“For All Things Change, Making Way for Each Other” – Modernism, Metatextuality and History in Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Authorship statement

I hereby declare that I am the author of this master's thesis and have only used the indicated sources and aids.

Rijeka, _____ Signature _____

This thesis will examine how *At Swim-Two-Birds* employs and, at the same time, disrupts ideas of the Irish past and Irish culture to create its metatextual world, how it is influenced by Irish history and culture, and where Flann O'Brien ultimately fits within the scope of Modernism. This will be done by examining the turbulent period that is 20th century Ireland, the impact it had on author and the formation of Irish Modernism, as well as analysis of the novel itself, the metafictional techniques it employs and the way it adapts and uses characters to convey its message.

Sadržaj

1. INTRODUCTION

There comes a point in a culture's development when it reaches a crossroad where it must make a crucial decision. The first path is the path that the people of that culture know well – that of tradition, the "artistic *ancien regime,*" as Gregory Castle (2001, p. 2) puts it. The second is an unknown, new frontier – that of modernisation, change, and estrangement from the old. Following the Irish Literary Renaissance, the Easter Rising of 1916, and the Anglo-Irish War, Ireland, now independent, found itself in a transitionary period where it sought to accommodate modern ideas and technologies while maintaining its heritage. It is in this climate of "in-betweenness" (Castle, 2001, p. 3) that Irish Modernism came about.

The period of Irish modernism was marked by several key figures, such as William Butler Yeats, a key figure in the Literary Renaissance, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Liam O'Flaherty, and others whose works are analysed to this day. Another notable figure is Flann O'Brien, whose style of writing inspired many modernist writers to explore what it means to write a novel. Flann O'Brien is an interesting figure in Irish literary history, as some academics have found it difficult to categorise him within Irish Modernism and literature (Greaney, 2022, p. 1) for reasons pertaining to his writing style which adopted aspects of both the old and new. This can be especially seen in what is by many considered to be his literary masterpiece – *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), a novel that is as much influenced by the literary period in which it was written in as it is influenced by the history and politics of that time.

This thesis will examine how *At Swim-Two-Birds* employs and, at the same time, disrupts ideas of the Irish past and Irish culture to create its metatextual world, how the novel is influenced by Irish culture and 20th century Irish history and where Flann O'Brien fits within the scope of Irish Modernism. This will be done by looking into the historical circumstances that influenced the Irish literary scene in which Flann O'Brien wrote, the biographical aspects that had a mark on his style of writing and by providing a metatextual analysis of the narrative layers of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

2. IRISH PAST AND FUTURE – MODERNISM AND FLANN O'BRIEN

Before we dive deeper into the inner workings of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one must first understand the literary period it was written in, its characteristics, and the literary peers his works coexisted with. After 1916 and the Anglo-Irish war roughly three-quarters of Ireland became the Free State in 1922. According to Lauren Arrington (2017) this led to an emergence of a new kind of literature characterised by introspection, and a struggle between the archaic and traditional aspects of Irish culture and literature and the modern world, its values and the passage of time. It is in this relationship between the old and new where we find ideal conditions for modernism to blossom (Castle, 2001, p. 3-10). Moreover, according to Castle (2001), the emergence of modernism in Ireland was not only influenced by both the social revolutions and modern technologies but also by its history.

Taking all of this into account, how does one then define Irish Modernism, and modernism as a whole? Before we begin untangling the Gordian knot that is modernism and postmodernism, we must first introduce ourselves to another concept – modernity. Modernity is a concept which many scholars over the years attempted to explain, developing various narratives and theories based on it. According to Marshall Berman (1988, p. 15), modernity is: "a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today." In simpler terms, it is a historical period of paradoxical qualities, in which we see the end and rebirth of values both old and new as well as contradictions and ambiguities in each aspect of life. It is a confusion that encapsulates various historical time periods and changes, of which the most prevalent ones for this thesis are those of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is in this period that "modernism expands to take in virtually the whole world," which leads to an unprecedented development of culture and, in particular, art and thought. However, as these cultures formed, they fragmented into their own categories with their own private languages, with the result that some of them were unable to give meaning to people's lives, and this led to degrees of dissociation (Berman, 1988, p. 17-28). Berman divides modernity into several phases, of which the Marxist perspective will help explain the difference between modernity (historical sense)and modernism (literary sense).

According to Berman, modernity is a concept of dual nature: on one hand we have 'modernisation' which covers the economic, political, and historical changes, while on the other

we have ‘modernism,’ which is associated with art, culture, and sensibility. (Berman, 1988, p. 88). This dualism is put in direct contrast with Karl Marx’s vision of modernism, which describes the concept as an absence of past norms and structures that defined us and which melted down into a singular, nondescript and contradictory concept, that being modernism, which leaves the common people with nothing but introspection into their own lives, the lives of others as well as their relations with one another: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.” (Berman, 1988, p. 89). This, according to Marx, is brought about by the emergence of a world market and the collapse of local and regional ones, the expansion of desire and demands which a world market brings, as well as the technological advancement tied to mass media, allowing information to spread faster and easier than ever before. These changes led to the world becoming unrecognisable to the common man, leading to questions of where they belong in this strange, new and ever-changing world they found themselves in (Berman, 1988, p. 90-95) – one in which, as Bob Fosse’s adaptation of *Cabaret* (1972) puts it: “money makes the world go round.” However, while the world has utterly changed, it is a world that is shallow and fuelled by the prospect of profit, leading some to adopt more nihilistic worldviews, while others accept the absurdity of it all. (Berman, 1988, p. 100-108). It is in this context where modernism (as an artistic movement) develops by questioning the cultural and the historical with the circumstances of that time. Because the pre-established norms of a ‘noble ascendancy’ are replaced with an even playing field, the people of this modern world, especially intellectuals, seek answers, morals, meaning and values by questioning norms and changes through which they combat the dissolution and fragmentation that modernisation brought about, something that is especially true following the First World War. In other worlds, modernism is an artistic movement which is meant to show the people (and governments) a reflection of what they are and how they got where they are now:

> So long as they [governments] are forced to sink or swim in the maelstrom of the world market, forced to strive desperately to accumulate capital, forced to develop or disintegrate-or rather, as it generally turns out, to develop and disintegrate-so long as they are, as Octavio Paz says, "condemned to modernity," they are bound to produce cultures that will show them what they are doing and what they are. (Berman, 1988, p. 122-125).

This ultimately leads to most modern literary works and forms of art being tied to history and culture, specifically those histories and cultures that impact the individual on an intimate and local level.

Taking this view of modernity and modernism into account, we can ascertain that modernist literature is innately tied to the history and culture it is born out of, which applies to Ireland as well. Ireland, much like the rest of the world, was hit with a wave of modernisation which impacted every aspect of life: art, literature, politics etc. However, due to the historical and cultural changes brought upon by the 20th century, Irish Modernism (the artistic/literary concept) can be viewed in several stages, stages whose representatives are all similar – yet at the same time dissimilar – to one another. Therefore, by specifying the stages of Irish Modernism and analysing each representative we can ascertain where Flann O'Brien's works belong. The representatives in question are William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett. These authors are chosen as the milestones of Irish Modern Literature due to the sheer significance and innovation they brought to the literary culture.

William Butler Yeats is one of the most prominent writers of the 20th century and the most important pillar of the Irish Literary Renaissance,. The purpose for the movement was the preservation and protection of an Irish identity and its spread amongst the people of Ireland, regardless of whether they were Catholics or Protestants (Boyce, 1988). Alongside other prominent figures such as Standish James O'Grady, Sir Samuel Ferguson and Lady Gregory, Yeats spearheaded the Literary Renaissance. Yeats' near-Blakeian dedication to the formation of an ever-growing myth through which he expresses himself was most likely influenced by his upbringing. Yeats was born into a well-off Protestant family in Dublin. However, not long after his birth his family moved to London, which quickly destabilised the family. You see, Yeats' mother, Susan Pollexfen, was attached to Sligo and Ireland, leading the family to frequent Dublin and Sligo. Due to her distance from her home, Susan recited old myths and legends to her children, hoping it would quench the yearning for her hometown. It is in these stories where Yeats' love for stories and mythology began and this shape his entire life (O'Malley, 2021, p. 131-133). It is in his works where we can find the first mode of Irish Modernism – the anti-modern modernist.

