A CRITICAL STUDY OF FLANN O'BRIEN'S EARLY NOVELS

Short Statement of Thesis

This thesis is a study of Flann O'Brien's two early novels, *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. My aim has been to show how these two novels pursue a similar end, namely, the question of identity, for the unnamed narrators of both books. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the narrator is a creative writer; for him, the writing of his novel is a working-out of his interior process of self-analysis. In *The Third Policeman*, the narrator is a scholar and a critic, who writes his book as a record of things past; his identity is what is in question during the events in the strange world which he records. In both novels, O'Brien is also concerned with satirising conventional views of the purpose and use of literature, and my thesis also aims to show how this satire is related to the larger question of identity in each book.

The Artist and the Critic; Flann O'Brien's novels At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman.

by

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I was most fortunate to be able to work with the collection of Flann O'Brien papers in the Morris Library of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois. This holding, the largest collection of O'Brien material in the world, is comprised of letters, notebooks, manuscripts and typescripts dating from 1938 to 1966, the year of O'Brien's death. The

collection also contains a large number of book reviews which would not be easily accessable otherwise. I should like to express my particular thanks to Mr. K. W. Duckett, Rare Books Librarian, and to his staff, for their unfailing and considerate assistance to me. I am also grateful to Dr. David Powell, the writer of a dissertation on O'Brien, whose correspondence with me was of great help in clarifying some points of research.

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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND TO THE TWO NOVELS

While completing his M.A. thesis on "Nature in Irish Poetry" at University College Dublin, in 1934, Brian O'Nolan (who later chose the nom-de-plume of Flann O'Brien), started a magazine in collaboration with his friend, Niall Sheridan. At the same time he began work on his novel At Swim-Two-Birds; the thesis, the magazine and the novel are all closely related.

The thesis dealt in part with a Middle-Irish tale called Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeny), about a man who was cursed to live as a mad bird-man in the trees. The poetry of Buile Suibhne, describing as it does Sweeny's impressions of various places on his flight through Ireland, is an example of medieval Irish nature poetry at its best, although the story as a whole is marked by some structural weakness. O'Brien's interest in the story of mad Sweeny is demonstrated by his thesis and by his use of it (in an abbreviated form) as a central episode in At Swim-Two-Birds.

The magazine BLATHER, most of which was written by O'Brien, ran for five issues between the Autumn

of 1934 and the Spring of 1935. The first issue, of August 1934, contained "The Blather Short-Story, Scenes from a Novel",[1] in which can be found some of the ideas which are expressed in At Swim-Two-Birds. The fictitious owner of the magazine, "The O'Blather", describes in this article his experiences of trying to write a novel, "Teresa's White Sin, or the Strange Occupant of Purple Lodge", in which the characters whom he creates rebel against him. "I had come to the place where McDaid was required to rob a poorbox in a church. But no! Plot or no plot it was not to be. JUST FENCY! 'Sorry old chap' he said, 'but I absolutely can't do it.'"[2] Shaun, the hero, also gives trouble to The O'Blather: "I have had words with my hero, Shaun. Shaun, showing a streak of yellow that I never suspected, coolly went behind my back and formed an alliance with a slavey in Griffith Avenue; . . . My carefully thought-out plot is turned inside out . . ." He concludes with "The book is seething with conspiracy and there have been at least two whispered consultations between all the characters, including two who have not yet been officially created. Posterity taking a hand in the destiny of its ancestors, if you know what I mean . . . Candidly,

reader, I fear my number's up; for soon I go to my room to write".[3] In At Swim-Two-Birds, Dermot Trellis writes a novel about the effects of evil and sin. For this, he creates a number of characters who come alive and rebel against him; his principal character, Furriskey, is very like The O'Blather's character McDaid, in that each was created as a figure of Evil, and each refuses to play his allotted role.

O'Brien's friend, Niall Sheridan, became incorporated into At Swim-Two-Birds as Brinsley, the narrator's friend. Just as in the novel the narrator shows various parts of his manuscript to Brinsley for approval, so O'Brien showed his novel to Sheridan, and finally allowed him to edit the finished book. Sheridan has said: "He began the book during our last year together at University College, in 1934. He showed me various sections of the novel as it progressed, and when he had completed it, I told him it was too long, so he said 'If you feel that way, you can cut it yourself', and I was left with the job of doing some editing on it before it went to the publisher in 1939."[4] In fact, Sheridan cut out about twenty-five percent of what O'Brien had written--mostly elaboration of the mythological elements. This

edited section has unfortunately been lost in the intervening years.

The typescript had gone to a London agent, A. M. Heath & Co., by January 1938. O'Brien wrote to them that the novel was "called At Swim-Two-Birds and is a very queer affair, unbearably queer, perhaps".[5] Longmans, the publishers, wrote to Heath, and Heath in turn wrote to O'Brien, quoting from Longmans' letter to them: "The book may seem at times unnecessarily coarse, and a few passages could be cut without harm. Otherwise its only fault seems to me [Longmans' reader] an obscure and rather hurried ending, and a title far more difficult than anything in the book".[6] By October of 1938, O'Brien was thinking of revisions and a new title. In a letter to his agent he gave some alternative titles: "I have given a lot of thought to the question of a title and think SWEENY IN THE TREES quite suitable. Others that occurred to me were The Next Market Day . . . Sweet-Scented Manuscript; Truth is an Odd Number; Task-Master's Eye; Through an Angel's Eye-lid; and dozens of others."[7] The original title was finally decided upon, and O'Brien subsequently donated the title "Sweeny in the Trees" to the American writer William Saroyan for one of his plays.

Writing to Ethel Mannin about At Swim-Two-Birds, O'Brien made the tart comment that "the fantastic title . . . is explained on page 95 . . ."; [8] in fact, Swim-Two-Birds is the place on the River Shannon where Sweeny (of Buile Suibhne) undergoes a religious change of heart. A knowledge of this fact informs any subsequent reading of the novel, since the event of Sweeny's conversion at Swim-Two-Birds is symbolic of the experiences of the narrator himself while he is writing the novel.

The bizarre complexity of the title is typical of the novel itself, and it is this quality of At Swim-Two-Birds which probably contributed most to its failure on publication. Most of the reviewers found something to praise about the novel, but Frank Swinnerton in The Observer was harsh: "Mr. O'Brien has plenty of words, and writes with an immense sense of sportiveness. I did not notice, however, that he had a single original idea to express; and I should reluctantly put him among the bores". [9] O'Brien himself, on the other hand, wrote to Ethel Mannin (admittedly tongue-in-cheek) that ". . . you may be surprised to know that my book is a definite milestone in literature, completely revolutionises the

English novel and puts the shallow pedestrian English writers in their place . . . It is not a pale-faced sincere attempt to hold the mirror up and has nothing in the world to do with James Joyce".[10] It is questionable that Joyce had no influence on the book because, as Philip Toynbee wrote: "What Mr. O'Brien seems to have set out to do is to adapt and extend the parodical method which Joyce used so freely throughout Ulysses . . . the whole plan of the book is a parody of conventional fiction--or at least a deliberate assault on its methods".[11] The external form, that of a novel-within-a-novel, may not be new; Swift in The Tale of a Tub and Sterne in Tristram Shandy had earlier parodied the form of the book-as-book. At Swim-Two-Birds falls into this peculiarly Irish tradition, and is unique in that it is not only a parody of the book-as-book, but it is also a serious exploration of the question of identity.

The Third Policeman was written in 1939, the same year in which At Swim-Two-Birds was published; however, while his first book took over four years to complete, O'Brien's second work was written within the space of one year. Very little is known about the background to the second novel. O'Brien wrote

to the "AE" Memorial Committee on January 18, 1940, saying that he had completed a second novel, and that he thought it was "funny, and an unusual effort in the murder or mystery story line".[12]

In a letter to William Saroyan (February 14, 1940), O'Brien gave a résumé of The Third Policeman and commented on its humour: "When you are writing about the world of the dead--and the damned--where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks".[13] That the novel is humorous is undoubted, but it is possible that this quality detracts from the horror of the "hell" through which the central character, the narrator, is passing. Saroyan wrote back to encourage O'Brien to make the book into a play: ". . . please make a play of it and don't worry about how it goes or how incredible or whatever it may be it seems to be.[sic] Get it in play form and send it out. Your synopsis of the book sounds swell: really great. Please let me know what's happened with the book, and if you've finished or started the play adaptation of it".[14] However, by this time (June 1940), the novel had been rejected by several publishers, including Longmans. Their

letter to O'Brien's agent said, in part: "We realise the Author's ability but think that he should become less fantastic and in this new novel he is more so".[15] At the time that The Third Policeman was written, O'Brien was at the height of his powers: Longmans were right in suggesting that his writing was becoming more fantastic. The Third Policeman deserves more attention than it has generally received, since in it O'Brien manages to create a work of rich and complex fantasy within the conventional novel form.

Despite the publishers' lack of enthusiasm, Saroyan's idea of turning the novel into a play stayed with O'Brieh. He wrote to Hilton Edwards, the Dublin theatrical producer, in 1942: "I have in mind another play of a much better and more difficult kind--mostly funny stuff but ultimately involving the audience in horrible concepts of time and life and death that would put plays like Berkeley Square into the halfpenny place. I think my idea is quite new . . ."[16] The idea never developed, and O'Brien wrote another play for Edwards instead, an adaptation of the Čapeks' Insect Play. However, it is clear that he was impressed by the novelty of the ideas

with which he had been dealing in The Third Policeman. Many years later, having apparently abandoned all intention of publishing the book, O'Brien "borrowed" the characters of Sergeant Pluck and de Selby for his last novel, The Dalkey Archive, published in 1964. In this book, Sergeant Fottrell has all of Sergeant Pluck's bizarre characteristics, and some of Pluck's original conversations are repeated verbatim. The Third Policeman itself was not published until 1967, one year after O'Brien's death.

CHAPTER I

At Swim-Two-Birds is a book about a man writing a book about a man writing a book, within which one of the characters writes a book. This seemingly confused series of books-within-books is the structural heart of O'Brien's novel. The narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds is a student who lives in Dublin with his uncle; he is writing a novel, the central character of which is Dermot Trellis, a Dublin publican. The narrator's novel is about Dermot Trellis's attempt to write a novel himself--"a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity" (p. 48).*

In order to write this moralising book, Trellis creates a number of characters, and it is important to note that these characters are "created" in the literal sense: when Trellis writes about them they take on a real existence, interacting in the world of the author, Trellis himself. Much of the plot of At Swim-Two-Birds is concerned with what Trellis's created characters do to free themselves of his control.

* All references are from the British edition of At Swim-Two-Birds (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

Trellis also hires some other characters from both contemporary works and Irish mythology, and forces them all ". . . to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them . . ." (p. 47) for the duration of his novel. The "central villain" of Trellis's book is "a man of unexampled depravity" (p. 48). He is John Furriskey, created to "attack women and behave at all times in an indecent manner" (p. 85). Trellis also creates Sheila Lamont "to show how an evil man can debase the highest . . ." (p. 86), Peggy (a servant), and the Pooka Fergus MacPhellimey, "a species of human Irish devil" (p. 85). Besides these original characters, Trellis introduces Finn MacCool from ancient Irish legend, and "hires" two minor characters who make their living by taking parts in novels, Paul Shanahan and Antony Lamont.

