

The Novels of Flann O'Brien:

Myth, Reality and the Irish Context

by

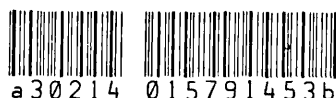
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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the two most outstanding features of Flann O'Brien's work: his comic approach, and his thematic and narrative complexity. The first two chapters explore O'Brien's use of comedy throughout his development as a writer, and examine the nature of his humour in its Irish context. Subsequent chapters deal with the four major comic novels individually, studying the author's treatment of his major theme of man's failure to establish himself in a reasonable relationship with reality, and in particular the tonal and linguistic complexity of the narrative used to pursue this theme.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<u>AS2B</u>	<u>At Swim-Two-Birds</u>
<u>TP</u>	<u>The Third Policeman</u>
<u>ABB</u>	<u>An Beal Bocht</u>
<u>HL</u>	<u>The Hard Life</u>
<u>DA</u>	<u>The Dalkey Archive</u>

These abbreviations are occasionally used for convenience in the following study, but in two situations only.

They are used when a passage from the O'Brien novel specifically discussed in the chapter is quoted; in this case the source of the passage is given directly underneath it rather than in the Notes.

They are also used, in the Notes, to give a brief page reference to an O'Brien novel which is not the specific concern of the chapter in question. When, however, a lengthy discussion is called for in the Notes, the full title of the work is generally used for facility of reading.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the five years in which I have made the novels of Flann O'Brien my study, I have received support and encouragement from a variety of people. I wish to thank, firstly, Dr Richard Cave, who, as my supervisor, has shared with me his wide knowledge of the subject and been a consistent source of encouragement. In addition, I owe many thanks to Mr Timothy O'Keefe, the publisher of O'Brien's later novels, for his generosity in talking to me about his memories of Brian O'Nolan and in allowing me to read and make use of the copies which he keeps of his correspondence with the author in those later years. I have also been fortunate in my contact with Dr Declan Stiberd of Dublin University who responded to my queries on the complexities of O'Nolan's bilingualism and its impact on the language of the novels. Mr J.A.L. McLean of Belfast discussed the articles of 'Cruiskeen Lawn' with me at great length most usefully, and my thanks to him extend to the many Irish friends who have added to my appreciation of O'Nolan's outlook in its Irish context.

This study is, however, especially dedicated to my father, Dr J. Maxwell Gardiner, who died before its completion.

INTRODUCTION

Flann O'Brien's novels (I use the pseudonym when talking of the novels since this was the name by which O'Nolan wished them to pass) can be seen as falling into two distinct groups, each being separated from the other by a gap of many years. At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman were both written before the end of 1940, while The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive were published in 1961 and 1964 respectively. Moreover, the author's approach to the novels is also quite different in each case. At Swim-Two-Birds was written over a period of some four years, having been begun in O'Nolan's last year at University College, Dublin (where he was doing an MA in Irish nature poetry), and being 'finished' late in 1939 when it was given to the author's close friend, Niall Sheridan, to read and, ultimately, to edit. This version was of enormous length, O'Brien having become blinded by excessive enthusiasm for the Celtic elements of the novel to the imbalance which these created in the whole. The radically pruned final manuscript was, however, accepted by Longmans and was published in the spring of 1939.¹ With a year, the second novel, The Third Policeman, had been devised, written, sent to Longmans, rejected, and mislaid.

The Third Policeman is outwardly a very different work from its predecessor, but it represents a further step in O'Brien's development as a novelist and his first step as a writer who has written himself into a position of some maturity of style; it not only encapsulated his hopes and ambitions as a writer of fiction, but also represented in his own opinion the pinnacle

of his achievements up to that point. Niall Sheridan was given a copy of the manuscript to read in the first months of 1940, and was favourably impressed. Longmans, however, turned it down, perhaps on account of the difficulties imposed upon them by the war. Whatever the reason, O'Brien was deeply angered and disappointed. The manuscript of The Third Policeman was not seen again for twenty-six years, in fact, in his lifetime. Various explanations were offered for its loss, such as that he had left it behind in a tram, or else in an hotel.² Those of his friends who had previously read the manuscript and admired it, tried to piece it together from memory, for they could remember it very accurately, but nothing, of course, came of it. O'Brien, one imagines, had closed the door on it. Niall Sheridan believes that he 'subconsciously wished to "lose" the book'³; I share the opinion that its disappearance was deliberate, especially in view of its eventual reappearance. For, after O'Nolan's death in 1966, his publisher⁴ asked of his widow whether she could help locate the missing work; Mrs Evelyn O'Nolan was able to find it, and permitted its publication.

The Gaelic satire, An Beal Bocht, was written the following year, 1941; it would seem that O'Nolan was not deterred from writing by the rejection of The Third Policeman, just to have abandoned the novel form. Again, this work was quite different from its predecessors, a linguistic and comic tour de force of the same high calibre as the others but in a different form. O'Nolan was an Irish-speaker from birth, an asset clearly drawn upon in An Beal Bocht, although surely it also lies behind the linguistic power of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman.

It can also be seen to have had an influence on the often highly accomplished humour of the 'Cruiskeen Lawn' column, which began at about this time and continued until his death. From 1935 until he 'resigned' in 1953, O'Nolan also occupied a full-time post in local government.