The anti-modern modernist, instead of accepting and projecting ideas of modernism (in the historical and political sense) rejects them, preferring to the portray more archaic and

romantic values and depictions in their works (O'Malley, 2021, p. 132-134). This can be seen in works such as *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *On Baile's Strand, The Death of Cuchulain* and *The Celtic Twilight*, in which he forgoes the dirty 'satanic factories' of industry and replaces them with a Celtic vision of Ireland in which Yeats desired to "create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy world, and to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who would look where I bid them." (Yeats, 1893). Yeats used these myths and legends in various ways: in his early poetry Yeats introduced the reader to supernatural worlds which coexisted with our own, making them more alluring than the actual modernist and materialist world. In his later poetry, however, the myths we are used to make sense of the world and one's place in history, the myths serving as parallels with the events that unfolded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By doing so Yeats attempted to turn art into a supernatural factor that stands in defiance of the nature of history as it can become timeless. (Sailer, 1991). Instead of Yeats relying on modernisation (in the historical sense) Yeats adamantly rejects that world in its entirety in his *Mythologies*, forming the Celtic archetypes that are found in other modernist works and changing the development of Irish literature and culture, becoming a Homer-like figure for the Literary Renaissance. This is partially thanks to the slow industrial and urban growth in Ireland at the time and the strong influence of the Celtic past, which meant that European modernity and its materialistic, psychological and political theories had a harder time penetrating into everyday life (Lenoski, 1979).

These notions of a mythological and Celtic Ireland were further helped through a key figure in Yeats life – Lady Augusta Gregory, who helped Yeats negotiate the Irish language origins of Irish myth and folklore and whose works helped him rise to prominence not only in Irish literature, but also in Irish drama (O'Malley, 2021, p. 132-141). In this anti-modern modernist mode of Yeats' writing, it is important to note the significance of the Abbey Theatre as well, doubly so as he and Lady Gregory were directly involved in its formation and existence. Thanks to Yeats' influence in both the political and cultural fields of Irish life, the Abbey Theatre allowed further spread of 'Celtic Irishness' which is prevalent in Yeats' works (Castle, 2001, 56-75), whose purpose was to establish a sense of 'Irishness' in which Celtic tradition and values are mixed with those of Christianity where applicable (Evans, 2003). The significance of this stage of Irish Modernism (literary sense) can be seen as echoes in various other Irish writers, including in Flann O'Brien's works. The echo of a 'Celtic Irishness' can be frequently seen in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), where the author 'borrowed' mythological characters such as Mad

Sweeney from the old Celtic poem *Buile Suibhne* (Sweeney's Madness), which was translated into English by Seamus Heaney *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (1983), Finn MacCool from the Fenian Cycle (*Fiannaidheacht*), and the Pooka (otherwise known as Puck or the Phouka) - a mythological creature that appears in several fairy tales (Briggs, 1976, p. 326, 337), and adapted them to modern times. This use of mythology is in contrast with Yeats' vision. Instead of it providing a supernatural world that coexists with our own or as a means of explainin the world, O'Brien's use of mythology primarily concerns itself with its place in contemporary literature and the world it inhabits as well as the metatextual merits it brings to a novel.

On the 28 January 1939, William Butler Yeats died, leaving behind a legacy that transformed Irish literature utterly. However, in Yeats' later years another figure rose to prominence, one that would equally shake Irish Modernism – that figure being James Joyce.

To say that James Joyce influenced the course of literary modernism in Ireland would be an understatement. Joyce, much like Yeats, was a unique, one-of-a-kind figure that emerged from the Irish literary (and to a degree political) revolution, offering a different approach to modernist (literary sense) writing and influencing a new generation of writers. From his early beginnings Joyce stood out from other Irish writers, adopting a style that is fiercely independent in terms of both the topics it covered and the artistic freedom it brought. Through his works Joyce introduced a sort of high modernism to Irish literature. This high modernism (again, in the literary sense) was characterised by novels that had nothing with Irish folklore traditions and that moved towards more experimental writing styles such as the development of stream of consciousness. In that sense Joyce and Yeats stand as two sides of the same coin: while Yeats describes these worlds and experience in a fantastical, idyllic form Joyce shows us Ireland in a more down-to-earth manner, preferring to go for realism instead of the mythological view Yeats is known for. Joyce's style was most likely influenced by the economic and social fall of his family, causing them to move into several different households throughout his life. However, through this the young James Joyce got to experience Dublin in its entirety, warts, and all, and soon came to learn the inner workings of it (O'Malley, 2021, p. 189-191). It is in these personal experiences that we find Joyce's style of writing. Joyce's style bases itself on his life in Dublin and the stream of consciousness narrative mode that ties itself to the history and culture of Ireland while being distinctly personal. Through his style we see a Dublin frozen in time - a

metatextual palimpsest of meaning which layers "private and public histories into a new epic form" (Arrington, 2017) that, looks to portray every facet of Dublin life.

Out of the three key figures of Irish Modernism Joyce was perhaps one of the most influential ones for Flann O'Brien's work. O'Brien, like Joyce, used the concept of a cityscape palimpsest to enhance his narratives and used metatextual references to frame his works in a bigger context. Furthermore, they both to some extent use mythology as an inspiration. Joyce used Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as a framework for his mythological references, with *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* paralleling Homer's *Iliad* as a representation of the previous stage of national development, while *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey* represented the newer stage (Ellmann, 1977). Moreover, *Ulysses* is the perfect example of Joyce's intertextuality, having references to both the *Odyssey* (the name of the novel and the character of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, the names of the chapters referencing characters and places from Greek mythology and the *Odyssey* such as Calypso, the Cyclops, Scylla, Ithaca, Hades etc.), as well as other works, authors and academic fields, such as theology (in beginning of Telemachus, there is the *Gloria Patri*, and Böhme's *De Signatura Rerum*), psychology and philosophy (Nietzsche's Thus Spoke *Zarathustra*, Aristotle's empiricism), literary works (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Blake's *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*; Leopold Bloom's bookshelf) and others, providing the reader with a trove of references (Joyce, 1922). In contrast, O'Brien took the approach of Yeats and focused more on Irish myths and legends of old, adapting characters such as Mad Sweeney and Finn MacCool into contemporary Ireland. These similarities can be seen if we are to look at the initial reception of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), which was compared to Joyce's novels and, specifically, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which shared a similar fractured style of narration to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, Flann O'Brien was not the only one who was heavily influenced by Joyce, as many of his peers took aspects of his writing and adapted it into their own, which paints a picture of the sheer sway and shadow Joyce's works had on the Irish literary landscape (Bixby, 2015).

Following the Second World War a new stage of Irish Modernism emerged from the ashes, one which was disillusioned with the modern world and the previous attempts to find any meaning, an endeavour which was often stifled by the lack of artistic ambition in Ireland and its censorships regimes. Out of all authors that fit into this stage of late modernism the most prominent one is most certainly Samuel Beckett. He much like Joyce rejected any romantic

notions in his works and instead adopted a more cosmopolitan perspective on life as well as writing, making some Irish critics and scholars consider that the notion of him being just an Irish writer is almost limiting for his works. Moreover, he too chose to leave his homeland, settling down in France in which he would write most of his works. However, unlike his predecessors, Beckett chose to write his works in French. Another thing that set him apart from his peers was the approach he had to writing. Unlike Joyce, who gave densely packed descriptions, Beckett went for the polar opposite approach – reduction on a textual and aesthetic level, deeming that "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (O'Malley, 2021, p. 211-212). His work also show a morbid fascination with death and existence. To Beckett, death is the greatest source of humour and a trope that is interwoven through all of his works. This obsession with death can be further amplified by a story told by Carl Jung in which an analysand (a person who is undergoing psychoanalysis) is diagnosed with an uncanny version of death, one in which the analysand "had never been born entirely" (Barfield, 2009, p. 1-2). This obsession with death can be seen in several of his characters who have never properly lived, such as the voice that exists in a state of liminality in *The Unnameable* (1953) or the world view and characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), who see human life as finite, petty and meaningless (Barfield, 2009, p. 2-3). Beckett faced death in the Second World War, he was an active participant in the Resistance, even earning the *Croix de Guerre* for bravery (O'Malley, 2021, p. 216-217). In terms of his thoughts on the Literary Renaissance, Beckett had a strong distaste for it, considering the movement to be nothing more than fake, poorly written Celticism. Following the Second World War Beckett decided to make French his primary language for literary works, further separating himself from Joyce and Yeats' concepts of literary modernism, claiming a spot in-between French and Irish literature and allowing him to further analyse existence and the meaning of it through his works. It was around that time that he also grew a distaste for the Irish government back home, mainly due to its sheer conservative and pro-Catholic nature as well as the censorship it promoted (O'Malley, 2021, p. 213-224).