All of Trellis's characters object strongly to being forced to live with him. A rebellion develops as a result of his strict control over them, exacerbated by the fact that Furriskey falls in love with Peggy, whom in Trellis's novel he is supposed to assault. Furriskey and Peggy "arrange to lead virtuous lives, to simulate the immoral actions,

thoughts and words which Trellis demands of them . . ." (p. 86), while the other characters lead lives of their own when Trellis is asleep.

Having created his virtuous woman, Sheila Lamont, Trellis assaults her himself. This results in Sheila's giving birth to a fully-grown man, Orlick Trellis who, as John Furriskey, Antony Lamont and Paul Shanahan discover, "has inherited his father's gift for literary composition" (p. 236). They encourage Orlick to write a story in which Trellis is to be punished for his misuse of others; the resulting book is the final novel-within-novel of At Swim-Two-Birds.

By his continuing presence in it, the unnamed narrator gives the book structural unity. As well as being a series of novels-within-novels, the book is also the record of the narrator's life for a period preceding his university examinations. Alternating with the various stories are brief accounts of his day-to-day life with his friends and his uncle. There are therefore two main narrative threads running through At Swim-Two-Birds. One is the narrator's straightforward (though subjective) account of his life as a Dublin student. The other is wholly the product of his imagination: the story of Dermot

Trellis and the attempts of his characters to revolt against him, both by living secret lives of their own, and by attacking him in a novel which they themselves write.

The novel's central tension, then, is between the alternating reality of the narrator's external world and the fantasy of his internal world, expressed in his own fiction. In the real world, the individual is necessarily subject to implicit laws of family and society, which tend to mould his behaviour to an acceptable norm. The quotidian--sleep and activity, the necessity of eating--dominates most lives; life does not change substantially from day to day. The same people, the same weather, the same conversations mark our existence. The narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds, being an imaginative young man, is unsatisfied, and creates a new world in his imagination.

Unlike the real world, the imaginative world has no boundaries except those which are self-imposed; there are no absolute laws, either natural or social, to determine events and behaviour. Fictitious characters can be made to come alive; men can be moved from century to century, or be made to fly. The individual's imagination is complete master of

this interior world, the structure of which is determined only by the laws which the individual imposes on it. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a natural tension between the narrator's world of reality, where he is subject to laws and circumstances which he feels to be outside of his control, and his imaginative world, where he is God.

While the central tension of At Swim-Two-Birds centres on the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, there exists another tension between Irish mythology and twentieth-century reality.[1] This second tension is exemplified by the relationship of Finn MacCool, the seventh-century Irish hero, with Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan. These three epitomes of modern Irishmen do not understand Finn, the world he comes from, or his story of Sweeny, the madman in the trees. They are too far removed from Finn and Sweeny in time and sensibility; they prefer the earthy realism of Jem Casey's poetry--"A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN"--to the fantasy of the Sweeny story. Shanahan admits that the Sweeny story is "the stuff that put our country where she stands today", but then asks about "the man in the street, where does he come in?" (p. 106). The ordinary people of the twentieth-century real world

have little time for, or understanding of, a legendary world containing a man like Sweeny who is turned into a bird.

This tension corresponds to the tension between fantasy and reality. In similar fashion to Finn, who "in his mind was nestling with his people" (p. 89), the narrator escapes into the world of his imagination. Each lives in tension with the real world of the twentieth century, but Finn escapes into his memories and the narrator creates a work of fantasy based on certain preconceptions about the nature of the real world. These preconceptions centre on his uncle, with whom he lives, and on whom he is financially dependent. In the narrator's novel, Dermot Trellis exercises strict control over the characters of his own novel--a representation of how the world of reality tries to control the world of the imagination. The contempt of Trellis's characters for him blossoms into open rebellion when Trellis's son, Orlick, writes a novel about his father. It is only in the world of imagination that the narrator can rebel against his uncle, and so Orlick's treatment of Trellis corresponds to the way in which the narrator would like to treat his uncle, but cannot.

In addition to being a symbol of authority, Trellis embodies another important trait of the narrator's uncle: a conservative moral code. The uncle believes in strict religious and moral principles: "Christian doctrine is . . . very necessary in the times we live in" (p. 130). Just as the narrator is continually harangued by his uncle about his apparent sinful laziness, so Trellis intends that his novel should frighten people away from sin. Both Trellis and the uncle are dominant individuals, with a strong sense of personal moral virtue. The narrator, on the other hand, is very impressionable, without either a strong personality or a definable sense of moral values. He experiments with drink and sex, visits the university societies and debates about literature and life with his friends; the process is one of exploration for a suitable lifestyle and for a scheme of values.

The establishment of a value system is a major factor in the establishment of a personal identity. The narrator is a typical young man, whose search for personal values is evident from the sections of <u>At Swim-Two-Birds</u> which correspond to his life. It is not so evident, although equally important, that

his writing a novel is itself a fantasised working-out of a moral code.

The narrator's novel is a rejection of conventional moral values which allows him to explore, in fantasy, the problems which he faces in his real life. Just as Trellis uses Furriskey and Sheila Lamont to epitomise Evil and Good, so the narrator uses the Pooka MacPhellimey and the Good Fairy to the same end; however, whereas Trellis regards them as opposites, in the narrator's view Good and Evil are ambiguous. The Good Fairy is corrupt enough to cheat at cards, while the Pooka, for all his diabolical qualities, shows compassion toward Sweeny when he is found in a tree. The section of the narrator's novel which deals with the meeting of the Good Fairy and the Pooka, and their journey to the birth of Orlick Trellis is essentially a working-out of the narrator's concept of Good and Evil. By blackmailing the Good Fairy, the Pooka wins the rights to Orlick Trellis's soul; thus Evil, in the narrator's novel, triumphs over Good. By creating this situation, the narrator has ranged himself against his uncle's moral ideals. Orlick writes the novel in which his father Dermot Trellis is to be finally destroyed; this destruction

represents the narrator's wish to reject his uncle.

However, the real world contradicts the narrator's fantasies. While Trellis is being tortured in the novel, the narrator is sitting for his University examinations. He comes home one night, knowing that he has passed with honours, to discover that his uncle knows already, and has a gift for him. This evidence of another, more human side to his uncle's nature so moves him that he can no longer allow Trellis (as the uncle) to be destroyed. The tension between fantasy and reality collapses when he realises that his attitudes toward his uncle were misconceived. He frees Trellis from his torture by writing into his manuscript that Trellis's maid burns the pages that "made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (p. 313). Since his torturers now no longer exist, Trellis returns home, shaken and confused. The narrator too is confused, since his own rejection of his uncle's simple moral code has left him without an alternative code of his own.

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"A good book" the narrator proposes at the beginning of At Swim-Two-Birds, "may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author" (p. 9). The inference that a book may hold a number of different attitudes toward its own subject reflects the narrator's understanding of literary subjectivity.

His novel's three openings introduce Finn MacCool, the Pooka and John Furriskey. Finn MacCool, the central legendary character of the book,[2] was a real figure in Irish history, but is an unbelievable character in the legends. The Pooka has some prototype in history, for there were magicians like him, but none ever had his fantastic powers. John Furriskey, although he appears to be a very ordinary man, is in fact a figure of total fantasy, a man created at the age of twenty-five.

The characters which the narrator creates in this fantasy world are influenced by his subjective view of reality, and clearly reflect his own attitudes. The description of his uncle implies the uncle's insensitivity to the narrator's artistic spirit: "Red-faced, bead-eyed, ball-bellied. Fleshy about the shoulders with long swinging arms giving ape-like

effect to gait. Large moustache. Holder of Guinness clerkship the third class" (p. 11). The uncle is described in a derogatory fashion in as few words as possible. At the other extreme, Finn MacCool is described in three pages of rhetoric: "Too great was he for standing, the neck to him was as the bole of a great oak, knotted and seized together with muscle-humps and carbuncles of tangled sinew . . ." (p. 17). This style is a parody of the construction of Middle Irish, and the difference in descriptive styles clearly demonstrates that the narrator is sympathetic toward Finn, but not toward his uncle.[3]

According to the legends, Finn MacCool, or more properly Fionn MacCumhaill, had both royal and supernatural lineage, his father Cumhall being a king of the ancient province of Leinster, while through his mother Finn was a great-grandson of Nuadha, a Druid. As leader of the Fianna, a great independent army, a legend grew up about his supposedly supernatural abilities. Geoffrey Keating, in his seventeenth-century History of Ireland, makes it clear that the legendary character was false:

> Hector Boetius, in the History of Alba, unjustly calls Fionn son of Cumhall a giant; and besides he falsely asserts that he was fifteen cubits in height. For

> it is plain from the old books of the seanchus that he was not of abnormal size as compared with his contemporaries; and it is plain that there were some of the Fian of greater size, more powerful, and stronger than he.[4]

While Boetius' description overestimates Finn, Keating's attempt at an objective viewpoint underestimates him. O'Brien utilises the legends to satirise the contemporary concept of the ideal mythological Irishman. Keating records ten conditions for membership to the Fianna, all within the bounds of possibility,[5] but when Finn in At Swim-Two-Birds is asked to "relate . . . the attributes that are to Finn's people" (p. 20), his list, besides including many of Keating's conditions, spirals out into a catalogue of insane demands, which no human could meet. For example, Finn's final requirement for the candidate of the Fianna is that "when pursued in a chariot by the men of Erin he must dismount, place horse and chariot in the slack of his seat, and hide behind his spear" (p. 20).

Within the twentieth-century world of the novel, Finn appears as an "old greybeard seated beyond dimly on the bed with his stick between his knees and his old eyes staring far into the red fire like a man whose thought was in a distant part of the old world

or maybe in another world altogether" (p. 87). Finn is a composite of the real and mythological, and in the twentieth century it is impossible to determine where the real ends and the mythological begins, since any record of experience is both selective and subjective, and each age re-interprets the past in relation to itself. Both Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory had translated the old tales into colloquial Anglo-Irish idiom, partly in an attempt to help establish a twentieth-century Irish national identity. However, the heroes of these translations were far removed from the original heroes of the sagas; such attempts to relate the mythological to contemporary national identity are useless. In accentuating the legendary Finn's distance from reality, O'Brien indicates the impossibility of grasping the reality behind mythological narrative. The real, historical Finn cannot be reached, either through Keating's realistic writing, or through fantasy; the Irish sagas cannot function as a basis for determining a twentieth-century Irish identity.

The narrator himself is searching for a personal identity which he pursues not only in his writing, but also in theoretical formulation; he develops his

search in debate with his friend Brinsley. "A satisfactory novel" the narrator says, "should be a self-evident sham . . . Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference" (p. 33). The immediate product of this theory's application to the narrator's own novel is Dermot Trellis, owner of the Red Swan Hotel, who is a writer himself. In accordance with the narrator's theory, Trellis is depicted in terms of the description of Dr. Beatty in the Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences. "I hope" said Brinsley, "that Trellis is not a replica of the uncle" (p. 40).[6] Trellis, we later discover, is indeed a replica of the uncle, created as an outlet for the frustrations which the narrator feels toward his uncle and his uncle's moral principles.

There is as much difference between the narrator and his uncle as individuals, however, as there is between the narrator and Trellis as writers. On the one hand, the narrator searches for the possible scope

and shape of a modern novel for a modern sensibility: an unorthodox book with multiple viewpoints and literary cross-references. On the other hand, Trellis is concerned with writing a conventional and somewhat conservative moralising tract, which is to be made popular by being written pornographically. The narrator proposes to borrow his characters from the supposedly noble heritage of Irish literature; Trellis borrows from the works of the hack writer, William Tracy. On this incongruity rests much of the satiric humour of At Swim-Two-Birds: great characters of Irish legend rub shoulders with Dublin cowboys. Neither group suits its assigned role: the legendary characters are out of place in the modern world, and Trellis's borrowed characters resent his treatment of them.