He returned to the writing of novels in 1959, at the instigation of a new publisher, who must be considered responsible to a large extent for the appearance of both the final novels. Timothy O'Keefe, then of MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., wrote to Brian O'Nolan suggesting a new edition of At Swim-Two-Birds and expressing his admiration of it. The edition was successfully published, and translations too were forthcoming into various languages. As a result, one can easily imagine, of O'Keefe's encouragement and high opinion, O'Nolan quickly began work on a third novel, The Hard Life. This was begun in the autumn of 1959 and sent to O'Keefe in January 1960, when it was published. The speed with which this work was written is, I suggest, reflected in its quality. In May 1962, moreover, O'Nolan announced in a letter to O'Keefe his intention to write 'a real book'; he began work on The Dalkey Archive, using, as one can readily see from a comparison of the texts, some of his more inspired ideas for The Third Policeman only slightly adapted for the new work. By contrast with The Hard Life this fourth novel took two years to complete, but when it was finished its author was thoroughly satisfied with it; it was his favourite of the novels, and he earnestly hoped and expected it to make his name. It was published in 1964, and then adapted for the stage, being put on at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, during

September to November of the same year. O'Nolan began to devise a fifth novel, to be called Slattery's Sago Saga, but on the 1st. April, 1966 he died of cancer without having completed it.

This study of the four major novels was initially prompted by a recognition of O'Brien's unique powers as a writer of comic prose, and of the magnitude of the comic as a literary mode among Irish writers generally. Why Irish writers had so widely adopted the comic approach, even in works of a basically serious or even bleak nature, was one question which posed itself, and exactly what the nature both of Irish humour and of O'Brien's personal version of it is, including the relationship between the two, were still more intriguing issues. My original pre-occupation with this comedy is reflected in the opening chapters, and the Irish context prompted my final chapter on O'Brien and Beckett. In the chapters dealing with individual novels the picture which emerges of the author's development is, in my opinion, ultimately a negative one of loss and degeneration; textual examination of each work revealed a greatly changing outlook in the author himself. While it becomes clear that the connection between the personality of the author and the nature of his comedy is intimate, the relationship is not a simple one. O'Brien's narrative style is rich and complex, deeply informed by his bilingualism, his own Irish context, the literary tradition behind him, and his personal dialogue with religion. What has emerged from this study, however, is that exploration of these complexities is rewarding, and that Flann O'Brien is a personality very much of his race.

Notes to Introduction

1. It should be said that the pruning and editorial work done on At Swim-Two-Birds by Niall Sheridan carefully preserved the major themes of the novel.
2. See Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, ed. Timothy O'Keefe, London, 1973, pp. 52,58.
3. Ibid., p.52.
4. Mr Timothy O'Keefe, of MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., (now of Martin Brian and O'Keefe), had latterly taken over the rights to O'Brien's works from Longmans.

Chapter One

O'Brien's Development as a Comic Writer

Part I - The Comic Outlook. Beginnings to The Third Policeman
and 'Cruiskeen Lawn'.

The single most dominant feature of Flann O'Brien's novels is surely his highly individual mastery of the comic; it is the feature which distinguishes his work more than any other, and which reflects the most accurately his own outlook and its development. What is more, his humour is particularly important in that it places him irrefutably in the long tradition of Irish comic writing in the context of which he should be read. Although it is always essential to give adequate attention to the qualities of individual works, their contents and implications, in O'Brien's case an appreciation of his mastery of the comic precedes all other impressions. Accordingly, I begin with a close examination of the nature of O'Brien's humour, and subsequently discuss the individual novels, as the various vehicles of it.

It is probably not unjust to suggest that humorous writing, in particular the quality of the comic, is the most difficult aspect of literature about which to speak. In trying to explain why we laugh, we are forced to confine ourselves to the less ambitious study of the only laughter of which we can begin to know the anatomy: our own. This is a limitation that is frequently unacknowledged, yet ultimately it is the true nature of criticism of comedy. When it is a matter of fact that people of different nationalities do not find the same things

humorous, it should be acknowledged that such variations also occur between individuals. Nor is this the extent of the problem, for laughter is a spontaneous thing, and under analysis one discovers that one's own reaction to a certain humorous piece changes perceptibly, so that the longer one is familiar with a comic work, the greater will be the distance between the critical intelligence and the immediate reaction about which it seeks to speak.

Nevertheless, one can make an attempt to discern the kind of laughter which is evoked by a certain work or rather by a certain area of a work, and the variations that are to be felt between this and other areas of it. This distinction between different areas within a novel is particularly appropriate to O'Brien, since he is a master of shifting tones, his writing displaying varying degrees of comedy and different proportions of humour and satire throughout, thus presenting the reader with both a dilemma and a challenge. Perhaps it is this quality of shifting tones that first alerts us to his participation in the Irish tradition of comic writing; while the humour of The Hard Life, for example, may accord better with Ballygullion and The Tailor and Ansty,¹ the subtlety of the comedy in the earlier works sets O'Brien among those Irish writers whose humour is more intricate: Joyce, Moore, Beckett, Yeats, and before them, Swift and Sterne. The tradition of comedy in Irish writing is not confined to relatively recent times, of course, as this may suggest, but dates even from the times before manuscript records: notably the Finn cycle central to At Swim-Two-Birds, famous for its humour. Professor Vivien Mercier's work on the comic

tradition in Ireland is both detailed and convincing, beginning with the most ancient evidence of the heritage and concluding with, among other modern writers, a reference to O'Brien himself. Although there is not space enough here to repeat his findings, his must be acknowledged as a seminal work² in the exploration of Irish comic writing, and central to my explorations in this study.

I wish to follow Professor Mercier's example in one respect, and approach O'Brien's comedy chronologically. This is particularly helpful because it reveals the very considerable changes which modified O'Brien's writing from At Swim-Two-Birds to The Dalkey Archive, illuminating simultaneously the difference in nature and quality between the novels, and the development of O'Brien's comic impulse at each stage. As the comedy develops, so does our understanding of the man. Indeed, since the information is available, it is perhaps illuminating to begin with the very earliest evidence of Brian O'Nolan's³ comic impulse and explore his university writing and journalism before approaching the four novels.