With these representatives of the distinct stages of Irish Modernism (in the literary sense) in mind, we may now attempt to place Flann O'Brien into this 'timeline.' O'Brien, much like the other authors mentioned in this chapter, was a product of his surroundings, as well as the prominent figures that influenced Irish literature. He, like Yeats, incorporated Celtic mythology into his works. However, his approach to writing and the use of those characters are very Joycean in nature. While those characters do exist and are (to some extent) faithful to the

source material, O'Brien incorporates these figures with a twist, adapting them to 20th century post-colonial Ireland and turning them into something different yet also familiar. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, he too uses metatextuality and at times different languages to enrichen his works, situating him closer to Joyce than Yeats. On top of that, O'Brien also plays with the structure of his works, which is why *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) was compared to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939). However, the clue that might help place Flann O'Brien and *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) on this timeline lies in the similarities his writings have with Beckett. As mentioned before, both authors stand against the pre-established norm of Ireland's modernist literature as an act of rebellion against the Irish Free State. The only difference is whereas Beckett left Ireland to pursue a more cosmopolitan literature, O'Brien decided to stay in Ireland and expose its hypocrisies. With that in mind, where does Flann O'Brien fit into Irish Modernism? Considering the faint influences of Yeats through the use of Irish myths and legends, the hallmarks of high modernism (those being metatextuality, the use of use of cityscapes as palimpsests of meaning, use of foreign language and the referential nature of works), and ultimately the glimpses of late modernist notions (e.g. the search for meaning, international influences), one may locate Flann O'Brien into early late-modernism, roughly around the period where the influences of the Irish Literary Renaissance were beginning to wane and when authors like Beckett steered Irish literature towards a more international perspective brought on by the historical and geopolitical changes in both Ireland and the world. This notion is further explicated by authors such as Maebh Long and other scholars, who over the past couple of decades have begun to shift the position Flann O'Brien in Irish literature from a postmodernist author to a late modernist author, considering him more of an author that shaped the Irish literary world rather than one that mirrored the cultural and literary *Zeitgeist* of that time (Long, 2012).

2.1. WITH O'LEARY IN THE GRAVE' – FLANN O'BRIEN AND THE TURBULENT HISTORY OF POSTCOLONIAL IRELAND

A vital part in understanding the modernist movement, especially the one that occurred in Ireland, is to understand the historical and geopolitical changes that brought on the emergence of modernism, as well as the impact these turbulent changes had on the authors that wrote in this time period. The impact of the drastic shift from a nation under British imperialism to a Free State can be seen in many key figures of modernism. Flann O'Brien's life and literary

career were intrinsically connected to the happenings in Ireland at that time and during the writing of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939.). Therefore, if we are to understand O'Brien's works, we must also understand the historical events that affected him and his writing.

Following the success of Sinn Féin in Irish politics, the impact the Irish Literary Revival had on the younger generations, as well as the Easter Rising of 1916, Ireland found itself in a war for independence. In 1921 the British government set out to negotiate a truce with Sinn Féin and its loyalists. After several months of arduous negotiation, on the 6 December 1921 the Anglo-Irish Treaty was officially signed, (McMahon, 2007). Following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 another crucial document was written and signed by members of both the Irish and British Government – the Constitution of the *Irish Free State (Saorstát Eireann) Act of 1922*, with which the Irish Free State was officially formed as a co-equal member of the British Commonwealth of Nations and its community. The significance of the Anglo-Irish War and the formation of the Irish Free State is not a small one, nor is it insignificant to the literary narratives that unfolded during and following the end of the wars.[1] The formation of the Irish Free State was a decisive and unprecedented first blow against British imperialism, allowing other countries under British rule to established themselves and slowly began a process of decolonisation. (Frampton, 2022, p. 1). On a smaller, more Irish-focused scale, this meant that Ireland finally had Dominion over itself, with the exception of Northern Ireland. However, not all the objectives of this revolution for independence were met: the question of Northern Ireland still remained, social attitudes towards Ireland and Britain were largely unchanged, and a new ruling elite comprised of well-educated members of the Catholic lower middle-class was formed. Furthermore, it soon became apparent that the revolution failed in another important task – remoulding the social, cultural, historical, and psychological features of Ireland. Another problem in the newly founded Free State was literary censorship and the pro-nationalist policies. In 1929 the Irish Government enacted the *Censorship of Publications Act* whose purpose was "the prohibition of the sale and distribution of unwholesome literature," which by 1946 would ban over 1700 literary works from some of the world's most prominent authors. This was done as an attempt to further push pro-nationalist policies, as these bans would allow for the government to restrict the intellectual growth of the nation. This led many authors such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett to leave Ireland in order to write and publish their novels, (O'Malley, 2021, p. 207-211, 224) and it is in this environment that Flann O'Brien wrote *At*

[1] Both the Anglo-Irish War and the First World War.

Swim-Two-Birds (1939), where he would show Ireland's political and religious hypocrisy through various means.

Brian O'Nolan, otherwise known as Flann O'Brien or Myles na gCopaleen was born 5 October 1911 in Strabane, the third child of Michael Victor O'Nolan, an officer in the customs and excise service with a love for the Irish language, and his wife Agnes Gormley, the daughter of the principal Catholic shopkeeper in Strabane. (Clune, 2009). His career was strongly influenced by his father, mother, and extended family. From his father he gained his love for the Irish language and interest in writing, while his love for games and puzzles came about thanks to the influence of his uncle, Gearóid Ó Nualláin. On the other hand, his mother's side also had an impact on the young Brian O'Nolan's interest in music, comics, popular literature and anecdotes. Because of his father's occupation as an officer, the O'Nolan family would often be forced to change their place of residence, leading to a somewhat isolated childhood spent almost exclusively with his family, with scarce contact with the outside world. During this period Brian and his siblings were educated at home, either by a tutor or their father. The language of the household was Irish (Clune, 2009). Not long after the O'Nolan family would permanently move to Dublin, where O'Nolan and his siblings would enrol into formal schooling and higher education. It is also important to mention that Brian was born during the period in which Ireland would eventually gain its independence. These circumstances, alongside his father's profession and the cultural, political, and literary atmosphere of that time, most likely influences the everyday family life of the O'Nolan family.

Enrolling into University College Dublin to study English, Irish and German, O'Nolan quickly rose to prominence as a contributor to various debates in the Literary and Historical Society and the student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne* (Fair Play). During his stay in UCD he began working on his first novel – *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). However, before the novel was finished and published, in 1937 tragedy struck the O'Nolan family – O'Nolan's father passed away, making him the head of the household and the sole financial support of the family. (Clune, 2009) During the production of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Nolan also worked on another novel exclusively in Irish - *Bhark I bPrágrais* (Bark in Prague). It was never finished, and the only remnants of it come from an extract of it initially published in a student magazine in 1935, and later published in *Ireland To-Day* in 1938. From what we can gather that the novel, much like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, was meant to be a parody of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), as it text

combined various Irish dialects with Greek, Latin, and English elements. (Harris et al, 2018) While the reason for O'Nolan dropping the production of *Bhark I bPrágrais* is unclear, we can assume that at least certain aspects of that novel were used in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, such as Baranpos' Porter's poem whose topic is similar to the Workman's Friend in *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

> I drink the drink of the saints / In the sanctuary where there is the bell of the righteous / Good the drunkenness there without guidance / (…) / A mouth there, purrs and meows / Truth (in wine) is found / (…) / Good to me, my thoughts of folly / Seeing my green-sided tumbler / (…) / As long as my porter is refreshing/ The voices of angels I hear / And the sound of birds in my head / The verse is dry and very dry / without my porter. (Harris et al, 2018)

> When things go wrong and will not come right / Though you do the best you can, / When life looks black as the hour of night - / A pint of plain is your only man. / (…) In time of trouble and lousey strife / You still got a darlint plan / You still can turn to a brighter life - / A pint of plain is your only man. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 74-75)

Finally, on March 1939 Brian O'Nolan, now under the famous pseudonym of Flann O'Brien, published *At Swim-Two-Birds* through Longman. While the first publication of the novel was not successful, with its republication in 1960 *At Swim-Two-Birds* gained a cult following, and came to be considered as one of the best examples of an anti-novel in modernist literature (Clune, 2009).