The similarities and contrasts between the narrator and Trellis are important as satire because O'Brien has created both as writers. This relationship between Trellis and the narrator also reveals O'Brien's attitude toward the characters and the novel which he himself has created. Within the structure of At Swim-Two-Birds--a book inside a book inside a book--the narrator, a writer, has created

Trellis, also a writer, whose son Orlick is a writer as well. Each one is under the control of his progenitor. In the fantasy world of his novel, it is the narrator who is in control of these people, whereas on the level of reality, the narrator feels himself to be under the control of the uncle. Although the narrator's personal freedom is restricted by his uncle, he still considers himself free as an artist. However, we must remember that outside of At Swim-Two-Birds is Flann O'Brien. The narrator, in many respects, stands for O'Brien himself, but that there is a distinction between O'Brien and the narrator is both evident in, and essential to the structure of At Swim-Two-Birds. It is ironic that the narrator should believe himself to be master of the characters and events which he is manipulating, while he is at all times subject to O'Brien's whim. In a sense, therefore, he is no more free in his world of imagination than he is in the world of reality.

The contrast between reality and the narrator's imaginative fantasy is often comic. Because he is aware of his lack of freedom, due to his uncle's control in his daily life, the narrator tries to

establish a way of life for himself; one of the things he experiments with is alcohol. On drinking his first glass of porter, he asks rhetorically: "Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air? . . . What wild ecstasy?" (p. 29). However, his actual experience contradicts this fantasy: "Whatever happened me, I started to puke and I puked till the eyes nearly left my head. I made a right haimes of my suit. I puked till I puked air" (p. 30).[7] The world of reality has little in common with the world of the narrator's imagination, and he is invariably disappointed by what reality has to offer.

Going to university places the narrator in contact with other students, but he is unsatisfied by their way of life, and unwilling to conform to their essential conservatism. The style in which he describes these students reveals his attitude toward them:

> Young postulants or nuns would also pass, their eyes upon the floor and their fresh young faces dimmed in the twilight of their hoods, passing to a private cloakroom where they would spend the intervals between

> their lectures in meditation and pious practices. Occasionally there would be a burst of horseplay and a sharp cry from a student accidentally hurt (p. 62).

Reality ranges from his uncle's way of life to Brinsley's; the uncle's is representative of the conservative students, while Brinsley's way of life is typical of the Dionysian students who react against conservatism. The members of the debating society would appear to be like this; however, as the narrator records, their meetings "afforded me many moments of physical and spiritual anxiety, for it seemed to me that the majority of the persons present were possessed by unclean spirits" (p. 67). Both ways of life appear unsuitable to the narrator.

Just as the world offers a number of alternate lifestyles so, within his novel, the narrator suggests the possibility of a number of alternate points of view toward any given event. The opening of the novel was one example; his description of the birth of John Furriskey is another. Furriskey's birth is recorded in three different ways. The first version is journalese; the second is in the form of a medical report, and the third is a parody of Joyce's style in the 'Ithaca' chapter of Ulysses. Having displayed his virtuosity at imitating styles of writing, the

narrator proceeds with his account of Furriskey's early experiences.

Furriskey, as a personification of evil, is the leading character in Trellis's book. Since Trellis's purpose is magnanimous, Furriskey's evil ways are supposed to turn the novel's readers away from wrong-doing. Furriskey's initial relationship with Trellis is that of a man with God; Trellis appears to him in a cloud, on a bed of enormous proportions: "A voice came from the interior of the cloud. 'Are you there, Furriskey?' it asked. Furriskey experienced the emotion of fear" (p. 68). If Trellis is God, then in a literal sense, Furriskey is "Son of God". In nature he is like Adam--a fallen creation; in function he could be compared with Christ--a man whose destiny is to lead people away from sin.

Trellis issues to Furriskey "a number of stern warnings as to the penalties which would befall him should he deviate, even in the secrecy of his own thought, from his mission of debauchery" (p. 71), because, if Furriskey is not completely under the author's control, he could live an independent life outside of the novel, possibly detrimental to its ends. The narrator's loss of the nine pages recording

Furriskey's personality and Trellis's instructions to him is partly responsible for the fact that Furriskey does not turn out as Trellis had planned. Trellis's oral instructions to Furriskey lose their authority when the written record is mislaid. Since only the pages recording Furriskey's personality are lost, and not those recording his birth, he still exists, but can now follow his own inclinations. Hence, instead of raping Peggy, as Trellis had instructed him, he falls in love with her.

Thus the various novels within At Swim-Two-Birds are not completely separate from each other--events in one affect the progress of another. Shanahan's account of his life as a cowboy in Dublin is a good example. Paul Shanahan, who is one of Trellis's minor characters, describes his experiences working as a cowboy for the author William Tracy. Tracy has been conducting a running feud with Henderson, a rival cowboy-story writer. This "battle of the books" (the opposing fantasies of Tracy and Henderson), takes place in Shanahan's world of reality, the suburbs of Dublin. In Shanahan's account, fantasy and reality are so interwoven that one can almost accept that the Dublin suburbs of Ringsend and Irishtown could contain

a whole "wild-west". For example: "The Indians got windy and flew back to us behind the buckboards and go to God if Red doesn't hold up a passing tram and take cover behind it, firing all the people out with a stream of dirty, filthy language" (p. 80). The author, Henderson, by allowing his hero Red Kiersay to steal the cattle out of Tracy's book, inflicts chaos on Tracy's novel. The narrator in similar fashion creates chaos in Trellis's novel by losing nine pages of his own book. Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan, by leading lives of their own, confuse Trellis's novel further.

Although Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan's covert rebellion against Trellis represents the narrator's dissatisfaction with his uncle, the group of men are in fact very conservative people. Just as Trellis has traits in common with both the narrator and his uncle, so Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan are very close in character to Mr. Corcoran, Mr. Connors and Mr. Fogarty, friends of the narrator's uncle. The values of each group are the same, as is the level of their pseudo-intellectual conversation.[8] The uncle warns Mr. Fogarty to have "no disrespect" for the Church; his values are echoed by Furriskey, who

assures Orlick that he "won't get very far by attacking the Church" in his novel about Trellis (p.247). It is true that Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan rebel over their treatment by Trellis, but this does not make them rebels at heart. For all their independence of action, they are still epitomes of conservative thought. They appear even more conservative when Finn MacCool recounts the story of Mad Sweeny to them.[9]

The original tale of Sweeny consists mainly of a series of poems in four-line stanzas--the direct speech of Sweeny and the other characters. This is interspersed with third-person prose narrative which serves to telescope both time and action. The Finn/O'Brien version of the story is abridged from the original Middle-Irish texts, O'Brien not using O'Keefe's dual-language edition but writing a better translation himself.[10]

Sweeny, or Suibhne, was regent of the northern kingdom of Dal Araidhe from the flight of King Congal in 629 A.D. until Congal's return to the battle of Magh Rath in 637 A.D.[11] Congal having returned, the battle of Magh Rath marks the end of Sweeny's regency, and, as a result of a clash with the Church, the beginning of his adventures as a bird-man. His

initial clash with the Church arises when St. Ronan tries to build a chapel near his property. Sweeny objects strongly to this, and assaults Ronan. Subsequently, at the battle of Magh Rath, Ronan accidentally blesses Sweeny while he is blessing Congal's army; furious, Sweeny kills one of Ronan's acolytes. By way of punishment, Ronan curses Sweeny, condemning him to a life of madness as a bird-man:[12]

> My curse on Sweeny!
> His guilt against me is immense,
> he pierced with his long swift javelin
> my holy bell.
>
> The holy bell that thou hast outraged
> will banish thee to branches,
> it will put thee on a par with fowls--
> . . . . . .
>
> Just as it went prestissimo
> the spear-shaft skyward,
> you too, Sweeny, go madly mad-gone
> skyward. (pp. 91-92)

Sweeny is an example of the man who has a strong enough sense of his own individuality to defy the authority of the Church and the mores of his time. The act of asserting himself by clashing with Ronan, however, isolates him from his friends and deprives him of status within the society. He is now in the position of re-defining his relationship to the social structure--his high-king, his king, the Church and the people. Actually, Sweeny is more of an outcast in

his mind than in reality, because he is unable to trust any person who might bring him help, or who cares for him. Domhnall, the high-king, seeing Sweeny in a tree after the battle, says "Good in sooth is the man who is there . . . and if he wished for treasures and wealth he would obtain them from us if only he would trust us" (BS 15).[13] Sweeny's exile forces on him a re-assessment of himself. At first he is more sorry for himself than for his sin; what he laments is not so much his separation from God, but his separation from society and the loss of the conventional fruits of power:

> Without a house right full,
> without the converse of generous men,
> without the title of king,
> without drink, without food. (BS 19)

In his feeling of isolation, Sweeny is like the narrator in twentieth-century Ireland, who finds it difficult to trust or understand his uncle's overtures of friendship.

After various adventures, Sweeny arrives at a place called Snamh-dha-En (Swim-Two-Birds), on the banks of the River Shannon. His arrival here seems to mark a spiritual change in him. From now until his death he is a different person, pious, gentle and humble. Even though the precise cause of his change

of heart is uncertain, his lays from this point become more spiritual in nature:

> O Christ, O Christ hear me!
> O Christ, O Christ without sin!
> O Christ, O Christ love me!
> sever me not from thy sweetness! (BS 23)

The curse on Sweeny seems to have purged him of his earlier self-pity. He arrived at Snamh-dha-En on Friday (a fast-day), and saw the women beating flax, and one giving birth: "It is not meet, in sooth, said Suibhne, for the women to violate the Lord's fast-day;"

> O woman, do not bring forth thy son
> on a Friday,
> the day whereon Suibhne Geilt eats not
> out of love for the king of righteousness. (BS 23)

Sweeny has by this stage, moreover, totally accepted responsibility for his own actions:

> I give thanks to the King above
> with whom great harshness is not usual;
> 'tis the extent of my injustice
> that has changed my guise. (BS 27)

God is not to be blamed for his state, and he no longer sees his suffering in terms of the physical pleasures which are denied to him.

O'Brien hardly suggests the importance of the incident at Snamh-dha-En, paraphrasing the six stanzas of the original to a mere eight lines. The name of the place, however, is used in the title of the book: <u>At</u> Snamh-dha-En (Swim-Two-Birds). Just as

Swim-Two-Birds is the place where Sweeny resolves the basic tension between his own state and the surrounding world of reality, so the novel At Swim-Two-Birds is where the narrator himself, identifying with Sweeny, works out his relationship to the world of reality.