Brian O'Nolan, the creator of both Flann O'Brien and Myles na Gopaleen⁴, showed an aptitude for wit and humour from an early age, and it is from there that it is best to trace the emergence of his comic outlook. His younger brother, Kevin O'Nolan,⁵ writes that as a boy Brian would make 'acid retorts', the wit of which would often be lost on those against whom he discharged them:

He was particularly quick, as some people are, to see the comic irony of situations; others see it when it is pointed out.⁶

Kevin O'Nolan attributes this aptitude in part to their mother's side of the family, the Gormleys, and in particular, to one uncle, George, the racing journalist, with whom Brian became very friendly as a youth. George Gormley became something of a legend in Dublin journalism circles for his 'command of the crushing retort' and 'control of laconic utterance'.⁷ But the family as a whole, according to Kevin, were

sufficiently close to a rich unlettered tradition to give them command of a vocabulary and modes of speech not to be found in the ordinary dictionaries.⁸

Thus even as a boy Brian O'Nolan was inheritor and manipulator of the verbal powers and satiric disposition that were to become so widely known in his later journalism and fiction.

At University College, Dublin (1930 - 35) Brian O'Nolan soon became recognised among his friends as a man with a special talent. Niall Sheridan, one such friend, expresses it as

something more profound and disturbing than mere talent. Behind that penetrating gaze lay the saeva indignatio of a Swift and he was rapidly achieving the capacity to give it devastating expression.⁹

Accordingly, O'Nolan undertook several 'literary' projects of a comic nature at the University. One of these involved writing for the college magazine what were supposedly 'a series of short fiction pieces dealing with contemporary life, a sort of Dublin Decameron'.¹⁰ He insisted on writing these in Old Irish, a tongue unknown to the editor (Niall Sheridan), who was thus

unable to edit or censor it, but who was unconcerned since it would be intelligible only to three senior members of staff. The content of the first installment was in fact of choice bawdy humour, to the wicked delight of the author, the entertainment of those who could understand it, and the discomfiture of the editor.¹¹

Satisfying to O'Nolan's instinct in a similar way were the vivid and highly improbable episodes which he invented from about this period and also later in life with which he adorned the story of his life. Niall Sheridan again remembers this penchant:

He greatly enjoyed creating legendary adventures for himself. In some previous incarnation, he had escaped from Russia on a six-horse sleigh, during a blizzard, escorting the daughter of a Grand Duke with three million pounds worth of jewels sewn in her clothing, while a horde of starving wolf-packs howled at their heels. So well established did this myth become that, years later, it surfaced in a biographical note on Brian in Time magazine.¹²

There were very many other such yarns, O'Nolan delighting in passing over the incredible to the credulous. The same kind of delight in perpetrating the ridiculous must also have been the appeal of several projects of a hair-brained nature which he and his friends devised at that time. One such was devised to make a fortune for them all in the literary world. If one thousand monkeys were to be chained to typewriters and allowed to write novels, the result would be 'a steady stream of best-sellers and, probably, a few master-pieces'.¹³ Another scheme began with an idea of Sheridan's, upon which O'Nolan in particular

seized with enthusiasm, for a Speech serviceable for all occasions, incorporating therefore nothing but cliché and meaninglessness:

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, and reluctant as I am to parade my inability before such a critical and distinguished gathering, comprising - need I say - all that is best in the social, political and intellectual life of our country, a country, may I add, which has played no inconsiderable part in the furtherance of learning and culture, not to speak of religion, throughout all the lands of the known globe, where, although the principles inculcated in that learning and that culture have now become temporarily obfuscated in the pursuit of values as meretricious in seeming as they must prove inadequate in realisation, nevertheless, having regard to the ethical and moral implications of the contemporary situation, etc, etc, etc.¹⁴

From these anecdotes it is clear that O'Nolan's expert manipulation of language and his observation of use of language (in this case particularly cliché) are already highly developed, as is his innate satirical delight in folly. Above all, these examples clearly demonstrate that much of O'Nolan's sensitivity to the comic at this early period lay specifically in the realms of literature and language; that is, that these were at the start both vehicle and the butt of his comic attack.

In another humorous extravaganza, having both the novel and the Irish as its object, O'Nolan and his university friends planned the 'manufacture' of The Great Irish Novel, to be called Children of Destiny, a hilarious saga involving the first Irish Pope, Pope Patrick I.¹⁵ O'Nolan himself was the prime motivating force behind this scheme, and a certain amount of energy went into

its hectic preparation. When the book failed to materialise, or perhaps when the project had lost its comic charm, O'Nolan moved on to begin his own first comic novel, At Swim-Two-Birds. Sheridan, who edited the massive manuscript of this novel to one fifth of its original size before it was finally sent to Longman's, writes that this first draft was seriously unbalanced by the disproportionate amount of space given to Finn:

He had got such fun out of sending-up the Fenian cycle that he over-indulged himself ...¹⁶

Clearly, as in the early comic experiments, ridicule for its own sake and for the author's enjoyment was a considerable part of O'Nolan's impetus, a view confirmed by the power and verve of its execution.

It is illuminating, however, to consider the comedy of the first novel only after considering at some length O'Nolan's journalism, even though the former ante-dates the latter. It was in his early journalism that the essence of O'Nolan's comic spirit received its greatest outlet; in the ephemeral columns of the Irish Times Myles na Gopaleen delighted the majority of readers with his unbounded wit and humour. The comedy of the journalism merges with the humour of At Swim-Two-Birds in so many respects, that while it must be remembered that the free play of the comic spirit for its own sake is not the only aim of At Swim-Two-Birds, which has a specialised structure and design greater than is imposed on a newspaper article, the comedy of the column is an important indicator of many enduring aspects of O'Brien's comic impulse.