3. 'LET'S EMULATE THAT WISE OLD BIRD' – LITERARY ANALYSIS AND METATEXTUALITY OF *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS* (1939)

Now that we have a firmer understanding of where Flann O'Brien belongs in the context of Irish Modernism, as well as the events (both personal and global) that had a profound influence on his writing, we may now begin with a more thorough analysis of *At Swin-Two-Birds* (1939). *At Swim-Two-Birds* is at its core a novel about the act and process of creation; specifically, of authoring a novel.

At Swim-Two-Birds tells the story of a young, unnamed, lazy, and often drunk student at University College Dublin who lives with his religious uncle in Dublin. The student spends most of his time locked in his room where he contemplates the novel he is writing, its characters and style. The student's novel has three different stories which, alongside the story of the student's life, make up the structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The first story the student introduces is that of the Pooka Fergus MacPhellimey, a creature from Celtic folklore who is obsessed with the nature of odd and even numbers. The second story is that of John Furriskey, a fictional character created by Dermot Trellis, an old author of westerns, who was born via the process of 'aestho-autogamy,' or in other words, he was born as a grown adult through Trellis' writings. The third story revolves around Finn MacCool (otherwise known as Fionn mac Cumhaill), a legendary hero from the Fenian Cycle who acts as the story's connection to old Irish mythology.

In the part of the story which concerns itself with the student's life, which for the purposes of this thesis we will call the Student layer, the students recounts details of his life in Dublin, his meditations on the art of writing, his frequent visits to various pubs (where he drinks himself sick) and his studies at University College Dublin. Because of his reckless lifestyle the student attracts the ire of his uncle, a clerk in the local Guinness brewery, who worries that his nephew's laziness and love for alcohol will reflect poorly on his character. As the novel progresses, the stories from the student's novel, which for the purposes of the thesis we will call the Red Swan layer, become intertwined with Trellis gathering his fictional characters, which he hires from other authors, and who come live with him in the Red Swan hotel where he can keep an eye on these characters and write his novel on the consequences which follow wrongdoings. What this means in practice is that as long as Trellis is awake the characters are forced to follow his instructions, leading some to do heinous acts for the sake of the story. Upon arriving at the Red Swan hotel, Furriskey meets Paul Shanahan and Antony Lamont, two of Trellis' creations who also resent their creator's control over their lives. As a result, these characters plot a rebellion against Trellis and drug him. This causes Trellis to spend most of his days asleep which allows the residents of the Red Swan to live their lives free of Trellis: Lamon and Shanahan spend their time drinking and enjoying freedom while Furriskey settles down with Peggy, a servant at the hotel, and gets married.

For the purposes of making Furriskey a truly reprehensible antagonist Trellis had created a beautiful female character by the name of Sheila Lamont to stand as a figure of high morals. However, due to her sheer beauty Trellis rapes her and shelater dies during childbirth, giving

birth to Orlick Trellis, his bastard son. Prior to Orlick's birth Fergus the Pooka and the Good Fairy, a fairy he meets along the way, arrive in Dublin to attend Orlick's birth so that they can influence his life. Along the way to the Red Swan they meet Finn MacCool and Mad Sweeney (whose name in the novel is written as Sweeny), who accompany them to the hotel. Finn MacCool becomes a resident of the hotel and recites old Irish myths and legends to the other characters, including the tale of Mad King Sweeney, which serves as a parallel to the two other layers and the basis for the Sweeney layer. As the story progresses, Orlick is shown to have inherited Trellis' talent for writing. The conspirators use this to their advantage by persuading Orlick to take revenge against his father for what he had done to his mother. This revenge is enacted by Orlick writing a novel of his own in order to trap Trellis inside it, allowing Orlick to torture his father for the crimes he committed. After some time, the conspirators decide to put Trellis on trial for the control he holds over their lives. Before the trial could reach its climax, the novel switches back to the student. Having passed all his exams, he is now considered an adult and is given a second-hand watch. Having no need to continue his novel, the student writes an abrupt ending to his novel: a maid in the hotel accidentally burns Trellis' writings, freeing Trellis from the trial and burning his creations.

Before we begin diving deeper into the layers themselves, we must first look at the way the novel itself is constructed, as well as the metatextual nature of it. According to Jerome Klinkowitz (2017) metatextuality, otherwise known as metafiction, is a style of narrative in which the process of literary writing and composition is put in the limelight, hence the use of the 'meta' in its name. This method stands in defiance of literary tradition and established aesthetic theories, defamiliarizing the reader from their expectation of what a novel is. This style of narrative is a relatively common one in the 20th century, which can be seen by the various authors who use a metafictional style in their novels or aspects of it. These include James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and others. That said, if we are to look at the definition more closely, we cannot with absolute certainty say that it is a narrative style born in the 20th century, as works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400), Giovanni Boccacio's *The Decameron* (1620) and Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1767) have aspects of metafiction within them. Looking at the brief summary of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, as well as other examples of metatextual novels, we can see that the novel employs several metatextual techniques, such as its 'Chinese box' structure (Szot 2019) in which one narrative resides inside another , or the way the novel,

being about the act of writing, disrupts ideas of 'Irishness' and literary norms to create a discussion about writing itself (Long, 2014, p. 9-10).

Another metatextual technique used in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is the way O'Brien evokes different ways of storytelling (written by pen or typewriter or conveyed orally) through how each layer is written, as well as the use of different styles of writing and how are interwoven into one another. (Long, 2020). There are repeated allusions to the use of a pen and typewriter: "I paused to examine my story, allowing a small laugh as a just tribute. Then whipping the typescript from a pocket, I read an extract quickly for his further entertainment." (O'Brien, 1939, p. 32). There are other references where manuscript, book and typescript are consistently differentiated. These differentiations, alongside the abrupt shifts from the Red Swan layer to the Student layer through biographical reminiscences (of which there are many in the novel) allows the reader the surmise that while the biographical reminiscences were written by hand, the narrator's writings, specifically those tied to the Red Swan layer, were written on a typewriter. (Long, 2020) In that sense, as David Cohen puts it, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is "an aggressively anti-modernist work that is simultaneously modernist in the sense that it does not, in its reductio ad absurdum of modernism, advocate a return to more traditional forms of fiction, but rather calls into question the enterprise of artistic creation itself." (Cohen, 1993, p. 208).

Following this overview of the story, structures and concepts of *At Swim-Two-Birds* out of the way, we may begin to dive deeper into the novel itself so as to analyse the arguments the author makes regarding the process of writing. This will be done by individual analysis of all three layers, as they all encompass specific aspects of creation and writing.

3.1. 'REBEL, REBEL' - CONTEMPORARY IRELAND IN THE STUDENT LAYER

As it was mentioned in the introduction to this section of the thesis, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is at its core a novel that concerns itself with the process of writing. As such, it concerns itself with notions such as the style of writing, characters, and other aspects of what some might call worldbuilding. It is then unsurprising that the novel begins with an elaboration of the narrator's (and potentially the writer's) view on what a good modern book must have: "a good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." (O'Brien, 1939, p. 5). From the very beginning. *At Swim-Two-Birds* makes it clear that this will not be the usual story of

cityscapes, romantic reinterpretations of myths and legends or any other mode or trope that was being used in this late modernist period. Instead, it will concern itself with the metatextual – the act of creation itself - by providing examples of how an author might tackle the process of creating a literary work. The student and his rebellion against pre-established literary norms can be seen as another example of type akin to the ones found in Joyce's character Dedalus and the protagonist of Beckett's *Murphy*. The medium of this literary rebellion is, of course, the novel the student writes. This novel is discussed with his friend Brinsley, to whom he explains his modus operandi of writing.

The first thing the student addresses is the amount of originally a new text may have. According to the student, every (or at least most) types of stories and tropes have already been written before. Because of this, the student proposes that the modern author should not bother with notions of originality and instead use pre-existing characters for referential purposes:

> 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. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before—usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 21-22).