In working out their relationships to the rest of the world, Brinsley is to the narrator what Sweeny's brother, Linchehaun, is to Sweeny. Both Brinsley and Linchehaun appear to empathise, and are interesting to talk to, but are in fact living in very different personal worlds. Linchehaun is concerned for his brother's welfare, and so assiduously sets out to capture the mad bird-man. However, when Sweeny sees his brother asleep he says:

> The man by the wall snores,
> slumber like that I dare not;
> for seven years from the Tuesday at Magh Rath
> I have not slept a wink. (BS 27)

Linchehaun cannot enter into Sweeny's experience, no matter how hard he may try, and his repeated attempts to capture and help Sweeny are nothing more than an embarrassment to Sweeny:

> O Loingseachan, thou art irksome,
> I have not leisure to speak with thee . . . (BS 29)

Similarly, Brinsley may be able to talk about

literature with the narrator, but ultimately he too is beyond the pale of understanding. After the narrator has read part of his manuscript to Brinsley, he records: "Looking up in triumph, I found Brinsley standing very straight and staring at the floor . . . 'Gob I see that horse of Peacock's is going today' he said. I folded my manuscript without a word and replaced it in my clothing" (p. 49). Ronan's curse, which stopped Sweeny "from putting his trust or his mad faith in any man" (p. 97), ultimately falls in a figurative sense on the narrator himself; it is the curse of isolation.[14] Brinsley gradually fades into the background of At Swim-Two-Birds; essentially he has little in common with the narrator, just as Linchehaun's experience is far removed from Sweeny's.

No other person can enter into or understand the lonely life of the independent man. Sweeny's wife, Eorann, tells him that she "had liefer bide sinless with thee", but Sweeny replies

> No path for a beloved lady
> is that of Suibhne . . . (BS 32)

Nor can anyone accompany him. At one stage, Sweeny is captured by Linchehaun and put in the care of a hag, who is instructed not to talk to him or let him go. However, Sweeny tricks her into a jumping

competition and so escapes. The hag, symbolically, cannot keep up with him "at her hag's leap behind him", and ultimately drops "on the precipice of Dun Sobhairce till fine-pulp and small-bits were made of her" (p. 114). In the course of his life as a mad bird-man, the only friend that Sweeny ever had was Fer Caille, a madman whom he met in "the land of the Britons". "'Who are you, my man?' said Suibhne. 'I am a madman' said he. 'If you are a madman' said Suibhne, 'come hither so that we may be friends, for I too am a madman'" (BS 46). Sweeny can relate only to Fer Caille, while the narrator's relationship with his closest friend Brinsley is very tenuous. The only people with whom the madman, or (by implication) the artist, can really communicate are those in the same state as himself.

Finn also, in telling his story to Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan, does not communicate with them. In the middle of Finn's narrative, Shanahan interrupts. Sweeny's fine eulogy on the "trees and stags of Erin" reminds Shanahan of what is, to him, the epitome of fine poetry, the work of Jem Casey. The people of modern Ireland, having lost contact with their past, both defend and denigrate what they know

of the past. As Shanahan says, ancient Irish literature is the "stuff that brought scholars to our shore . . . [but] It's a short jump for the man in the street . . ." (pp. 105-106). Sweeny eulogised nature:

> Glen Bolcain my home ever,
> it was my haven,
> many a night have I tried
> a race against the peak. (p. 101)

Casey eulogises the "Pint of Plain":

> When money's tight and is hard to get
> And your horse has also ran,
> When all you have is a heap of debt--
> A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN. (p. 108)[15]

The satiric juxtaposition of the two poems emphasises the extent to which the twentieth-century Irishman has lost the meaning of the poetic tradition which is his heritage; the story of Sweeny is meaningless within Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan's scheme of values. The account of Sweeny leaping through the trees of seventh-century Ireland only serves to remind them of a banal modern parallel--"The Jumping Irishman". Sergeant Craddock, an Anglo-Irish policeman was tricked into a jumping competition at a Gaelic League festival, and in defeating the reigning champion made the Gaelic League look foolish. The epitome of a modern Irish champion is far removed in

heroic stature from his illustrious predecessor, Sweeny.

The section in which Finn recounts the story of Sweeny to Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan contains the greatest juxtaposition of literary styles and ideals in the novel; this section directly precedes and prefigures a major ideological clash between the narrator and his uncle about the narrator's work and moral values. Their argument is the result of the apparently irreconcilable nature of their opposing ideals, but the polarity between them exists only because both narrator and uncle harbour false conceptions about each other. The uncle believes that his nephew does no work, and the narrator believes that his uncle is insensitive, crass and bigoted. By the uncle's scheme of values, the narrator appears to be slothful, but when he passes his examinations, even his uncle cannot argue that the nephew's means of working have not been justified by the end result. The reality underlying appearances is that the narrator is intelligent, even though his intelligence does not manifest itself in prodigious work. He is aware of his uncle's lack of perspicacity, but he cannot intuit that he too may be mistaken about his uncle.

The narrator's attitude toward Michael Byrne,[16] an ersatz polymath who passes judgement on all matters, reveals the same shallowness of perception. Byrne proposes a system which the narrator finds congenial: "We must invert our conceptions of repose and activity" he says. "When a man sleeps, he is steeped and lost in a limp toneless happiness: awake he is restless, tortured by his body and the illusion of existence" (p. 137). The narrator, who spends a substantial part of each day in bed, concurs with this philosophy. Byrne represents an ideal figure to the narrator, who describes him as "painter, poet composer, pianist, master-printer, tactician, an authority on ballistics" (p. 135). By appearing to be a sage, and holding a strange philosophy of sleep, Byrne gives authority to the narrator's own ideas.

It is evident, however, that Byrne's erudition is negligible; it is inconceivable that any genuine expert in all of these subjects could seriously hold Byrne's philosophy of life. Byrne, it appears, is a pretentious sham. When the narrator mentions Trellis, Byrne replies "Did he write a book on Tactics?" (p. 138), and claims to have met him. Byrne's accomplishments are as fortuitous as those of Trellis, who is also a

species of scholar. Trellis regarded "All colours except green . . . as symbols of evil and he confined his reading to books attired in green covers. Although a man of wide learning and culture, this arbitrary rule caused serious chasms in his erudition" (p. 139). Trellis's intellectual reputation is accidental; publishers tend to publish in green covers "works on the subject of Irish history and antiquities", and therefore "it is not surprising that Trellis came to be regarded as an authority thereon" (p. 140). Byrne has pretensions to scholarship, Trellis is a scholar by accident; both appear ridiculous. The narrator, in approving of Byrne while condemning Trellis, himself appears ridiculous and inconsistent.

The bizarre nature of the narrator's values and philosophies is further manifested by the Pooka and the Good Fairy, two characters drawn from Irish myth into the narrator's novel.[17] The Good Fairy comes to inform the Pooka about the forthcoming birth of Orlick Trellis, Sheila Lamont's son by Dermot Trellis. The Good Fairy suggests that the Pooka accompany him to the birth in order to contend for Orlick's soul: "I shall be there" the Good Fairy says, "and shall endeavour to put the child under my benevolent

influence for life. To go there alone, however, without informing you of the happy event, that would be a deplorable breach of etiquette. Let the pair of us go therefore, and let the best man of us win the day" (p. 158). The classic theological dualism of Good and Evil presupposes that one cannot exist without the other, and that they are almost equal as forces; however, the fantasy world which the narrator describes is one in which the forces of Good and Evil are unevenly matched.[18] The Pooka has a powerful physical presence and is undoubtedly male, in contrast with the Good Fairy, who is invisible and of indeterminate sex.[19] In the world which they govern between them, it is the Pooka who exercises power: "He awoke with a frown and made a magic pass in the air with his thumb, thus awakening also the beetles and the maggots and the other evil creeping things that were slumbering throughout the forest under the flat of great stones" (p. 145). The Good Fairy appears ineffectual by comparison. On arrival at the Red Swan Hotel, a game of cards is played, and the Good Fairy loses to the Pooka. The Good Fairy had been lying when he said that he had money, and so when the Pooka demands his winnings the Good Fairy is

forced to surrender his rights to Orlick's soul in order to avoid exposure of the deceit. A less ambivalent Good Fairy would not have cheated, and thus would have retained the right to contest for Orlick's soul. By allowing the Pooka to dominate the Good Fairy, the narrator is demonstrating the power which Evil has over Good.[20]

The description of the journey to Orlick's birth is another example of the capacity of the imagination to create an alternative scheme of things to the world of reality. On their way, the Pooka and the Good Fairy meet Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews (two of Shanahan's cowboy friends), Jem Casey "the poet of the pick", and Sweeny, the madman of seventh-century Ireland. As the group go along, they collect gifts to bring to Orlick's birth: ". . . golden sheaves of ripened barley, firkins of curdy cheese, berries and acorns and crimson yams, melons and marrows and mellowed meat . . ." (p. 196). The preparations for Orlick's arrival in the world of fantasy are contrasted with the preparations which the narrator's uncle is making for a priest who is to return to Ireland from America: "Eighteen loaves. Two pan-loaves (? one pan) . . . Fancy cakes 2d. and 3d. (? 4d.)

. . . Hire of crockery £1. ? Breakages Speak re necessity care . . ." (p. 188). In the narrator's world of reality, the uncle is frugal with his money; in the narrator's fantasy world, he creates an alternative to the limitations which reality imposes.

Since the narrator has allowed Evil to triumph over Good, at least temporarily, the Pooka takes Orlick with him to his hut for six months "sowing in his heart throughout that time the seeds of evil, revolt and non-serviam" (p. 214).[21] While Orlick is being educated in evil by the Pooka, the revolt against Trellis escalates. He is now "almost perpetually in a coma, as a result of the drugs secretly administered by Mr. Shanahan" (pp. 214-215). However, the narrator has not yet succeeded in overcoming the influence of his uncle in the world of reality. Because he is not able to break away from his uncle's control, he plans to overthrow his uncle symbolically through the destruction of Trellis by his characters. In order to do so, the narrator creates another level in the book-within-book structure of his novel.[22] Shanahan and Lamont, discovering that Orlick Trellis has literary talent, "suggest

that he utilise his gift to turn the tables . . . and compose a story on the subject of Trellis, a fitting punishment indeed for the usage he has given others. Smouldering with resentment at the stigma of his own bastardy, the dishonour and death of his mother, and incited by the subversive teachings of the Pooka, he agrees" (p. 236). So, both the narrator and Orlick revenge themselves upon their oppressors by writing them into a novel (just as Joyce revenged himself on Gogarty with eternal effect by writing him into Ulysses).

The author of Trellis's destruction, Orlick, is an image of what the narrator would wish himself to be in dealing with his uncle but, if the narrator is to be completely identified with Orlick, then he would have to be much more malevolent and vicious than evidence of his character would suggest. It seems reasonable, therefore, to see the narrator's symbolic destruction of his uncle as corresponding in motivation to Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan's desire to punish Trellis for exercising too strict a control over them.

Orlick makes three attempts to write a story which will lead to Trellis's destruction. The first

two attempts are abandoned because the group quarrels over the "refinements of physical agony" to which Trellis is to be subjected. Just as Finn had earlier lost touch with his audience in telling the story of Sweeny, so Orlick loses touch with the same audience: ". . . this tack of yours is too high up in the blooming clouds. It's all right for you, you know, but the rest of us will want a ladder" (p. 242). In Orlick's third attempt to write a story, he decides to use the Pooka to punish Trellis. In the fantasy world of Trellis's novel, Evil was to triumph over Good in order to frighten the reader away from sin; his is a radical novel written by a conservative man for conservative ends. However, Trellis's characters see his incarceration of them as evil in itself; their rebellion takes place in Trellis's real world. By writing his novel about Dermot Trellis, Orlick transforms Trellis's real world into a fantasy world. In Trellis's world of reality, Evil has already triumphed over Good--the Pooka has defeated the Good Fairy--and so in the fantasy world the Pooka defeats Dermot Trellis also.