It was as a direct result of the audacity of O'Nolan's humour that 'Cruiskeen Lawn', his column in the Irish Times, came to exist in 1940. It all began when a play by Frank O'Connor, Time's Pocket (1938), was produced at the Abbey Theatre and immediately given bad reviews. A friend of O'Connor's, fellow Corkman and writer Sean O'Faolain, returned harsh words to the critics, and at this point, enervated perhaps by this league of naturalists, O'Nolan contributed a 'Letter to the Editor', hotly and humorously supporting the adverse criticism:

What Mr O'Faolain wants is a sound spanking - that, or five minutes with Mr Sears (the drama critic of the Irish Independent) or myself behind the fives court.¹⁷

From here the debate escalated to become one of the most memorable of Dublin literary 'debates', if such a fiasco can be so called, of the time. O'Nolan's first contribution to it was written under the name of Flann O'Brien, his first use of that pseudonym; subsequent 'letters' from the same source bore many eccentric signatures, even, accidentally, one really belonging to an actress at the Abbey who wrote hotly to deny the letter. Such was the furor aroused all this time, aggravated enthusiastically by O'Nolan, that the editor, R.M. Smyllie, sent for him privately and arranged for him to contribute instead a humorous column on a regular basis.

'Cruiskeen Lawn' was originally written in Irish, but before long included some English parts and eventually appeared entirely in English. By 1945 it was only rarely that an article appeared in Irish. As a result O'Nolan reached a larger

audience, who responded to his satirical attacks on Dublin officialdom, the Censorship Board, the newspapers and many other bodies, and outright humour of a less satirical kind, with the devotion of a following. Yet O'Nolan's success in The Times was not ostentatiously that of a satirist; for the most part his tirades were not the most original, potent or apt, and frequently attacked nothing at all. One of his great talents was manipulating subjects for their greatest comic potential, according to his own boundless ingenuity, and another his deft management of Dublin speech-rhythms and expressions: perhaps most important, however, is the fact that the column began in Irish, because neither it nor Brian O'Nolan ever lost touch with this bilingualism, either in the literal sense of drawing upon and counter-pointing the two languages, or in similarly having access to the two traditions they imply. The games O'Nolan played with grammar in his journalism significantly focus the comedy on language, showing it to be not just a medium or form of expression, but an inextricable part of the point being expressed. The word-play central to 'Cruiskeen Lawn' is no less crucial to the novels, its linguistic instability reflecting, embodying and initiating a more fundamental metaphysical instability which O'Nolan's verve explores. Likewise, the manipulation of literary tradition and with Irish conventions that is evidenced in the column, ever juxtaposing them with a satirically drawn constant of the present day (The Plain People of Ireland; the readership) are an exercise also intimately connected with the bilingualism and still very current in the novels.

A selection of O'Nolan's articles which represents the best of his humour was collected by Kevin O'Nolan in a volume, The Best of Myles in 1968; this was not the first collection to be made, but is nevertheless the most popular and the best circulated. It consists of excerpts from the column over the War years, before Myles's rich humour began indeed to become more grim and harshly satirical.¹⁸ An attempt has been made to order the articles selected in The Best of Myles under titles relevant to their content, where possible. Such an arrangement helps to underline the various ways in which his bilingualism shaped Myles's humour, so it can usefully be adhered to here.

Those articles grouped together as featuring The Brother and The Plain People of Ireland are perhaps those which are the least accessible to the non-Irish reader, for much of the humour of these pieces resides in the rich representation of Dublin speech rhythms and colloquial forms, highlighting perhaps a piece of mild absurdity such as might have been overheard in or exaggerated from a piece of pub conversation. The following is one such piece, including The Plain People of Ireland:

The ball climbs high into the air.
It seems to pause, then to fall,
falling slowly in the hot blue sky.
Jamstutter races from Square Two,
his inferior cotton 'flannels' pinned
by the wind to his fleet thighs - a
white smear of speed on the bright
June grass. Will he catch the ball?
He will. HE DOES! He reaches for
it with clean avid fingers. HE HAS
IT! Good man, good man. Good old
Jamstutter.

Again it rises in a long gentle
lob. Observe the glint of sun on
the gold-faced lace-holes. Now it
falls with a soft elegance of

descent. Jamstutter races from Square Two and again - YES - again he has caught it with prim peerless ease.

Up again, higher this time, its soft brown hue of baby hogskin blotted to a blackness against the hard glare of the heavens. Again Jamstutter moves lithely to his task. Will he catch it this time? Will he make Square Two in time? He is flitting across the grass like a hare -
The Plain People of Ireland: What is this game and who is this man Jamstutter? It doesn't sound like an Irish name.

Myself: The game is - WAIT! He's got it. He's caught it again! O good man, good man! Good old Jamstutter!

The Plain People of Ireland: Whoever is he he is not as good as Patsy, the Tipp goalie that stopped 52 sure scores in the 1937 hurling final.

Myself: But Jamstutter has a wooden leg.

The Plain People of Ireland: O, that's different. If he has a wooden leg, fair enough. He must be good so. Certainly that's very smart work for a man with wan leg. He's OK.₁₉

From comedy such as this comes the exhilarated dialogue of Shanahan and the others in At Swim-Two-Birds, which will be described in a later chapter as having the features of 'pub oratory'. Here, however, the comedy forms part of no greater whole, nor is it seriously satirical, but simply exudes humour for that humour's own power to delight.

The nature of that humour, however, is primarily linguistic. Obviously the Dublin speech rhythms and expressions are used amusingly, but the language here is not just the medium for telling a silly story. Its use in close connection with the traditional Irish game of hurling and the development of the piece into quasi-factual fantasy draws upon an Irish

comic heritage of fantasy emerging easily from fact and landing inevitably in the soft terrain of the ridiculous. O'Brien's use of language here has located himself, his story, and the whole of Ireland in a comic situation both familiar and ancient; it does not express the situation so much as embodying it.