These notions of 'recycling' characters that are established in existing literature is then demonstrated through the novel the student writes: both Finn MacCool and the Pooka are not original but are instead reused and adapted to a modern setting.

Another notion the student puts forth is the authenticity an author gives to their world. According to the student, estrangement is vital in the creation of a novel, as it allows for the suspension of disbelief often found in plays:

> It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked outward accidents of illusion, (…) The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort; the novel was self-administered in private. (…) A satisfactory novel should be a

> self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 21-22).

This notion, albeit slightly modified, may have been influenced by James Joyce, whose work is set in Dublin (*Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*) drastically changed Irish Modernism and the perception of what a novel truly is. Through Joyce's works we see Dublin as a palimpsest of meaning which layers private and public histories (Arrington, 2017), turning the setting of his works into a living, breathing world. An adapted version of this style of writing appears in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as well, where the student in an attempt to create an authentic 'self-evident sham' creates a believable and ordinary world and fills it with extraordinary characters whose purpose is to create a suspension of disbelief in the reader. To prove a point, the student offers Brinsley and the reader an example of said world with the description of the location of the Red Swan Hotel:

> The Red Swan premises in Lower Leeson Street are held in fee farm, the landlord whosoever being pledged to maintain the narrow lane which marks its eastern boundary unimpeded and free from nuisance for a distance of seventeen yards, that is, up to the intersection of Peter Place. New Paragraph. A terminus of the Cornels court coach in the seventeenth century, the hotel was rebuilt in 1712 and afterwards fired by the yeomanry for reasons which must be sought in the quiet of its ruined garden, on the three perch stretch that goes by Croppies' Acre. Today, it is a large building of four stories. The title is worked in snow white letters along the circumference of the fanlight and the centre of the circle is concerned with the delicate image of a red swan, pleasingly conceived and carried out by a casting process in Birmingham delf. Conclusion of the foregoing. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 22)

This cityscape is then populated by fantastical or out-of-place characters (Finn MacCool, the cowboy in room 13 and the leprechauns that infest the cellar), moving the setting away from the realistic depictions of Dublin. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 31).

By suggesting that characters and settings should be largely of unoriginal nature the novel alludes to the soulless and artificial nature some works may have. To these works, as Maebh Long puts it, words "are not organic wholes but are made up of letters arranged and rearranged, and novels are not organic wholes but are made up of plots, phases, and characters that are arranged and rearranged. Characters are effectively movable types written by an editor, a compiler, a stenographer." (Long, 2020, p. 8). To put it simply – such a concept of writing

reduces language into nothing but its base values and mimicry, devoid of all the richness and flavour literary works are supposed to have – of a 'soul.' While this term is subjective and can mean different things from person to person, in this case for a literary work to have a soul means having characters who are well-written and authentic, whose setting is believable enough and whose story resonates with the audience. The process of creating such an environment (and in turn creating such a soul) varies wildly depending on the story the author wishes to tell (as well as the author himself), as all factors must be considered during the creation of this 'soul' and woven into one another. In the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a novel about writing a novel, we see that each character has a purpose: Finn MacCool provides a commentary on the oral tradition, the student (to an extent) represents the author and the shift in literary norm at the time, while characters such as the uncle or Brinsley represent different demographics in early 20th century Dublin. But, while Mad Sweeney, the Pooka and Finn MacCool are fantastical in nature, they are adapted into the modern setting in such a way that makes their addition to the story purposeful and clear. This allows the story to flow naturally while continuing to develop the themes of how to write a novel. As such, the student's meditation on what it means to write a good novel shows the development of writing up to a certain point. As Long puts it: "The novel, as a modernist discourse network, maps the movement from orality to medieval manuscript to printed page to typescript, using the typed form to assemble, rearrange, and reinscribe intimacy into impersonality." (Long, 2020, p. 9). A similar notion to this can be found in how the student portrays the 'referenced' characters and tropes in his novel and the way Dermot Trellis is presented, something which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Aside from metatextual and literary notions, this layer has notions of the clash between old and new characterised by the student and his relationship with his uncle. The relationship these two have represents the clash of the old, romantic and conservative values that came forth from the previous literary and political periods with the newer, post-colonial Ireland generation – one that is not influenced by O'Leary's or Yeats' romanticised view on Ireland, but rather one that looks towards modernism and later Europe for answers. Through the uncle we also get depictions of the Catholic community in Dublin and the importance of status within it (O'Brien, 1939).

The student layer encapsulates the student's perception of the process of storytelling, which often goes against the norm. However, it is not merely a playful attempt at subverting how one may perceive a novel. It is an open discourse of the relation between old and new, author and writer, as well as author and its creation (Long, 2020). Furthermore, it is also a

criticism of contemporary (in this case late high to early late modernism) literary works and culture as well as the lack of unoriginality that came from blindly adopting modern writings (e.g. the cityscape palimpsest) or romanticised Celtic ideals.

3.2. THE RED SWAN – *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*' COLLISION OF PAST AND PRESENT

As alluded to in the previous chapter, the Red Swan Layer takes place in the book the student is in the process of writing. Therefore, it concerns itself narratively with the happenings of the characters at the Red Swan Hotel and specifically the rebellion of the characters against their author, Dermot Trellis. However, if we are to look at this layer on a metatextual level, the act of rebellion against the author is superseded by something far more interesting – the relationship between author and their creations and the importance (and variation) of style.

In the chapter regarding the student layer, we briefly touched upon the student's proposal for how a modern novel should be written, that being that a good modern novel should be of referential nature, and that one should create a character for their story only if a fitting one cannot be found in the corpus of literary works. Furthermore, the world the story inhabits should be equal parts realistic and equal parts unbelievable, mimicking to an extent the nature of plays (O'Brien, 1939, p. 21-22, 31). However, who to use and where the story should take place are not the only thing the writer must take care of. As the student points out in his explanation, great care must be put on how one uses one's characters:

> It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good, bad, poor, or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 21).

This is not the case in the Red Swan Hotel. Looking at the events and characters in the Red Swan Hotel, it is clear that Dermot Trellis' writing, at least prior to the rebellion, suffered from mismanagement. While the characters that were hired do have a decent standard of living, in Red Swan Hotel, the other points are completely ignored. For Trellis, these characters exist for the sole purpose of writing his novel about the consequences of one's actions. As such, they are under constant supervision and are pre-determined into roles which they cannot rid themselves of. In other words, they are not allowed a private life, as Trellis entirely dictates their lives, and

they cannot determine their roles themselves. It is then all the more ironic and amusing that the writer himself becomes the one to show the readers those consequences, as he is drugged and put to sleep for most of the day by his characters, allowing them to lead a life of their own, with Furriskey, the 'bad guy' and Peggy, a domestic servant with whom Furriskey falls in love with, living peaceful and virtuous lives (O'Brien, 1939, p. 58) in a suburb in Dublin:

> They took a little house in Dolphin's Barn and opened a sweety-shop and lived there happily for about twenty hours out of twenty-four. They had to dash back to their respective stations, of course, when the great man was due to be stirring in his sleep. (…) Shanahan and Lamont, I answered, were frequent and welcome visitors to the little house in Dolphin's Barn. The girl Peggy made a neat and homely housewife. Tea was dispensed in a simple but cleanly manner. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 98-99).

Furthermore, Peggy, Shanahan and Lamont break the notions of major and side characters, moving from their role as 'filler' characters and taking more active roles in the story (Long, 2014, 40.) With this act of defiance against (Trellis') both the borrowed and/or 'hired' characters (Pooka, Finn MacCool, Mad Sweeney) and the characters created by Trellis (Furriskey, Sheila Lamont, Orlick Trellis, Paul Shanahan, Anthony Lamont) show that they are more than the role for which they were hired or created (Long, 2020).

We will now take a closer look at some of the characters and their significance to *At Swim-Two-Birds'* metatextuality. Firstly, we have the author's author – Dermot Trellis. Dermot Trellis is introduced to the reader during the description of the Red Swan Hotel, and is described in a way that evokes Joycean descriptions of Dublin and its inhabitants:

> Dermot Trellis was a man of average stature but his person was flabby and unattractive, partly a result of his having remained in bed for a period of twenty years. He was voluntarily bedridden and suffered from no organic or other illness. He occasionally rose for very brief periods in the evening to pad about the empty house in his felt slippers or to interview the slavey in the kitchen on the subject of his food or bedclothes. He had lost all physical reaction to bad or good weather and was accustomed to trace the seasonal changes of the year by inactivity or virulence of his pimples. His legs were puffed and affected with a prickly heat, a result of wearing his woollen under trunks in bed. He never went out and rarely approached the windows, (O'Brien, 1939, p. 22).