However, before Orlick gets to the climactic point where Trellis is to be annihilated, the events

of the narrator's real life disrupt Orlick's novel.

Having passed his examinations with honours, the narrator returns home to receive a summons from his uncle to appear in the drawing-room. The narrator stays in his room reading for a while; as he says "A delay in my appearance would have the effect of envenoming the character of the interrogation" (p. 302). This is a deliberate insult to his uncle, who wanted to see him immediately; his rebellion in the world of reality is still simplistic and covert, in radical opposition to what he is trying to do to his uncle in the world of his imagination.

On going downstairs, he discovers that his uncle and Mr. Corcoran know that he has passed his examination. They present him with a watch. The narrator returns to his room with a new view of his uncle. "My uncle had evinced unsuspected traits of character and had induced in me an emotion of surprise and contrition . . ." (p. 312). It is not any munificence of the gift which touches the narrator; rather, it is the unexpectedness of his uncle's action which so overwhelms him. In fact, the uncle is basically the same individual, sufficiently mean to buy his nephew a second-hand watch rather than a new one; however,

the narrator allows his whole attitude toward his uncle to change: "Description of my uncle: Simple, well-intentioned; pathetic in humility; responsible member of large commercial concern" (p. 312). This contrasts with his earlier description: "Rat-brained, cunning, concerned-that-he-should-be-well-thought-of. Abounding in pretence, deceit. Holder of Guinness clerkship the third class" (p. 40).

By giving him a watch, the uncle unwittingly destroys the basis of the narrator's novel. Through over-reacting, the narrator now finds it very difficult to sustain his condemnation of his uncle in order to make the uncle's symbolic death as Trellis meaningful and justifiable. The narrator writes into his story that Teresa, Trellis's maid, accidentally burns the pages of Trellis's novel that "sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (p. 313). At the final moment, the narrator is incapable of the supreme rebellion against his uncle.

While the original purpose of the narrator's novel has failed, the remnants of this and of the other novels within it remain, along with the narrator's diary-like record of day-to-day events. In the sense that the novel At Swim-Two-Birds is a composite of

these two types of writing--realistic and fantastic--it is a different book from that which the narrator originally intended, a work of total fiction. As it stands, the narrator's work of fantasy is seen not as an independent novel in its own right, but rather as a book placed within the context of the events which shaped it--the daily activities of the narrator himself. This composite work, At Swim-Two-Birds, is a record of the narrator's development from naivety to a type of maturity; he now sees that there are no simple judgements to be made about people or ideas. The strange philosophy of the final section, "Conclusion of the book, ultimate", shows us the narrator's realisation of this. "Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? . . . Even experts do not agree on these vital points" (p. 314). Or, as the Good Fairy says: "Answers do not matter so much as questions . . . A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question" (p. 291).

CHAPTER II

The narrative structure of The Third Policeman is more conventional than that of At Swim-Two-Birds. Basically the book is divided into two parts. The first is primarily a record of the narrator's life and gives insight into the motivations which decide his actions. As a young man he had become enslaved to the eccentric philosophy of de Selby, he tells us, and now he has devoted his life to the study of this man's work. The hired man who runs the narrator's farm, John Divney, persuades him that they should murder a rich old man, Mathers, so that the narrator can publish his definitive de Selby Index and Divney himself can get married. After the murder, Divney hides Mathers' money-box and refuses to tell the narrator where it is. When finally Divney does allow him to get the box, the narrator is killed by a bomb which Divney has placed inside. The narrator describes his death as ". . . some change . . . indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable" (p. 23).[1] It is not until near the end of the book that the reader realises that the "ineffable" change is the narrator's death, and that the events which take place afterwards

occur, as O'Brien says, in "a sort of hell which he earned for the killing"[2] of Mathers. During the major part of the book, the narrator is unaware that he has passed from life into death, from a finite world of reality to an eternal world of unreality.

The first thing of which he is aware, following the "momentous, ineffable" change is that the money-box has vanished from beneath his hand. Sensing the presence of someone else in the room, he turns to see old Mathers, the man he murdered for the box three years earlier. Terrified, the narrator tries to persuade himself that it might be Mathers' brother, but a voice within him contradicts him; this voice, which is the narrator's soul, he calls Joe.[3] Driven by greed for the box, the narrator overcomes his fear of Mathers and tries to find out, with Joe's help, where the box is. Mathers eventually suggests that the narrator enquire at the local police-station about it.

Reaching the police-station, the narrator is disturbed by its appearance; it seems to him to be without dimensions. The policemen he meets inside are no less strange; Sergeant Pluck is obsessed with the idea that most human problems are related to

bicycles, holding that the riding of a bicycle causes the personalities of rider and bicycle to intermingle. Policeman MacCruiskeen is perhaps even more puzzling than Pluck: he shows the narrator some strange devices he has made which do not seem to obey any natural laws.

The Inspector arrives and informs the Sergeant that an old man, Mathers, has been murdered. The narrator is arrested for the crime and sentenced to death by hanging. Because the narrator is going to be hanged anyway, the Sergeant agrees to show him where Eternity is and to explain the workings of this strange world. The narrator is brought to an underground place, built like a labyrinth with many passages crossing each other, where a control room contains various gauges and levels which the policemen read and manipulate in order to keep the mechanics of the world running smoothly. All matter, it has been explained to the narrator, is made of omnium, a substance common to everything and contained in greater or lesser quantities in each thing. In this powerhouse it is possible to manipulate omnium and create any desired object.

The following morning, the narrator awakens to

hear the scaffold being built. On his way to the police-station, he had met a bandit named Martin Finnucane, the captain of all the one-legged men. On learning that the narrator himself had only one leg, Finnucane promised to come to his aid with an army, if the narrator should ever need such help. The carpenter building the scaffold is a one-legged man also, and the narrator sends him off to Finnucane with a plea for help. However, the mysterious "third policeman", Fox, whom nobody ever sees, sends a message to Pluck warning him about the coming of the one-legged men. Later, just when the narrator is about to be hanged, MacCruiskeen arrives with news for the Sergeant that the readings on the guages in Eternity are at a dangerous level. While the narrator recovers from the shock of his near-death experience, MacCruiskeen paints his bicycle a colour so unlike any other that it drives men mad and, by riding the bicycle into the ranks of the one-legged men, utterly routs them. The narrator escapes on the Sergeant's bicycle, and makes his way home. On the way he stops at Mathers' house and meets Policeman Fox. Fox shows the narrator his private police-station inside the walls of the house, where he has been using the

contents of the box which the narrator has been seeking. The box, however, does not contain money but omnium; with this Fox has been creating havoc in Eternity.

When the narrator leaves Fox, he goes on the bicycle to his home, where he finds John Divney. Although the narrator has been away only three days, so far as he knows, Divney is twenty years older; on seeing the narrator, Divney collapses from shock and dies. The narrator leaves the house and retraces his steps toward the police-station. Soon he hears steps behind him; it is Divney. The two of them go along in silence until they reach the police-station. There the whole cycle begins again, as if for the first time.

The record of the narrator's life is quite short, but it is of considerable importance for the following reasons. Firstly, O'Brien wants to establish that "hell goes round and round";[4] therefore it is necessary to show that the narrator's life comes to an end, while his eternity never does. Secondly, one of the ideas which he later develops is that the hell in which the narrator finds himself is a punishment for the evils of his life;[5] it is necessary to show

what kind of person the narrator was while alive in order to make his punishment justifiable. Thirdly, O'Brien wants also to show that the laws governing the hell of the narrator are directly related to the laws of de Selby's philosophy, to which the narrator had devoted his life.

In contrast with the narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds, who imposed an imaginative structure on his experience, the critic-narrator of The Third Policeman works primarily within the creative philosophy of de Selby and therefore finds neither an individual identity nor a scheme of values: he has derived all he knows of the world and of himself from de Selby. As a result, he is unable to deal with either the practical problems which he faces in life, or the more bewildering problems which confront him in the "eternity" ruled by the policemen. The initial level of experience, the narrator's real life in the so-called "real" world, serves as a frame of reference to which all his later experiences can be related; whatever it is that makes him act as he does in life is the cause of his actions in the world beyond death.

In the first novel, there was a development in the narrator's personality from innocence toward

maturity, but in the second novel there is no development in terms of the narrator's personality, only the unfolding of a terrible cycle.[6]

* * * * *

The preface to The Third Policeman introduces a major principle of the philosophy of de Selby. "Human existence" he tells us, "being an hallucination . . . it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death." The lack of importance which de Selby appears to attach to life would suggest that if life is unreal or meaningless, then moral values are just as meaningless; the narrator of The Third Policeman uses this implication as a rationale for his dubious activities. As a young man, he stole a rare copy of de Selby's book Golden Hours. This theft was justified because it was carried out in the name of de Selby: ". . . it was for de Selby I committed my first serious sin. It was for him I committed my greatest sin" (p. 9). De Selby functions for the narrator as a kind of God figure, in whose name any action is justifiable.

On the other hand, in the case of the murder of

Mathers, the narrator claims that "Divney . . . was personally responsible for the whole idea in the first place . . . He was the one who gave the orders on the occasion and also the explanations when they were called for" (p. 7). Divney, like the narrator, is pursuing his own ends in the murder of Mathers; there is little moral distinction between their motives--one needs the money to publish his book, while the other needs the money to get married. Divney professes no system of morality, but he is little different from the narrator, who does profess a philosophy. The motives of each man are selfish and, whether it is de Selby or Divney whom the narrator holds responsible, he is nevertheless unwilling to accept any moral blame himself. Since for O'Brien the degree to which an individual accepts moral responsibility is a major determinant of character, the narrator therefore fails to establish an independent identity for himself in his real life. His experiences in eternity only reinforce this essential lack of a real identity.[7]

When the narrator lifts up the black box and dies, his whole world of perception changes and he becomes aware of things which until now he has never known to exist. For the follower of de Selby there is

no death, only "a supreme hallucination". This hallucination is, in de Selby's terms, the last of a chain of illusions which constitutes life. It is also the first experience of the next world for the narrator, and therefore it is a transition between the two modes of existence usually called life and death. It is a watershed experience, having its cause in one type of experience, and its effect in another.

The narrator's death is merely a change in his nature, with concomitant confusion until after the adjustment has been made: "That I did not die of fright was due, I think, to . . . the fact that my senses were already disarranged and able to interpret to me only gradually what they had perceived . . ." (p. 23). His transmutation makes him aware of the whole new kind of reality which characterises eternity. On turning around, he sees the dead man, Mathers, sitting in the room. Looking at Mathers' eyes, he says that they " . . . disturbed me agonisingly, and gave rise in my mind to interminable speculations as to the colour and quality of the real eye and as to whether, indeed, it was real at all or merely the dummy with its pinhole on the same plane as the first

one so that the real eye, possibly behind thousands of these absurd disguises, gazed out through a barrel of serried peep-holes" (pp. 24-25). For de Selby and his followers, all questions, simple and complex, become imponderable when placed in a philosophical context. What disturbs the narrator is the idea that what is real either exists behind so many layers that it is impossible to reach, or does not have an independent existence at all.[8] One of the conclusions reached in <u>At Swim-Two-Birds</u> was that appearance and reality are not the same things, that the narrator comes to realise that his assumptions were based on appearances and hence false. This conclusion of the narrator in the first novel is one of the earliest realisations of the narrator of the second novel; Mathers as he appears may not be the same as the real Mathers, inside the skin.