A very prominent member of the na Gopaleen family is Sir Myles na Gopaleen, the Da. Like the Brother, the Da is a comic figure whose background and something of his character is quite carefully built up through the columns, making him quite distinct from the Brother and offering scope for various skits connected with the more well-to-do. The Best of Myles contains a lengthy series of articles on the Da's 'death', exhumation and subsequent legal wrangles, and an even more consummate, shorter piece on the problems of owning the only library ('in the true old-fashioned sense') in the country:

Sir Myles na Gopaleen (the da) was standing in the conservatory in immaculate evening dress, a figure almost kingly against the riot of banksia alba, green tomatoes, and Zephirine Drouhin. The heated air was laden with the stench of paraffin emulsion, a sign that Jenkins, the head-gardener, was taking precautions against the disorder known as Cuckoo Spit. The dusk was performing its customary intransitive operation of 'gathering'. In some far tree an owl could be detected coughing.

A clink is heard. The grand old man laid a glass of scotch and soda against the gold-laced patrician teeth and is swallowing the nourishment with the calm of a man well used to it. He is lost in thought. He wishes to go to the library. He has business there. But he remembers that his is the only library (in the true old-fashioned sense) that remains in the whole country. And he knows a thing or two. He fears the worst.

He sighs, puts down the glass and passes from the conservatory. He traverses the old baronial hall, lined with dead Gopaleens, each in his theatrical and anachronistic iron panoply. Sir Myles glances with affection at the last of them to be set there - the Hon. Shaughraun na Gopaleen, quondam ace-bottle-man in the southern command of the Black and Tans. Sir Myles passes on, smiling to himself with whimsical grace. He reaches the library and enters.

'I thought as much,' he sighs.

Stretched on the floor in a most ugly attitude is a corpse. Sir Myles has already taken up the telephone and asked for a number.

'That you, sergeant? Look here, those dreadful detective stories. Another corpse in the library this evening. Really, you know, too much of a good thing. Fourth this week. No doubt trouble is shortage of libraries. What? A young man, extremely handsome. Curious scar on left cheek. Dressed? Don't be a damn fool. You ought to know he is attired in immaculate evening dress. Do not touch the corpse and leave everything as it is until you get here? What do you take me for - an ignorant fool?'

Sir Myles puts down the instrument testily and pours himself a stiff drink. He sits down sipping it and apparently listening intently for something. Soon three shots are heard some distance away, followed by a scream.

'I thought as much,' Sir Myles mutters, 'that will be the mysterious little Belgian governess who has been seen in the neighbourhood recently'.

He rises wearily and takes a well-worn storm lantern from a cupboard. He lights it and passes with it from the library. He approaches the massive baronial stairway and mounts it. Flight after flight he traverses, the flickering light illuminating portrait after portrait of deceased Gopaleens. Soon he has reached the cob-webbed spiral stairs that leads to the tower. With agility that belies his advanced years, he grasps the cold iron balustrade and continues the journey upwards. Soon he is out on the platform of the old Norman tower, the icy wind playing on his old-world countenance. From a small press he has

taken a telescope and his eagle eye is ranging the sea. In the gloom he can make out the shape of a small ship standing in the bay. It is exchanging mysterious light signals with some unknown party ashore.

'I thought as much', Sir Myles sighs, 'question of some plans being thieved by international interests; obviously the agents of a foreign power are leaving no stone unturned. Well well well'

The grand old man wearily descends again to the library. He has lifted the telephone and asked for a number.

'Look here, sergeant, I realise I am telling you something you must know, but the corpse has disappeared during my momentary absence from the library'

'I expected as much, Sir Myles'.

'Also there were the usual shots and a scream and all that kind of thing'.

'Quite Sir Myles. It is a good job the body has been taken off your hands because I have changed my mind. I have no intention of going out to your place. This once we will let the mystery be solved by the private investigator who will accidentally arrive on the scene. On this occasion we will spare the police the trouble of making mistakes, following dud clues, arresting innocent parties, and generally complicating matters'.

'I realise how you feel, sergeant. Good night'.

Then the grand old man threw away his glasses and started using the bottle. 20

The Da articles seem to play upon an elaborate sophistication of a situation for their comedy; in the above, the hackneyed formula of detective fiction is coupled with the comic potential of the stereotyped wealthy landowner to produce a slant version of the old theme, linguistically heightened by the appropriate use of cliché and stylised vocabulary. Interestingly, the comedy focuses upon the fictional nature of the characters, who quite openly acknowledge their purely literary existence without any sense that they are anything but autonomous; one is clearly in the country

of At Swim-Two-Birds. The crux of the humour of this passage, however, is the linguistic undercutting of the over-used literary genre of the "Death in the Library". Again, there is clearly an intimate connection here with the many games played in At Swim-Two-Birds with literary and pseudo-literary genres ranging from the heroic tales of Old Irish to the cowboy tale and the jingoistic verse.

Myles's art of verbal humour is seen at its purest in the witty punning which forms the core of the Keats and Chapman pieces. In these the technique of the shaggy-dog story is brought to perfection and capped every time with a crushing pun. Professor Mercier explains that word-play was a sophistication practised by the ancient Irish poets,²¹ and O'Nolan's games with grammar, in the novels as here in the journalism, show him to be drawing on this tradition. Word-play still remains a prominent form of Irish national humour, James Joyce's writing being probably the ultimate apotheosis, and it demonstrates the traditional dualism of love for and ridicule of their own language that has always characterised Irish writers. In the Keats-Chapman series, for instance, the humour derives, not purely from the shaggy-dog sequence of expectation and anticlimax, nor entirely from the final pun. An important quality of this humour lies also in the reader's amused appreciation of O'Brien's ridicule of yet complete immersion in his language his tortuous but loving 'working back' from the pun in order to give it the greatest opportunity to resound. One or two examples will suffice to illustrate Myles's skill in creating 'prehistory' for

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his puns, and the effect of his dual approach to language.