However, in this description we also see a reflection of the author (student): they both spend an unreasonable amount of time in their bedrooms and leave their bedrooms for very brief periods

of time. Following this rather vivid description of Trellis, O'Brien switches the style to reference oral literature, once again breaking the literary norm and providing the reader with an example of how different styles can bring new and interesting perspectives on a character:

> *Tour de force by Brinsley, vocally interjected, being a comparable description in the Finn canon*: The neck to Trellis is house-thick and house-rough and is guarded by night and day against the coming of enemies by his old watchful boil. His bottom is the stern of a sea-blue schooner, his stomach is its mainsail with a filling of wind. His face is a snowfall on old mountains, the feet are fields. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 23).

Aside from it presenting another form of how one (especially Finn MacCool) might describe Dermot Trellis, this excerpt alone also encapsulates the ever-changing medium works are created in. This is a clear reference to the oral tradition of Irish myths and legends. However, unlike the oral tradition it bases itself on this description is done in a written format. This act once again blurs the line of literary norm and styles, leading the reader to question the function of both styles not only within the novel itself but also in contemporary Irish literature (Long, 2020).

So far there have been several styles in *At Swim-Two-Birds* which often overlap to develop a modernist discourse: the student's biographical pen-written format questions the longevity a text may have and its purpose in the modern world, the typewriter style used for his novel questions notions of originality and the 'soul' of a text, whereas the Joycean descriptions of the student's imaginary Dublin questions and at times mocks the necessity of detailed descriptions in a novel. However, there is another important discourse O'Brien presents in *At Swim-Two-Birds* – the place oral tradition has in the modern world. This discourse is brought on by the student's inclusion of Finn MacCool in the novel. To repeat: Finn MacCool is , a legendary hero from the Fenian Cycle whose purpose is that of the 'god-big' storyteller, appearing in one of the beginning stories in the first chapter of the book. His introduction is by no means done unintentionally, as each opening is tied to the second layer and, as the student states in his approach, "inter-related only in the prescience of the author," (O'Brien, 1939, p.5), the author in this case being either Dermot Trellis (who hires or creates them for his novel), the student (who is writing the book about Dermot Trellis and his downfall in the first place) or Flann O'Brien (who is writing *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The metatextual importance of Finn MacCool cannot be understated, as he speaks to the perception of oral tradition in the contemporary world. This can be seen in the reaction the other characters have to Finn

MacCool's telling of Irish myths: instead of characters such as Lamont and Shanahan praising the oration and valuing the myths Finn MacCool shares with them, these myths are mocked and trampled on, reduced to nothing more than fancy poetry, with Shanahan being the only one to appreciate Finn's stories:

> Tell us, my Old Timer, (…) what do you think of it? Give the company the benefit of your scholarly pertinacious fastidious opinion, Sir Storybook. (…) Quick march again, said Lamont. It'll be a good man that'll put a stop to that man's tongue. More of your fancy kiss-my-hand by God. (…) Excuse me for a second, interposed Shanahan in an urgent manner. I've got a verse in my head. Wait now. (O'Brien, 1939, 75-77).

With these interruptions and the defacement of the old Irish tradition Finn MacCool, the legendary hero of the Fenian Cycle, the 'god-big' storyteller of old Ireland becomes nothing more than 'Mr Storybook,' a man who amuses the co-conspirators with archaic tales which get superseded by low-brow poetry such as The Workman's Friend (O'Brien, 1939, 15, 69-75). From this mistreatment of the oral tradition and Finn MacCool we can see the attitude post-colonial Ireland had towards this tradition. With the time of Yeats and O'Leary being long gone and the Literary Renaissance coming to an end, people wanted more from Irish literature than another work based on the 'old world.' While Irish folklore had its uses in the fight for the Free State, Ireland at this point, has already established itself and is looking outside of Ireland, allowing itself to be influenced by various other genres not native to Ireland. This can be seen during the celebration of Orlick's birth at the Red Swan, where the visitors sing various songs from Ireland and England, but also from America, Cuba, Germany, Italy, France, and Austria (Long, 2014, p. 26). This is especially seen in the appearance of Westerns in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

At first glance, Western-inspired characters and styles seem out of place. However, upon closer inspection, they begin to make sense when we look at the Irish literary and cultural landscape. In a sense, the Irish Free State was a wild west for the people of Ireland, especially those with an inclination for writing. It was this brave new frontier in which authors explored what it means to be Irish and what a novel can represent in which the difference between the old world (Yeats' romantic Ireland and its mythologies and values) and the new one (the Irish Free State and modernism) is explored through various mediums. Furthermore, Western novels were particularly popular in 1930s Dublin, something Flann O'Brien was seemingly intrigued with as well, hence the inclusion of Shanahan, Shorty, Slug, and the western part of the story.

Shanahan's stories represent the Western style of writing almost perfectly, as is seen during his recounting of his experience as a cowpuncher in Ringsend, a district in Dublin:

> One day Tracy sent for me and gave me my orders and said it was one of his own cowboy books. Two days later I was cow-punching down by the river in Ringsend with Shorty Andrews and Slug Willard, the toughest pair of boyos you'd meet in a day's walk. Rounding up the steers, you know, and branding, and breaking in colts in the corral with lassos on our saddle-horns and pistols at our hips. (O'Brien, 1939, 50).

Here we once again see the playfulness of the author in his use of style and setting by combining the foreign, in this case Western tropes and idioms, with the familiar contemporary Dublin. Flann O'Brien manages these foreign elements masterfully by incorporating them into the novel in such a way that they seem organic. This is done by the style itself, by the names of Shanahan's cowboy friends (Shorty and Slug being foreign names compared to the other Irish or English names), the appearance of prairies and the use of Western idioms and phrases such as 'toughest boyos,' 'rounding up the steers,' 'breaking in colts,' 'saddle-horns,' 'to get the wire,' 'we goin' ridin' tonight,' etc. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 50-51) The appearance of these slang words and idioms signify the interconnectedness that was occurring throughout the world, which not only allowed for easier commerce and the expansion of capitalism into all corners of the world, but also for cultural, linguistic and literary exchanges. Much like in today's age, when a foreign form of media or genre becomes popular it changes the native language that is used in that country. Thanks to mediums such as the cinema, novels and dramas, Westerns spread through Ireland's younger generations, who in turn began to adopt some of the slang found in Westerns. This in turn gives rise to these fantastical descriptions, as the author satirised the rising popularity of Westerns by turning Dublin into the Wild West and its Western-loving inhabitants into cowboys. These fantastical depictions that are seemingly stripped out of a Western are then given further credence by excerpts from the press, adding not only the style of journalism into the novel but also mocking it at the same time and presenting Dublin journalism in an amusingly dull manner (O'Brien, 1939, p. 51-56.)

Lastly, there is the court case and the academic style. These can be found in the depiction of the trial of Dermot Trellis as well as in Trellis' explanation of 'aestho-autogamy,' the method through which he created John Furriskey. According to Trellis:

> Aestho-autogamy with one unknown quantity on the male side, Mr. Trellis told me in conversation, has long been a commonplace. (…) Many social problems of

> contemporary interest, he wrote in 1909, could be readily resolved if issue could be born already matured, teethed, reared, educated, and ready to essay those competitive plums which make the Civil Service and the Banks so attractive to the younger breadwinners of to-day. The process of bringing up children is a tedious anachronism in these enlightened times. Those mortifying stratagems collectively known as birth-control would become a mere memory if parents and married couples could be assured that their legitimate diversion would straightway result in finished breadwinners or marriageable daughters. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 36-37).

Aside from the allusion to conception and mental masturbation, as Maebh Long (2020) mentions, we are once again provided with the discourse of how a novel's characters are created, with the process of creating a character being equated to a biological and scientific phenomenon.