The general question which occurs to the narrator about the "real" individual being somewhere below the surface enables him to recognise a dimension of his own nature which was previously unknown to him, his soul:

> In my distress I thought to myself that perhaps it was his [Mathers'] twin brother but at once I heard someone say: <u>Scarcely</u>. <u>If you look carefully at the</u>

> left-hand side of his neck you will notice that there is sticking-plaster or a bandage there. His throat and chin are also bandaged.
> Forlornly, I looked and saw that this was true . . . But who had uttered these words? . . . For convenience I called him Joe. (p. 25)

Joe fulfils a complex function in the novel; he is the narrator's alter ego, a voice of conscience who is a moral arbiter and guide. In the world of reality, with its safe laws and predictable circumstances, the narrator could rely entirely upon de Selby. In the world of eternity, de Selby and his philosophy are of little help, since there is no easily understood logic behind its laws. In this environment, Joe guides the narrator, prompting him to say and do the right things, since he is an acute observer of phenomena which the narrator himself fails to notice.

Joe's initial usefulness to the narrator is in making him aware of certain peculiarities about Mathers. The narrator tries to question Mathers about the money-box, but he can get no satisfactory response from the old man until Joe points out that Mathers answers 'No' to every question. Recognising this, the narrator then adapts his questions in order to obtain some sort of response. The ensuing conversation with Mathers forces the narrator to deal at first hand

with a bizarre system of logic. Mathers believes that more evil ideas than good occur to an individual and hence the only simple way to be sure of doing good is "to say No henceforth to every suggestion request or inquiry whether inward or outward" (p. 30). By adapting his presupposed system of logic to enable him to function in this world, the narrator makes a compromise which reconciles him to his experience. Learning how to ask questions which require a negative answer from Mathers, he says, "meant that my mind had got to grips with his, that I was now almost arguing with him and that we were behaving like two ordinary human beings" (p. 28). The irony is double-edged: the narrator knows that the situation is ridiculous, but he does achieve the effect of making Mathers talk. Furthermore, neither Mathers nor the narrator are "human beings", since both are dead and presumably no longer human. What is normal and what is real can only be determined with relation to the world in which the narrator finds himself, not with relation to the laws governing his previous mode of existence.

The real Mathers, and the real narrator, are not easily apprehended, and the narrator faces the question of his own identity for the first time in his

conversation with Mathers. When Mathers asks him his name, the narrator tells us "I did not know my name, did not remember who I was . . . I found I was sure of nothing save my search for the black box" (p. 31). However, Mathers does not know the whereabouts of the box, and points out that if the narrator has no name "Then how could I tell you where the box was if you could not sign a receipt?" (p. 31). Mathers suggests that the narrator enquire at the local police-station about the box, and so the narrator pursues his search there.

On the way to the police-station, the narrator reflects on the question of a name. As far as he is concerned, a name merely confers legal rights but has no connection with the nature or personality of the individual himself. He is not aware that the lack of a name in this world equals a lack of identity, and that a lack of identity is the same as non-existence. As far as he is concerned, most names "afford some clue as to the parents of the person named and confer a certain advantage in the execution of legal documents" (p. 40). He notes, however, that for de Selby a name is a defining label: one's name is what one is. The narrator tells us that de Selby pursued this

idea ". . . to rather fanciful lengths, drawing up elaborate paradigms of vowels and consonants purporting to correspond to certain indices of human race, colour and temperament and claiming ultimately to be in a position to state the physiological 'group' of any person merely from a brief study of the letters of his name . . ." (p. 40). De Selby's theory may be absurd in terms of the real world, but it has more than a modicum of truth about it in the context of the world of eternity. However, the narrator chooses to mock the idea of the importance of a name by inventing a whole series of possible names and identities for himself in collaboration with Joe.

The narrator's meeting with Martin Finnucane on the road to the police-station does provide him with a certain sense of identity. Finnucane is a bandit who believes that life is a commodity of fixed amount, each live person possessing a portion. He kills all the people he robs so that "there will be more life to go around" and he himself will therefore live longer. He is about to kill the narrator when it is discovered that each has a wooden leg. Finnucane, who is "the captain of all the one-legged men in the country" (p. 47), promises to come to the narrator's

aid whenever necessary. It is this promise that is the narrator's only cause for hope when, later, he is about to be hanged for the murder of Mathers. This bond, which links the narrator with the band of one-legged men is the only identity which he achieves in eternity.

The narrator does not raise any doubts about the bizarre theories which he has learned in eternity, but he is consistently sceptical about de Selby's theories on the same subjects. On his way to the police-station, he muses on de Selby's theory of life and time. De Selby defined human existence as "a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief" (p. 50). For him, motion is an illusion, since any motion may be divided into an infinite number of static moments, separated from each other by an infinitely short period of time. Hence, progression is an illusion. The narrator's comment is "It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated . . ." (p. 52). He has only measured scorn for de Selby's theory (which is a re-working of Zeno's Third Paradox of Motion), and for de Selby's claim that he was able to travel,

according to the principles of his theory, from Bath to Folkestone and back while remaining in his room for the whole journey. The narrator's personal comment on de Selby's theory that progression is an illusion is brief: "Of my own journey to the police-barracks I need only say that it was no hallucination" (p. 52). However, when he discovers the barracks to be without recognisable dimensions, he is frightened. He describes it as being ". . . momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it" (p. 53). In the world of the policemen, laws of dimension have little significance; in de Selby's world, laws of distance and progression are meaningless. Within the terms of de Selby's philosophy, the bizarre police-station would seem quite acceptable: de Selby, or a good disciple of de Selby, would not have been surprised by it. The narrator, it seems, uses de Selby's philosophy only when it suits him, to justify his own actions. Every person whom the narrator has met so far in eternity has revealed a little more to him about the laws of this world, which are in general accord

with de Selbian principles, but each revelation is a total surprise to him because he does not apply what he knows of de Selby's philosophy to his new experiences.

On entering the police-station, the narrator meets Sergeant Pluck, the man who teaches him most about the forces which govern this absurd world. The narrator's sole aim and motivation is to recover the black box, and he is determined that Pluck should learn nothing about him; "but it was even better if he knew several things which were quite wrong. It would help me in using him for my own purposes . . ." (p. 57). In order to cloak the purpose of his visit, the narrator claims to have lost a watch. Sergeant Pluck's response is "Why should anybody steal a watch when they can steal a bicycle?" (p. 61). Responses which appear illogical, such as this, are what the narrator has come to expect in this world, but his attempt to be devious has only enmeshed him in more complex problems. For the narrator to claim to have lost a watch (which he has not lost), in a world where people apparently only lose bicycles, involves him in a situation the reverse of that which he had planned; his stratagem, instead of making him appear

innocuous, makes him appear strange and peculiar, an oddity in eternity.[9]

This unwanted prominence of the narrator is complicated rather than simplified by his further claim that he has no name. To have no name, in this world, is to have no identity, as he has already learned from Mathers. That the narrator has no name, and is thus literally nobody, is a great curiosity to the Sergeant. "I was once acquainted with a tall man" he says to the narrator, "that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his nullity and all his nothings" (pp. 56-57). The false information which the narrator gives to Pluck about his father and brothers being in America only involves him in useless complexities and leads to a situation in which he knows nothing about Pluck, while Pluck now knows a great deal about the character of the narrator. Once again, the reason for this is the narrator's inability to understand the world with which he is dealing.

Both the Sergeant and Mathers belong to the same world, and have a similar system of logic. Having already met Mathers, the narrator should not be so surprised by the Sergeant. Mathers' dictum was that

"No is a better word than Yes" (p. 28); the Sergeant says that "The first beginning of wisdom is to ask questions but never to answer any. You get wisdom from asking, and I from not answering" (p. 59). In effect, this means that it does not matter what the questions or answers may be: the narrator will always learn something by asking a question, but what he learns will not necessarily be the answer to his question.

When the Sergeant does answer a question, by enumerating the laws of wisdom, the narrator's confusion is compounded. The five rules of wisdom are: "Always ask any questions that are to be asked and never answer any. Turn everything you hear to your own advantage. Always carry a repair outfit. Take left turns as much as possible. Never apply your front brake first" (p. 60). Naturally the narrator does not see the connection between bicycles and rules of wisdom, but the result of his initial conversation with Pluck is completely in accordance with the Sergeant's first rule of wisdom. Contrary to what the narrator had hoped, the stratagem of reporting the loss of a watch, instead of the money-box, has made him appear ridiculous. He says of the Sergeant "It

was quite clear that he did not believe any part of my story, and that he thought I was in delicate mental health" (p. 61). Further, as the Sergeant tells him, the narrator's lack of a name and identity makes it impossible for him to claim anything as his own, whether it be a gold watch or a money-box: "If you have no name you cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not exist . . . you possess nothing and you do not exist . . . On the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you" (p. 62). The narrator is puzzled by the laws which govern eternity, just as Mathers and Pluck are puzzled by him. Pluck's associate, Policeman MacCruiskeen, is equally mystified. On learning that the narrator did not arrive on any sort of bicycle at the police-station, MacCruiskeen says "In my natural puff . . . I have never encountered a more fantastic epilogue or a queerer story. Surely you are a queer far-fetched man. To my dying night I will not forget this today morning" (pp. 66-67). The same could be said for the narrator's feelings: those in the world of eternity are puzzled by the narrator; for the world of reality the reverse is also true.

The narrator's bewilderment is exacerbated by

the devices which MacCruiskeen has made. MacCruiskeen shows him a spear, the point of which is infinitely thin and some distance beyond the visible point. He has also carved a series of boxes within boxes, the smallest one visible being "nearly half a size smaller than ordinary invisibility" (p. 74). The third thing which MacCruiskeen has made is his piano, which plays notes "so high in their fine frequencies that they cannot be appreciated by the human earcup" (p. 75). De Selby had proposed that, life being an hallucination, all motion and distance are also illusory; in so doing, he challenged the normal, empirically verifiable laws of nature. MacCruiskeen's inventions verify de Selby's theory in another world of reality. The spear, the boxes and the piano challenge the normal laws of finiteness, just as the police-station challenged the laws of perspective.

The laws which govern eternity, strange as they are in themselves, gradually fall into place for the narrator as part of a logical system. The narrator goes out with Sergeant Pluck and a man named Gilhaney to search for the latter's lost bicycle. The Sergeant finds it without hesitation and, after Gilhaney rides away, reveals that he had stolen it himself. The

ensuing conversation between the Sergeant and the narrator explains the Sergeant's obsession with bicycles. Like de Selby's Theory of Motion, Pluck's Atomic Theory is not far removed from actual scientific fact. When a bar is struck with a hammer, he explains, some of the "atoms" are interchanged between the objects; from this, Pluck concludes that "people who spend most of their lives riding iron bicycles . . . get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of the bicycles as a result . . ." (p. 85). Therefore the Sergeant spends a great deal of his time stealing bicycles in order to prevent people from becoming part-bicycle in personality.