When Keats and Chapman were at Greyfriars, the latter manifested a weakness for practical jokes - 'practical jokes' you might call them, indeed, of the oddest kind.

One afternoon Chapman observed the headmaster quietly pacing up and down in the shade of the immemorial elms, completely submerged in Dindorf's Poetae Scenici Graeci. It was late summer, and the afternoon stood practically upright on the scorched lawns, weaving drunkenly in its own baked light. Sun-struck pigeons gasped happily in the trees, maggots chuckled dementedly in the grasses, and red ants grimly carried on their interminable transport undertakings. It was very, very hot. Chapman, however, had certain fish to fry and mere heat was not likely to deter him.

He wandered off to an old tool-shed and emerged very casually, carrying a small bucket of liquid glue. He took up an unobtrusive position near the pacing headmaster, and waited patiently for his chance. The headmaster approached, turned, and moved again slowly on his way. Instantly Chapman darted out, ran up noiselessly behind the pedagogue, and carefully emptied the bucket of glue all down the back of his coat. In a flash the young joker was back again in the shadow of the elms, carefully studying the results of his work. The headmaster continued his reading, wondering vaguely at the sound of aircraft; for the shining brown mess on the back of his coat had attracted hordes of wasps, bluebottles, gnats, newts and every manner of dungfly. Chapman from his nook decided that the operation had been successful.

But the end was not yet. Two fifth form bullies (Snoop and Stott, as it happened) had observed the incident from the distance, and thought it would be funny to turn the tables. They approached Chapman under cover, leaped on him, gagged his mouth, and lifted the little fellow in their arms. The pacing headmaster paced on. When his back was turned, the two fifth form ruffians ran up behind him, jammed Chapman on to him back to back on the gleaming glue, and were gone before

the wretched headmaster had time to realise the extraordinary facts of his situation. That a howling small boy was glued to him high up on his back did not disturb him so much as the murderous punctures of the wasps, who were now angry at being disturbed.

There was hell to pay that evening. Nobody would own up, and every boy in the school was flogged with the exception of Chapman, who was regarded as a victim of the outrage.

After Keats had received his flogging like the rest, he was asked for his opinion of the whole incident, and particularly what he thought of Chapman.

'I like a man who sticks to his principals', was all he would vouchsafe.²²

In this example as with all the others one feels Myles began with the final phrase and worked out the whole elaborate story to precede it, piling on elaboration and detail. In other cases a well-known phrase or fable is altered, either by misspelling or otherwise misconstructing it, and again the preceding tale is elaborately invented:

Keats and Chapman once called to see a titled friend and after the host had hospitably produced a bottle of whiskey, the two visitors were called into consultation regarding the son of the house, who had been exhibiting a disquieting redness of face and boisterousness of manner at the age of twelve. The father was worried, suspecting some dread disease. The youngster was produced but the two visitors, glass in hand, declined to make any diagnosis. When leaving the big house, Chapman rubbed his hands briskly and remarked on the cold.

'I think it must be freezing and I'm glad of that drink', he said.

'By the way, did you think what I thought about that youngster?'

'There's a nip in the heir', Keats said.²³

Chapman once became immersed in the study of dialectical materialism, particularly insofar as economic and sociological planning could be demonstrated to condition eugenics, birth-rates and anthropology. His wrangles with Keats lasted far into the night. He was particularly obsessed by the fact that in the animal kingdom, where there was no self-evident plan of ordered Society and where connubial relations were casual and polygamous, the breed prospered and disease remained of modest dimensions. Where there was any attempt at the imposition from without - and he instanced the scientific breeding of race-horses by humans - the breed prospered even more remarkably. He was not slow to point out that philosophers of the school of Marx and Engels had ignored the apparent necessity for ordered breeding on the part of humans as a concomitant to planning in the social and economic spheres. Was this, he once asked Keats, to be taken as evidence of superior reproductive selection on the part of, say, horses - or was it to be taken that a man of the stamp of Engels deliberately shirked an issue too imponderable for ratiocative evaluation?

The poet found this sort of thing boring, and frowned.

'Foals rush in where Engels feared to treat', he said morosely.²⁴

As the latter piece indicates, these witty sophistications can become involved to an absurd degree, but this only heightens our primarily intellectual laughter and appreciation. It is this mastery of wit, word-play and punning which forms the basis of the manipulation of language both in At Swim-Two-Birds and in the Gaelic novel, An Beal Bocht, which was written shortly afterwards; the linguistic complexity of the Irish tradition is as important there as here in 'Cruiskeen Lawn', and though less obvious, continues to be so in all O'Brien's novels.

A writer possessing such immense flair and natural ear for language as did O'Nolan, must inevitably be sensitive to the misuse of language, and recognise its comic potential. Myles seized his opportunity to exploit this in the articles comprising 'The Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliche', described as:

A unique compendium of all that is nauseating in contemporary writing ... A harrowing survey of sub-literature and all that is pseudo, mal-dicted and calloused in the underworld of print.²⁵

This, as the above suggests, is the most distinctly linguistic of all Myles's comic styles. The sheer joy of exactly recalled cliché and the amount of it that is poured before the reader at once is what makes the greatest impact:

The Myles na gCopaleen Catechism of Cliche. Part Four and no wonder. Hold your nose, boys.

What is Mr Blank made after 109 years' of faithful service with the firm?

The recipient of a clock and handsome set of carvers.

By whom?

His friends and colleagues.

And as what?

A small token of their esteem.

What, according to the person making the presentation, does Mr Blank carry with him, and where?

The best wishes of the firm and staff; into his well-earned retirement.

In what are these wishes expressed by the person making the presentation?

In the course of a witty and felicitous speech.

How does Mr Blank reply?

Suitably.

What does he declare himself to have received and from whom?

Nothing but kindness from all those he was privileged to come in

contact with.