Shanahan's stories, Finn MacCool's oration, the cityscapes, Trellis' trial as well as biographical reminiscences by the author all point towards Flann O'Brien's talent for mixing different worlds, styles, and idioms together to make a (mostly) coherent story. As David Cohen puts it: "Various high and pedestrian styles of writing are recreated, parodied, and subverted, and our standard notions of form and content are baffled by the narrator's ability to render a scene in any style he desires despite the seeming inappropriateness of the form to its content" (Cohen, 1993, p. 211). This interweaving of different elements and styles, such as the Bildungsroman, Western, courtroom drama, mythological saga, fairy tale and modernism, (Long, 2014, p. 13) reaches a climax in the finale of the novel.

3.3. SWEENEY ASTRAY – ENDINGS, BEGINNINGS, AND THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

The last layer in *At Swim-Two-Birds*' is Sweeney[2] layer. While this layer is significantly shorter than the other two, the Sweeney layer holds significance for both the narrative of the novel as well as its metatextual features. Starting with the character of Sweeney himself, we are

[2] It is important to note that while Seamus Heaney and most other authors spell his name as Sweeney, Flann O'Brien spelled his version of the Mad King Sweeny. However, for the purposes of easily referring to *Buile Suibhne*, this thesis will use the more common spelling of his name.

first introduced to him through Finn MacCool, who at one point in the story recites the tale of the mad king Sweeney to the others:

> Now Sweeny was King of Dal Araidhe and a man that was easily moved to the tides of anger. Near his house was the cave of a saint called Ronan—a shield against evil was this gentle generous friendly active man, who was out in the matin-hours taping out the wall-steads of a new sun-bright church and ringing his bell in the morning. (…) Now when Sweeny heard the clack of the clergyman's bell, his brain and his spleen and his gut were exercised by turn and together with the fever of a flaming anger. He made a great run out of the house without a cloth-stitch to the sheltering of his naked nudity, (…) and he did not rest till he had snatched the beauteous light-lined psalter from the cleric and put it in the lake, at the bottom; (…) Sweeny then left the cleric sad and sorrowful over the godless battery of the king and lamenting his psalter. (…) He then returned with joyous piety to his devotions and put a malediction on Sweeny by the uttering of a lay of eleven melodious stanzas. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 61).

As one might assume with the other stories Finn MacCool told to the characters in the Red Swan layer, this too is a recounting of an old Irish folk tale - *Buile Suibhne*, otherwise known as Sweeney's Madness.

The pivotal nature of Sweeney in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is twofold, both reasons being linked with one-another. Firstly, we must look at the author himself. As previously mentioned in the biographical section of the thesis, Flann O'Brien clearly had a strong love for the Irish language, one which is evident by it being the field in which he wrote his master's thesis. The importance of this factor lies in the fact that *At Swim-Two-Birds*' production occurred in parallel to his thesis, meaning that there was a high likelihood that the author, being almost finished with his thesis, perhaps adapted some of the findings into this work, or perhaps was inspired by them (Cohen, 1993). Secondly, we have Sweeney's story itself, or more specifically his curse. Sweeney's story, especially O'Brien's adaptation of it, depicts the story of an exiled and mad king who in some sense had a rebellion of his own. This was a rebellion against divine authority – church and God – in favour of true freedom. His madness and rebellion begin at the news that Saint Ronan Finn is planning to erect a church near his territory. Furious at this, Sweeney assaults the local cleric, throws his psalter into the nearby lake, violates the promise that no man shall be slain at Magh Rath after sundown and kills a psalmist with a spear. For his crimes he is cursed, banished and forced to live in the trees as part-human part-avian (O'Brien, 1939).

This rebellion did grant him freedom, but at a cost – while he may be free from the authorities and norms of old, he is forever doomed to speak in verse, forced into creativity until the curse is lifted from him , upon which he ends his text and falls into the eternal silence that is death (Merrit, 1995). Despite the freedom he is given, Sweeney laments his past mistakes while also finding peace in nature and a new sense of self, identifying his ties to Glen Bolcain. After a failed attempt at ending his madness, he makes his way to the very church he rebelled against, where he is met with Saint Moling. The two embark on a dialogue through which we are told that this church is destined to be Sweeney' final resting ground and the place where his story will be recorded and laid to rest. Not long after Sweeney is killed as the curse foretold – at the church he rebelled against with a spear. It is here where his cursed is lifted and where his story ends. Sweeney was cursed with creation, and yet in the story it is through this madness and the help of Saint Moling that his words were written and made into more than just the ramblings of a mad man: they were immortalised through the Saint's texts. Similarly, an author (to an extent) is 'cursed' with creation through which he expresses his inner thoughts and beliefs.

The importance of this aspect of the story and the influence of Sweeney's curse is even more apparent if we are to look at *At Swim-Two-Birds*' original title – *Sweeney in the Trees* (Merrit, 1995, p. 315). It is no surprise then that referential echoes of Sweeney can be found all throughout the novel: the act of creation and the freedom, control, and lack one has while writing a novel, the rebellion against various norms (O'Brien with his discussion on what makes a novel modern and its defiance of the preestablished norm, the student's metatextual writings, stylistic changes and his discussion of what makes a good novel, Orlick's rebellion against his father Trellis for inadequate writing), and the fate of those who rebel (Sweeney's death for the crimes he committed against the church, Trellis' torture and trial for the mismanagement of his characters, the Student's shift into adulthood and abrupt end of the story). However, at some point the title of the novel got changed to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which has ties to the core of the novel.

The title of the novel as well as the Fenian cycle-style orations by Finn MacCool represent a different kind of creation which too can be used in the process of literary writing – translation. At its core, translation is used in several parts of the novel – the modern English translation of *Buile Suibhne* found in the novel, the translations of some of the character names (Finn MacCool, Mad King Sweeney) and the title of the novel itself.

According to P. L. Henry (1990) *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a rough, imperfect translation of *Snámh dá Én* (the swimmable ford of the two birds) - a placename for a ford between Roscommon and Offaly Counties situated on River Shannon, the longest river in Ireland (Logain.ie, 1). The title is comical translation of the placename and lacks any expressed relation between swim, two, and birds, most likely in an attempt to imitate either a form of 'imitative Anglo-Irish,' or how an Irish Gaelic speaker of that time would form sentences using English world material (Henry, 1990). However, that is not the sole reason Flann O'Brien chose that as the title for his novel, as it the church at *Snámh dá Én* Sweeney visits in the story, further tying the Mad Sweeney to the metatextual and referential nature of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Through the interwoven stories of *At Swim-Two-Birds* the novel presents the reader with one more theme – change. Change, much like the act of creation, is seen throughout the entire novel and is manifested in several ways: the change from penned to typed text in the Student layer, the various writing styles used in different parts of the novel (courtroom drama, oral tradition, western novel etc.), the commentary of the change of writing norms and where oral tradition belongs in the modern age, the student becoming an adult, Sweeney's death, Trellis' descent from control to helplessness at the hands of the Conspirators and ultimately the ending of the novel. Taking that into consideration, we can see that the change in Sweeney's story (the lifting of his curse and subsequent death) parallels the endings of each layer of the novel, which rather fittingly matches with one of the very first notions the reader is given by the student (and in turn author) at the start of the novel: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings (…), or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." (O'Brien, 1939, p. 5), which further weaves the layers into one another.

As with Sweeney, the student's curse, in other words his grievances with his uncle and with the literary norms, is lifted. However, instead of this leading to the physical death of the protagonist, it leads to a form of 'death,' or more precisely a change from student to a fully-grown adult via graduation. As a memento for this momentous occasion, the student is given an antique second-hand watch:

> Mr. Corcoran and myself, he said, have taken the liberty of joining together in making you a small present as a memento of the occasion and as a small but sincere expression of our congratulation. We hope that you will accept it and that you will wear it to remind you when you have gone from us of two friends that watched over you—a bit strictly perhaps—and wished you well. (…) The characters of a watch-face, slightly luminous

> in the gloom, appeared to me from the interior of the box. Looking up, I found that the hand of Mr. Corcoran was extended in an honest manner for the purpose of manual felicitation. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 213-214).

Here we once again see O'Brien's emphasis on playing with words, as "when you have gone from us" may also be interpreted as death, while the gift of a watch may be seen as both the student finally claiming control over his own time and life, but also as a pun since Mr. Corcoran and the uncle *watched* over him during his process of becoming an adult. The appearance of the watch may also be a joke from O'Brien himself, signalling to the reader that it is *time* for this layer's story to end as the student, now an adult goes into his bedroom one last time, drawing another parallel with the ending of the Red Swan layer.

