entropy. As Penny van Toorn's discussion of Bakhtin implies, the dialogic novelist can assume an almost "imperial" role in appropriating and controlling the languages of others (97).
- ²⁰ For an exemplary and well-known skirmish over these issues, see Ahmad; and Jameson, "Third World Literature." on the applicability of the term "national allegory" to "third world literature." Jameson argues that a conscious deployment of such allegory is generally observable in post-colonial narrative, while Ahmad challenges the very project of theorizing "Third World literature." National or nationalist writing (one of whose modes is allegory) has obviously played an important role in most modern movements of political and cultural decolonization—including Ireland's. And, if such nations are to maintain cultural autonomy against forces like Jameson's "global American postmodernist culture" (65), nationalist rhetoric still plays an important role in postcolonial writing. On the other hand, postcolonial writers resist identification with forms like national allegory (or epic) because so many of their "national" histories were invented, revised, and otherwise modified by an alien culture. Thus literary claims to national representation are too often forced to borrow from the reductive or romantic archive of colonial discourse.
- ²¹ Letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 25 November 1961.
- ²² For a useful list of the criticism emphasizing O'Brien's connection to Joyce, see McMullen, 62n.
- ²³ Anthony Cronin reports that young writers of O'Brien's circle came to terms with Joyce by thinking of him as a "great but demented genius" who ultimately sacrificed faithfulness to Ireland's living heterogeneity on the altar of High Art (52).
- ²⁴ Joyce was no doubt more aware of the problems inherent in writing a modern Irish epic than O'Brien allows. By emptying his precursor of ironic self-consciousness and casting him as a naive writer, O'Brien employs precisely the "revisionary ratios" (*clinamen* and *tessera*) of misreading outlined by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). For further ideas on Bloom's relevance to the O'Brien-Joyce case, see O'Grady.

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