The bicycle/man in The Third Policeman is a precursor of Beckett's obsession with the same concept and, although Beckett's work is more directly related to Cartesian philosophy, the connection with Descartes is implicit in O'Brien's novel. The Cartesian man, as Hugh Kenner points out in his book on Beckett, is a centaur: "a man riding a bicycle, mens sana in corpore disposito".[10] Many of Beckett's characters own or use bicycles. In Molloy, both Molloy himself and Moran, who is trying to find him, use bicycles, but neither of them can manipulate the

bicycle properly. Molloy drapes himself over his bicycle and walks, using the bicycle as a support; Moran can only ride on the carrier, propelled by his son. When Molloy loses his bicycle, and Moran's son goes off with his, both Molloy and Moran suffer extreme hardship. The bicycle is a model of the body, and the bicycle/man relationship is representative of the tension between a continuously thinking mind and a gradually dissipating body. Mind and body become more and more remote from each other until finally the body can no longer support the mind.

In the eternity of The Third Policeman, the bicycle/man relationship represents that of an individual to some other identity not his own. Sergeant Pluck makes the point that bicycles are not, of themselves, intrinsically bad, but that the combination of man and bicycle is particularly dangerous. He tells the narrator that "The behaviour of a bicycle that has a high content of humanity . . . is very cunning and entirely remarkable" (pp. 88-89), and proceeds to give a number of examples. The first story concerns Gilhaney, who stole a school-mistress's bicycle and left his own for her. The immorality of this action was compounded by the fact that the woman took

Gilhaney's bicycle and rode it herself. Because Gilhaney's personality was diffused between the man and the bicycle, there was doubt as to which contained more of him, and thus doubt as to who or what was guilty of immorality. Similarly, Pluck's great-grandfather rode a horse, which was eventually shot for molesting young girls. However, as the Sergeant points out, "if you ask me it was my great-grandfather they shot and it is the horse that is buried up in Cloncoombe Churchyard" (p. 91). Later, MacCruiskeen tells the narrator about a man named MacDadd who killed another man. Both MacDadd and his bicycle had to be arrested for the murder, and the Sergeant found the bicycle guilty and had it hanged because it contained the greater part of MacDadd. In this world of eternity, then, there can be no certainty as to where moral responsibility or guilt lies.

The confusion of identity between man and bicycle is a model of the relationship between the narrator himself and de Selby. The identification of MacDadd with his bicycle is similar to the identification of the narrator with de Selby. As we have seen, the narrator claims that his relationship with de Selby exonerates him from accepting moral

responsibility for his own actions. It is difficult to distinguish how much of the narrator's character is derived from de Selby, and how much of what we know of de Selby is a projection of the narrator himself. As David Powell says, "The narrator's beloved philosopher is a reflection of his own self".[11]

The narrator's inherent lack of identity (which becomes an actual lack of identity in eternity) is later exploited by him in his attempt to escape being hanged by the Sergeant for the murder of the Mathers whom he met in eternity. Pluck claims that the narrator is the murderer; in response to the narrator's demand for an explanation, Pluck says ". . . to turn everything to your own advantage is one of the regulations of true wisdom . . . It is the following of this rule on my part that makes you a murderer this today evening" (p. 98). The narrator replies that because he has no name, and because his personality is "invisible to the law" (p. 100), he cannot be hanged for the crime.[12] The Sergeant concurs: "Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true . . . For that reason alone . . . we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all . . ." (p. 102). The narrator's

stratagem of revealing nothing about himself to Sergeant Pluck has backfired on him completely. Having no existence, he is therefore not guilty of any crimes, and also guilty of all crimes. In his real life, the narrator was guilty of the murder of Mathers; the subsequent murder of Mathers in eternity (presumably by Finnucane, since the body was found with its belly slit open), places the narrator in the strange position of being both guilty and not guilty of the crime.

The shock of being arrested for this murder sets the narrator thinking of "the numerous consolations which philosophy and religion can offer in adversity . . . Not unnaturally my thoughts were never very far from de Selby" (p. 92). He tells the story of a man who, having come under de Selby's influence, changes from being relatively happy and innocent to being suicidal because de Selby presents him with "fifty imponderable propositions each of which raised difficulties which spanned many eternities"; subsequently the man became a criminal. The narrator's comment is "So much for the savant as a dispenser of advice" (p. 93). However, the narrator fails to see that his own condition is similar to that of this other disciple of de Selby: both have been corrupted by his

philosophy.

Throughout the novel, the narrator's exposition of de Selby's philosophy mirrors the condition of the narrator himself. In the opening chapters of the novel, the record of de Selby's theories is straightforward, and not confused by references to the differing views and opinions of the critics. Likewise, there is clarity in the record of the narrator's life. As the narrator gradually realises the extent to which he is helpless in eternity, his commentary about de Selby becomes more strained; the critics ravage de Selby and each other, and finally the whole edifice of de Selby criticism collapses in disarray.

The narrator's life is completely shattered by the sentence of death; in view of the fact that he is soon to be executed, he pursuades Sergeant Pluck to let him visit the eternity of the policemen. The country which the narrator perceives on his way there is beautiful, but mechanistic. "The world" he says, "rang in my ear like a great workshop. Sublime feats of mechanics and chemistry were evident on every side. The earth was agog with invisible industry" (p. 125). The metaphor is more true than he knows. In the underground eternity, he discovers, are all the

controls necessary for manipulating life in the world outside. Here the policemen read gauges and manipulate levers in order to control omnium, the force behind the workings of the external universe. "Omnium is the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and it is always the same" (p. 110). The controller of pure omnium is thus the master of all things in eternity. On the other hand, in the narrator's world of reality, it is money which is the source of all power: Mathers' money can change his life, if only he can publish his initial work on de Selby.

The structure of the underground eternity is similar to the structure of the outside world--the narrator's eternity. Both are controlled by the policemen, so completely that the narrator is absolutely powerless. In the underground eternity, the Sergeant informs the narrator that any route which he may take in the labyrinth of passages will take him back to his starting-point. In the outside world, the narrator is also eternally destined to return to the barracks where he first met Sergeant Pluck. As the narrator goes from reality to one eternity, and then to another, time slows down. In the world

of reality, twenty years pass while the narrator's adventures in eternity take only three days; in the policemen's eternity, time stops--MacCruiskeen's beard does not grow and the narrator's cigarette does not burn down. It is clear that the peculiarities of the policemen's world are magnified in their eternity.

After he returns from the underground eternity, the narrator's situation as a pawn in the hands of the policemen reaches its climax. On waking up the following morning, he hears the sound of the scaffold being built, but rather than take any constructive action, he wanders into a lengthy discussion of de Selby's experiments with water, using footnotes to elaborate on the varying points of view of the critics.[13] The narrator fails to deal with his immediate experience himself, and uses de Selby--as always--as an escape from critically assessing his experience and determining a character for himself which will allow him to deal constructively with this experience. When the narrator does do something constructive, it is in response to Joe's prompting.

Joe points out that the builder of the scaffold is a one-legged man; the narrator then sends a call for help by the carpenter to Finnucane. Before

Finnucane can arrive, the Sergeant leads the narrator out onto the scaffold; while waiting to be hanged, he meditates on what life after death--eternity--will be for him. His reflection, that he might be "an influence that prevails in water . . ." or belong to "a lonely shore or be the agony of the sea when it bursts upon it in despair" (pp. 159-160), is similar to Joe's belief that he himself might become "part of the world", or part of "the inside meaning of it" (p. 162). It is ironic that both should be oblivious to the fact that they are already in eternity.

The narrator's contemplation of death is interrupted by the arrival of MacCruiskeen; Pluck and MacCruiskeen hurry off to eternity, while the narrator recovers from his near-death experience and plans to escape on Sergeant Pluck's bicycle. In considering such an escape, the narrator has finally come to recognise the laws and conventions of eternity, which he had earlier treated with scepticism. The bicycle is a hybrid, a dangerous Cartesian man which threatens the mechanical structure of the social order, and is the only device by which the narrator can overcome the policemen's power and break out of this eternity. Man and machine need each other: "Both of us were

afraid of the same Sergeant . . . both knew that the hope of each lay in the other, that we would not succeed unless we went together . . ." (p. 171). It is only by rejecting his previous beliefs and coming to terms with the laws governing his present situation that the narrator can overcome the forces which are greater than he.

The narrator's rejection of pre-supposed systems of logic is well represented by his final reference to de Selby, in which he describes how the battle of print between de Selby's commentators becomes a real battle. Incensed by Du Garbandier's savage attack on de Selby, Hatchjaw goes to Germany to find the critic in the belief that "Du Garbandier" was a pseudonym for another critic, Kraus. Bassett, on the other hand, believes that "Kraus" is a pseudonym for Du Garbandier. Hatchjaw is arrested in Germany for impersonating himself, a ruse probably engineered by Kraus/Du Garbandier. Le Clerque, for his part, claims that Hatchjaw has been impersonating himself for many years. This footnote shows the futility of the critics' attempts to come to grips with de Selby's philosophy; their scholarly wrangling becomes a series of <u>ad hominem</u> arguments, and de Selby is forgotten in the

process. The absurdity of de Selby's critics fighting a ridiculous battle contrasts with the narrator's sensible rejection of such a critical approach when his life is in danger.

Having decided to trust his intuition, the narrator leaves the police-station with the bicycle, mounts it and turns right. One of Sergeant Pluck's rules of wisdom was to "Take left turns as much as possible" (p. 60) for, as he says later, "we are only at the beginning of our knowledge of the right" (p. 153). But, as the narrator says, "It was to the left that the Sergeant had gone with MacCruiskeen, to that quarter the next world lay and it was leftwards that all my troubles were" (p. 173). By turning right, the narrator breaks the "rule of the road" of eternity, for once taking events into his own hands in order to escape from this frightening world.

However, his turn to the right leads him to an encounter equally frightening for, (still searching for the black box), he stops at Mathers' house. There he meets the elusive third policeman, Fox.[14] Fox has a private barracks within the walls of the house, dimensionless like the first. Policeman Fox has had Mathers' money-box for some time; however, he tells

the narrator that it contains omnium, not money. With this powerful substance he has been playing tricks with the workings of Pluck and MacCruiskeen's underground eternity. The most terrifying thing about Fox is that he has Mathers' face; the narrator's turn to the right has simply brought him further into the horrifying world from which he was trying to escape. Even the black box is no nearer recovery, for Fox has sent it on to the narrator's house. Hoping to find it there, the narrator leaves Mathers/Fox and cycles home, where he finds Divney, twenty years older, living in the house with a wife and a child. Divney dies of a heart attack on seeing him, although the narrator is invisible to the rest of the family. Together with Divney, the narrator traces his steps along the road to the barracks, which is described in the same words he had originally used. He has no memory of his experiences, and the novel ends as the whole cycle of evehts begins again.

In hell, events return to the place of their beginning, eternally repeating themselves; the first person encountered by the narrator in eternity is Mathers, and the last person he sees is Fox/Mathers. The man whom he murdered is paradoxically also the

man who manipulates power in eternity, the mysterious third policeman who gives the book its title. The narrator began life in eternity looking for a box of money, the source of power in real life; he completes the cycle looking for a box of omnium, the source of power in eternity. On a fragment of paper O'Brien wrote:

> Joe had been explaining things in the meantime. He said it was again the beginning of the unfinished, the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered. Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable.[15]

It is because of the destructive influence of de Selby that the narrator finds himself in this position. The philosopher has given the narrator, the critic, a system which cannot be readily understook and by which it is impossible to live. The narrator, who surrendered his chances of an individual identity and murdered for the sake of de Selby, achieves nothing in his real life; and although in his life after death he is gradually forced to abandon a system of pre-determined philosophy, he is eternally doomed to repeat the struggle without ever managing to establish an identity for himself.[16]

F O O T N O T E S

BACKGROUND TO THE TWO NOVELS

[1] BLATHER-I:1 (August 1934), pp. 9-10.