Trellis and the Conspirators, much like Sweeney and the student, share a similar fate with the ending of the story. The Conspirators (Shanahan, the Lamonts, Furriskey, the Pooka), having previously drugged Dermot Trellis to stop him from dictating their lives for the sake of his novel, finally put the author on trial. While the crime he is convicted it is the act of creation itself, the trial holds significant implications for the metatextual reading of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. As Maebh Long (2020) claims, Orlick's text, that being the text in which he predetermines the outcome of the trial (Trellis' death), can be perceived as the death of the author, that is then caused by another author, turning the power dynamic on its head and turning the author into the character (and vice versa). This occurs when Orlick, upon finding that he inherited his father's gift of writing, sets out to write a novel himself, creating an ouroboros-like situation where both characters are the creator (Trellis indirectly creating Orlick, Orlick using Trellis as a character) and the created at the same time. As for the death of the author, Trellis nearly avoids a literal one (with his characters nearly sentencing him to death) and an artistic death in the form of the character's rebellion against Trellis and his intentions in order to make their own interpretations on what they as people want to be. This then further plays into the warning against the limits of authorial intentionality and the fine line between literary introduction and adaptation, (Long, 2020) as Trellis 'hired' the characters without thinking too much of their purposes outside of pushing the plot forward

However, before his characters, Furriskey and the Pooka can take their revenge on the old man their rebellion's final act is ultimately thwarted by Trellis' servant Teresa who burns the rebellious text:

> She revived the fire and made a good blaze by putting into it several sheets of writing which were littered here and there about the floor (not improbably a result of the open window). By a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened that these same pages were those of the master's novel, the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends. Now they were blazing, curling and twisting and turning black, straining uneasily in the draught and then taking flight as if to heaven through the chimney, a flight of light things red-flecked and wrinkled hurrying to the sky. (O'Brien, 1939, p. 214-215).

According to Merrit (1995) the last passage may refer to *Buile Shuibhne*, in which Sweeney passes into the afterlife in an analogous manner: "When he reached the door Sweeney leaned his shoulders against the jamb and breathed a loud sigh. His spirit flew to heaven, and he was given an honourable burial by Moling," (Heaney, 1983, p. 85.). However, that is not the only 'death' in the Red Swan Layer. Upon the extinguishing of the rebellion, as Trellis, following the destruction of his characters and novel joins them in silence, retreats to his bedroom one final time (O'Brien, 1939, p. 214-215).

As mentioned previously, alongside the act of creation itself, *At Swim-Two-Birds* also concerns itself with the concept of transitivity – of beginnings and ends. From the moment readers the novel they are directly told what it will be about, albeit in a cryptic manner. This is done through an excerpt from Euripides' *Heracles*. This quote, alongside the second half that precedes it goes as follows: "Yes, for even men's misfortunes often flag, and the stormy wind does not always blow so strong, nor are the prosperous ever so; **for all things change, making way for each other**." (Eur. Her. 100-105). These changes can either be narrative, literary or stylistic. In the case of the final couple of pages of *At Swim-Two-Birds* it is all of the above.

In the last moments of At Swim-Two-Birds O'Brien presents us with a maelstrom of different writing styles in the form of maddening ramblings, all of which reference aspects of the novel. Firstly, we have the obsession with numbers seen throughout the novel as well as in the Pooka: "Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop." (O'Brien, 1939, p. 215). This may also be a nod to Beckett's mathematical aspects found in some of his works. According to Arka Chattopadhyay (2018), Beckett employed mathematical autonomy counter notions of literary realism as a means of exploring psychological and literary introspection through their works. This is done through Beckett's textuality, where instead of engaging with literal numbers Beckett imports mathematical forms into fiction, or as Chattopadhyay puts it:

“Beckett engages with mathematics in an operational way, and his texts are axiomatic in their mathematical dimension.” (Chattopadhyay, 2018, p. 47). An example of this can be found in *Murphy* (1938), where Beckett shows a great interest and focus on irrational numbers and numbers as communicative signs, for example when Murphy attempts to communicate with his mother by knocking on her skull, where the number of knocks represent meaning (Chattopadhyay, 2018). A similar interest numbers can be seen in the parts of the story regarding the Pooka, who takes great care of keeping track of even and odd numbers, whether it be in the works of Bach, the number of tails on his garments or the number of hair strands. However, these mathematical notions are more developed in Beckett’s later works like *Waiting for Godot*, which comes after *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

This is then followed up with a switch to Sweeney, where it draws a parallel with the student through the mention of watches: “Sweeny in the trees hears the sad baying as he sits listening on the branch, a huddle between the earth and heaven; and he hears also the answering mastiff that is counting the watches in the next parish” (O’Brien, 1939, p. 215-216). This depiction is interwoven with the first one through the use a watch, as every watch has twelve dials – an even, and therefor evil, number. This may allude to the passage of time, its change, and things beginning or dying, which segues into a philosophical discussion on whether or not Trellis and Sweeney were mad, and the causes of it (and in turn the effects madness had on their artistic creation) all the while referencing Hamlet and behaviourism. It is here that we are given two additional ends in the form of suicides – one physical with the man who cuts his throat three times and writes “good-bye” three times on the picture of his wife and one metaphorical, with the novel’s termination: “On another level we have another sort of self-termination: O'Brien and the Nephew have both come to an end. As Trellis's characters have disappeared, their transitory nature ended by a textual ending, so Trellis disappears, so the adolescent vanishes.” (Merrit, 1995, p. 316). In other words, the passing of the student into adulthood marks the passing of the rebellion of every aspect of the novel and in turn the passing of the novel.

4. CONCLUSION THESIS, ULTIMATE

"Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop." (O'Brien, 1939, p. 215). So too does this thesis come to a stop. Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is many things condensed into one singular novel – it is a commentary on contemporary Ireland, a discussion of where Irish Modernism is heading, a reminder of the Romantic Ireland that, as Yeats puts it in *September 1913*, "is with O'Leary in the grave", a novel about the process of writing, things beginning and ending.

At its core *At Swim-Two-Birds* attempts to convey change within literature and literary styles, how the medium through which one writes is important, the significance of style and how it is used as well as how these changes can shape the way an author approaches writing a novel. Much like the events and stylistic shifts in the novel, all of these things are in constant flux, changing as the world changes around them while continuing to be influenced by it. At the start of the novel, we see a student meditating on the important aspects one must consider when writing – characters, setting, themes and style. In other to develop these thoughts further the student begins to write a novel about an author, Dermot Trellis, who too is in the process of writing a novel. This leads to the creation of the Red Swan layer, in which the student is free to experiment with literary styles and the characters he uses. This is seen in the different styles of writing in this layer alone which are all tied to either a character or an event in the novel – the Western-like interpretations of Dublin by Shanahan, the courtroom drama during Trellis' trial, the mythological saga and fairy tales found in Finn MacCool's orations etc. Through these changes the author (Flann O'Brien) opens a discussion on where these styles of writing fit into the modern landscape and how literary forms have developed throughout the ages. Then we also have the Sweeney layer, which serve not only as a parallel to the events in the other two layers, but also the premise of the novel itself – creation and change. Throughout these layers O'Brien employs many metatextual techniques. At the end of the novel the student changes from being a student to being accepted as a fully-grown adult, which then influences the events in the Red Swan layer, leading to its abrupt end, an end which parallels Sweeney's story as much as it parallels the student's need for finishing the novel, leaving behind ripples which end the novel for good.

At Swim-Two-Birds and its author Flann O'Brien have most certainly left their fair share of wakes and ripples across the literary landscape, influencing countless authors. The novel

presents the importance of change, whether that be of a historical, political, personal, or literary nature, as well as the thought process that goes into creating a novel, play or other work of art. Because of the focus the author put on the act of writing, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is one of the most profound commentaries on contemporary literature, authorship and the act of creation as a whole.

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6. ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine how *At Swim-Two-Birds* employs and, at the same time, disrupts ideas of the Irish past and Irish culture to create its metatextual world, how it is influenced by Irish history and culture, and where Flann O'Brien ultimately fits within the scope of Modernism. This will be done by examining the turbulent period that is 20th century Ireland, the impact it had on author and the formation of Irish Modernism, as well as analysis of the novel itself, the metafictional techniques it employs and the way it adapts and uses characters to convey its message.