[2] ibid., p. 10.

[3] ibid., p. 10.

[4] "Flann O'Brien," a programme in a television series called Anthology broadcast by Radio-Telefis Eireann, 5 November 1970.

[5] Letter from Flann O'Brien to A. M. Heath & Co., 31 January 1938; Southern Illinois University File No. 243. In subsequent footnotes, references to Southern Illinois University will be designated "SIU".

[6] Quoted by A. M. Heath & Co. in their letter to O'Brien, 22 September 1938; SIU File No. 91.

[7] Letter from O'Brien to A. M. Heath & Co., 3 October 1938; SIU File No. 269.

[8] Letter from O'Brien to Ethel Mannin, 14 July 1939; SIU File No. 133.

Footnotes to "Background" contd.

[9] Frank Swinnerton, "Right Proportions," The Observer, 19 March 1939.

[10] Letter from O'Brien to Ethel Mannin, 14 July 1939; SIU File No. 133.

[11] Philip Toynbee, "A Comic Heir of James Joyce," The Observer, 24 July 1960.

[12] Letter from O'Brien to the "AE" Memorial Committee, 18 January 1940; SIU File No. 272.

[13] Letter from O'Brien to William Saroyan, 14 February 1940; SIU File No. 187.

[14] Letter from William Saroyan to O'Brien, 9 June 1940; SIU File No. 187.

[15] Letter from Longmans to A. M. Heath & Co., 11 March 1940; SIU File No. 91.

[16] Letter from O'Brien to Hilton Edwards, 20 June 1942; SIU File No. 256.

Footnotes to CHAPTER I

[1] Bernard Benstock notes that At Swim-Two-Birds "examines the Irish landscape of both the past and the present, and in particular the use of the Celtic past, concentrating on the concern of the Irish writer with making literature out of a fusion of life and myth".

Bernard Benstock, "The Three Faces of Brian Nolan," Eire-Ireland, III:3 (Autumn 1968), 51-65.

[2] "In that he seems to be alive at the end, [Finn] is the novel's one great exemplar of its much-discussed 'aestho-autogamy', holding together the real and the fantastic, cementing different levels of its structure."

Timothy Hilton, "Ireland's Great Cyclist," New Statesman, 8 December 1967, 815-816.

[3] This part of the novel was heavily cut by O'Brien's close friend, Niall Sheridan, when O'Brien asked him to edit the novel in 1938:

> I must have taken out nearly twenty-five per cent of the original version, mainly elaboration of the Fenian mythological themes. He enjoyed writing this stuff very much and over-indulged himself to such an extent as to unbalance the book. Curiously Joyce (to whom I brought the

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

book in Paris) greatly enjoyed this aspect--
but then, of course, he also had a thing
about the Fenian Cycle."

From a letter from Niall Sheridan to me,
8 October 1970.

[4] Geoffrey Keating, History of Ireland II, ed. P. S. Dineen (London: Irish Texts Society, 1908), p. 331.

[5] ibid., pp. 333-335.

[6] David Powell notes that "the respectable uncle on the biographical level is reflected in the respectably Trellis on the fictional level".

David Powell, "The English Writings of Flann O'Brien," Diss. Southern Illinois University 1970, p. 106.

[7] Benstock remarks that "Vomit is as close to reality as he allows for his fiction, the comic aspect remaining predominant. This is not only the condition that the author places upon his material, but it is also his strongest assets [sic] as a writer, his ability to create a perfect, ludicrous vignette which

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

capsulises the events of the narrative".

Benstock, "Three Faces", pp. 56-57.

8 "Their conversation reflects the values and the speech of the uncle and his friends: conventional morality, drab tastes, and incomplete or distorted knowledge."

Powell, p. 121.

9 What we know of the story of Sweeny comes from three manuscripts, two written in the seventeenth century, and one in the eighteenth century. All three agree substantially, but are independent versions derived from a single source which was written much earlier but which had been lost by the seventeenth century. O'Keefe, in the Irish Texts Society's dual-language edition of Buile Suibhne, The Frenzy of Sweeny (1913), has edited these three according to what appear to be the best texts of each.

10 O'Brien wrote to Longmans, his publishers, on 21 January, 1939: "I have compared my own version with this translation and find that occasional phrases here and there and odd lines in the poetry agree identically.

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

This is due to the extreme terseness of the original. I worked from a text published here without a translation."

SIU File No. 304.

[11] All my factual information is derived from O'Keefe's Introduction to Buile Suibhne.

[12] John Jordan has written: ". . . in Mr. O'Nolan's use of the story of Mad Sweeny, we might see a parable of the relationship in Ireland between the writer and the Church".

John Jordan, "The Saddest Book ever to come out of Ireland," Hibernia, 5 August 1960, p. 5.

[13] "BS" is used to refer to section references from Buile Suibhne.

[14] "No man, said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself."

James Joyce, "The Day of the Rabblement", cited by Benstock, p. 51.

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

[15] "A pint of plain is your only man" is Dublin parlance which means "a pint of porter is the only friend you'll ever have".

[16] The narrator describes the act of going to see Michael Byrne as "the chiefest wisdom" (p. 135). He then quotes a two-page passage from the Biblical book of Ecclesiasticus, the source of the phrase "the chiefest wisdom". The value of the exhortations of the son of Sirach is completely overlooked by the narrator just as he overlooks the value of all conservative thought. "The fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom" is the experience of Sweeny, and "Praise not a man for his beauty, neither despise a man for his look" contains a moral to which the narrator is blind. These "wise sayings of the son of Sirach" precede the "wise sayings" of Michael Byrne, an irony of which the narrator is unaware.

[17] In a television programme devoted to Flann O'Brien, Niall Sheridan, the original editor of At Swim-Two-Birds, said that O'Brien invented the Pooka and the Good Fairy "representing the principles

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

of Good and Evil".

"Flann O'Brien", Anthology, Radio-Telefis Eireann, 5 November 1970.

[18] In a book review written in 1960 of The Middle Kingdom by D. A. MacManus, O'Brien elucidated some of his beliefs about the supernatural. The author of the book, he said "believes that fairies exist (as I do) and is content to record indisputable evidence of their manifestation. . . . fairies in general are friendly and harmless, provided their 'rights' . . . are observed". On the other hand "there is a uniformly malignant section, the main representative of which is the puca or pooka".

Brian Nolan, "Small Men and Black Dogs," The Guardian (Manchester), 14 October 1960.

[19] "'Good Spirit' (which was originally 'Angel') has been changed to 'Good Fairy'. I think this change is desirable because 'Fairy' corresponds more closely to 'Pooka', removes any suggestion of the mock-religious and establishes the thing on a mythological plane."

Letter from O'Brien to A. M. Heath & Co.,

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

3 October 1938; SIU File No. 269.

[20] Trellis, it should be remembered, has based his moralistic novel on the premise that Good invariably triumphs over Evil. The clarity with which it is made evident to us that the world is governed by Evil (in the exchanges between the Pooka and the Good Fairy) prepares us for the final total destruction of Trellis's novel.

[21] Del Ivan Janik has established some connection between O'Brien's narrator and Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The principle of "non-serviam" is also enunciated by Stephen: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can . . ." James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 247.

Del Ivan Janik, "Flann O'Brien: the Novelist as Critic," Eire-Ireland, IV:4 (Winter 1969), 64-72.

[22] "Life engenders life as literature engenders

Footnotes to Chapter I (contd.)

literature, until the literary art subsumes in its vastly imaginative world the prosaic and limited environs of 'real' life . . ."

Benstock, "Three Faces", p. 63.

[23] "The Trellis ending ('penultimate') has been extended and clarified to show that the accidental burning of Trellis's MS solves a lot of problems and saves the author's life. I think this will go a long way to remove obscurity."

Letter from O'Brien to A. M. Heath & Co., 3 October 1938; SIU File No. 269.

Footnotes to CHAPTER II

[1] All references are to the British edition of The Third Policeman (London: McGibbon & Kee, 1967).

[2] Letter from O'Brien to William Saroyan, 14 February 1940; SIU File No. 187.

[3] O'Brien planned to revise the novel and remove Joe, but never did so. He wrote: "I intended to kill completely a certain repulsive and obtrusive character called Joe."

Letter from O'Brien to Messrs. Matson & Duggan, literary agents, New York, 7 September 1940; SIU File No. 284.

[4] From a fragment in manuscript written by O'Brien; SIU File No. 296 (See also p. 83 and footnote No. 15 below).

[5] "All the ghastly things which have been happening to him are happening in a sort of hell which he earned for the killing."

Letter from O'Brien to William Saroyan, 14 February 1940; SIU File No. 187.

Footnotes to Chapter II (contd.)

[6] "Literary historians will no doubt examine all those pieces, and note that beneath the fun is that quality of desperation that often goes with the most devoted punsters, that the nonsense is often the thin ice above despair . . ."

Timothy Hilton, "Ireland's Great Cyclist", New Statesman, 8 December 1967, 815-816.

[7] "As in At Swim-Two-Birds, the narrator of The Third Policeman is unnamed and is again involved in the action of the story he tells; he could be anyone, re-living in death or in imagination or madness the punishment for his sin . . ."

David Powell, "The English Writings of Flann O'Brien", Diss. Southern Illinois University 1970, p. 132.

[8] This concept is close to Kant's theory of a noumenon, or Reality, underlying all phenomena, or Appearances.

[9] "All the laws of the physical universe are without relevance, for this is hell. And the narrator's lifetime might have prepared him for it in some measure

Footnotes to Chapter II (contd.)

for he has been a lifelong student of de Selby . . ."
Hilton, p. 815.

[10] Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 121.

[11] Powell, p. 135.

[12] In the interrogation of the narrator by the Sergeant, who tries many names for him, two of the names suggested are "Nolan", a variant of O'Brien's real name "O'Nolan" which he sometimes used, and "Roger MacHugh", a well-known Dublin scholar and a professor at University College, Dublin.

[13] Hugh Kenner suggests that the footnote as literary device is an author's ". . . way of speaking in two voices at once, or of ballasting or modifying or even bombarding with exceptions his own discourse without interrupting it. It is a step in the direction of discontinuity: of organising blocks of discourse simultaneously in space rather than consecutively in time".

Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic

Footnotes to Chapter II (contd.)

Comedians (Boston: Beacon, 1963), p. 40.

[14] Bernard Benstock has attempted to see the policemen as a Trinity: Sergeant Pluck as the Father, MacCruiskeen as Christ, and Fox as the Holy Spirit. However, as he notes himself, the presence of a fourth policeman, Inspector O'Corky, who would appear to be a God-the-Father figure, confounds this theory.

cf. Bernard Benstock, "Flann O'Brien in Hell: 'The Third Policeman'", Bucknell Review, XVII:2 (May 1969), 67-78.

[15] There is no indication as to when O'Brien wrote this, or where he might have intended it to come in the text of The Third Policeman.

Fragment in manuscript written by O'Brien; SIU File No. 296.

[16] "In the other three books [At Swim-Two-Birds, The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive] the bittersweet ending eliminates all previous complications and poses newer, but lesser ones; here [in The Third Policeman] the conclusion eliminates the possibility that the adventures were only a dream and condemns the hero to

Footnotes to Chapter II (contd.)

repeating them over again."

Benstock, "O'Brien in Hell", p. 72.

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