What did the proceedings then do?

Terminate.²⁶

What, as to the quality of solidity, imperviousness, and firmness, are facts?

Hard.

And as to temperature?

Cold.

With what do facts share this quality of frigidity?

Print.

To what do hard facts belong?

The situation.

And to what does a cold fact belong?

The matter.

What must we do to the hard facts of the situation?

Face up to the hard facts of the situation.

What does a cold fact frequently still do?

Remain.

And what is notoriously useless as a means of altering the hard facts of the situation?

All the talk in the world.

Is this killing you?

It certainly is.²⁷

Of all Myles's articles this concentrate of cliché is perhaps the one which appears to be least represented in the humour of the novels, the one that is the most exclusively appropriate to the Times column. Yet is it surely this same alertness to and delight in the use and misuse of language which inspires the near malapropisms of Sergeant Pluck's speech when out in search of Michael Gilhaney's bicycle in The Third Policeman:

'.. put your hands in under its underneath and start feeling promiscuously the way you can ascertain factually if there is anything there in addition to its own nothing'.

'That is very satisfactory and complacently articulated ..'

'A constituent man', said the Sergeant, 'largely instrumental but volubly fervous'.

The Third Policeman, pp.69, 71

Quite apart from specific connections, however, O'Nolan's immersion in the exact nature and current value of words, as demonstrated in the 'Catalogue of Cliché', is the same linguistic meticulousness which informs the texture of the novels, his dexterity with language, especially in At Swim-Two-Birds, being the single most important factor in both the comedy and the meaning of the work.

The ingenuity of the 'Myles na gCopaleen Central Research Bureau', however, is a humorous escapade with its own character. It is obviously a forerunner of the marvellous inventions of Policeman MacCruiskeen (the very name gleefully acknowledges this), especially of the mysterious 'mangle':

The Research Bureau is facing up to the problem posed by the jam shortage. The proposal to generate jam from second-hand electricity is being thoroughly investigated and a spokesman prominent in industrial jams - perhaps too prominent - revealed last night that experiments show that the inquiry 'will not be fruitless'. At present it is impossible to say more but an official spokesman stated that it is 'not unlikely' that the ESB and the sugar-beet people will be approached not to secure their co-operation but with a view to securing their co-operation in this vital industry. At the outset it is believed that a small army of collectors, recruited by competitive examination, will be sent out all over the country collecting, grading and cataloguing all sorts of electrical refuse (and fuse, of course). This 'raw' material will be absorbed by a factory (to be built somewhere in Ireland) where the new 'jam' will be degenerated into immense wats, pardon me, vats. Black and red currant will probably be the most popular varieties,

though, at a later date, it may be possible to manufacture a limited quantity of alternating. In addition it is proposed to establish a cottage industry, probably in Donegal, where ohm-made jam will be produced for the carriage trade. The great advantage of the scheme is that it by-passes the bottling and carton problem since the new confiture will be distributed on the mains. Also the jam will be broadcast three times daily over wave-lengths to which only the purest fruit juice will be added. There is some talk of a secret plumb jam, a savoury but perpendicular mess which it is rumoured will be extracted from the uprights of old doors. (Here, according to taste insert a wretched joke about traffic jams, or if an educated person, murmur:

'Jam! Jam! (Non domus accipiet te laeta, neque uxor Optima, nec dulces occurrent oscula nati Praeripere et ...')₂₈

A less linguistic piece and one which depends more upon mechanical ingenuity and absurd logic is the extended series of articles on the problem of running trains on fuel provided by the perpetual scooping up from beneath the moving train of peat from the Irish bogs, and using it in combustion:

My plan is that all the lines should be re-laid to traverse bogland only, and that the locomotives should be fitted with a patent scoop apparatus which would dig into the bog underneath the moving train and supply an endless stream of turf to the furnace. Naturally, it would be dried in the furnace before being burned. This principle is at present recognised in taking up water when the train is at speed, and must, therefore, be quite feasible.

Of course, there are difficulties - nobody sees them more clearly than myself. For example, unless care were taken, an express careering across a bog at full tilt might encounter a quagmire and disappear into the bowels of the earth, passengers and all. To prevent this, it would be necessary to

precede every heavy train by a light engine fitted with a prodding apparatus. This would consist of a battery of steel poles, which would be fitted to the front of the engine. The poles would rise and fall as the engine proceeded, probing carefully into the nature of the bog strata and ringing bells in the driver's cabin when the resistance encountered was less than a given limit. When the bells are heard, the driver would press a button and set in motion another machine at the engine's rear. This rear machine would consist of mammoth pounders, which would descend on the bog, feed builder's rubble into it and pulverise it to a suitable firmness. Thus, by application and perseverance, our difficulties are surmounted.²⁹

More difficulties and dangers are anticipated as this proposal (in the Swiftian sense and also manner) proceeds, but, although each is more ridiculous than the last, the proposer 'dredges up' solutions and ends triumphantly:

I almost feel justified in inviting the reader to watch this newspaper for an important announcement.³⁰

Epitomised, perhaps, in the absurdity of the Research Bureau is the delight in ingenuity, the perpetration of fantastic absurdities for their own sake, that characterises the novels' plots in the same way as word-play underlies their language and underlying nature. In her Introduction to the works of Flann O'Brien, Anne Clissmann points to the connections to be found between column and novels, even in so far as a shared joke or incident,³¹ and there are of course many facets of the journalism which have a bearing on the novels. It is also important, however, that the differences as well as the similarities between the two forms receive proper emphasis. The humour of 'Cruiskeen Lawn' is ingeniously drawn out

for the entertainment of its readers, who enjoy its liveliness, invention, parody, folly; yet their laughter at that folly is generally not that of the discerning man responding to a Johnson or a Swift, if only because it is not prolonged and directed. J.C.C. Mays assesses the difference very clearly when he writes:

If, however, The Best of Myles continues the De Selbean rhetoric of The Third Policeman it does so in an entirely different context, not that of a novel but of a newspaper and not that of a structured argument for which the author is responsible but of a daily column whose purpose is only to divert. The paradoxically more relaxing demand of a newspaper deadline at least at first encouraged the spinning out of fantasy for its own sake. It gave Brian O'Nolan a detachment which allowed him the fiendish stalking of the absurd at its own pace, to press his pursuit of folly into a world of liberated aesthetic activity Since the framework of the column was given by its surrounding context of serious news and comment, consequences could be ignored and contrivance and invention pursued to a point where their absurdity need not be underscored. Brian O'Nolan's role as a newspaperman enabled him to keep a distance from his activity as a writer. Though he was serious on occasion, the effect was predominantly to liberate his humour into the pure impersonal activity described.³²

It would be wrong to suggest that a discerning, even satirical, criticism was not involved in Myles's column, because certainly such an instinct had to lie behind the comedy. Furthermore, it must be remembered that At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman were both written prior to the author's first column appearing in the Irish Times. Nevertheless, 'Cruiskeen Lawn' could not

offer Brian O'Nolan the scope of prolonged,organised,satirical and humorous writing, so although the humour of the novels is from the same pen as that of the column, it is in effect markedly different. From considering a writer of jokes we must consider a writer of comic fiction.

The comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds can quite easily be seen as a glorious celebration of irrationalism and disorder; in fact, it treads a delicate, excitingly precarious line between celebration and satire, the celebrative element lying in the ingenuity of the plot and the narrative, the satiric in the underlying themes of irrationality and mental unbalance. Both the sense of a celebration of its own chaos, and the satire of the student narrator's fictional activities are, in their tone and degree, quite unique among O'Brien's novels.

In its celebrative aspect, the humour of At Swim-Two-Birds has something in common with Nietzsche's description of comedy as 'a release from the tedium of absurdity'; it is both a celebration of the release and a latent acknowledgement of the absurdity. By contrast, it is this 'tedium' which seems to close in on the later novels and cause them to be either darker or less comically vibrant. At Swim-Two-Birds abounds with a sense of the positive energy of life, with flexibility and resilience. Its narrative pace has much to do with this sense of positive energy; the humour, as well as the characters, would seem to be quickened by a certain 'narrative compulsion'.

One can liken this, I think, to the rough-and-tumble spirit of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, with its hectic irrationality, whirlwind aggression, demented dialogue and corruption of logic. In this aspect of its comic style, At Swim-Two-Birds clearly indulges the reader in the enjoyment, innately pleasurable but traditionally repressed, of a certain freedom from restraint, and encourages this enjoyment by the strength of its 'play' element.

The 'play' element in Irish literature is a feature described and applied by Vivien Mercier in his discussion of the Irish comic tradition.³³ Professor Mercier claims that modern Irish literature, especially Anglo-Irish literature, has absorbed much of the archaic outlook of Gaelic literature, and has thus maintained its links with the 'play-spirit' of a more primitive society. This 'play-spirit', he explains, derives from the half-belief evidenced by primitive peoples towards their myths and rituals, a half-belief which is combined with 'scoffing and pretended indifference'. The result of this 'play' element transposed to modern Irish culture has a lot to do with the quality of the comedy of Irish writers, lying behind their ability to play with words, ideas, even taboos in a 'mood of abandon'. In At Swim-Two-Birds the sense that chaos is somehow being celebrated clearly falls into this category, O'Brien's use of ancient Irish legends perhaps unwittingly encouraging the making of this connection. The novel also, moreover, revels in its quantity of fantasy and magic, themselves features of the Gaelic tradition; whether or not O'Brien, with his knowledge of Irish, was deliberately recalling his heritage is immaterial:

the effect is of the successful creative presentation of absurdity.

The celebratory and 'play' spirit of At Swim-Two-Birds perhaps accounts for the tolerant nature of the satire behind it. If one can successfully detach oneself from the eccentricity and pure Irishness of the novel, one can see it as festive comedy of the Shakespearean pattern, serving a tolerant vision of life. O'Brien's comic outlook at this stage undoubtedly recognised in man the stuff of lively comedy, his irrationality inherently humorous, deserving of some light satire evoking attitudes of amusement or mild contempt, but not of such as evokes indignation or scorn. He ridicules only so that right proportions might be restored. Even the narrative pattern of the work is in keeping with the Shakespearean parallel: we initially learn to recognise a Dublin social situation marred by an element of misrule which gradually becomes intolerable; this is finally overcome, and normality is restored by the end of the novel. This is in marked contrast to the ending of The Third Policeman, which is informed with great bleakness, and from the conclusions of both The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive, both of which end on a problematical, rather unsatisfactory note. Admittedly the 'epilogue' of At Swim-Two-Birds suggests, by its convolutions and obscurity, that the truth is elusive and the solution far from easy, but even in this the 'play-spirit' dominates the passage and seriousness is apparently kept at bay:

Well known, alas, is the case of the poor German who was very fond of three and who made each aspect of his life a thing of triads. He went home one evening and drank three cups of tea with three lumps of sugar in each, cut his jugular with a razor three times

and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye.

At Swim-Two-Birds, pp. 217 - 218

The sense of O'Brien's attitude which is conveyed by the treatment of his material is, therefore, that all the irrational behaviour depicted in the novel is in fact 'in the nature of things'. Though he has presented in his characters certain undeniable departures from the 'norm', these are treated as vagaries, and portrayed with a warm humour rather than a derisive one. O'Brien even locates himself within the novel, both in the personal humour of the isolated 'cruiskeen lawn' reference and other jokes,³⁴ and in the profound underlying concern with his own position as author, including, naturally, all the autobiographical material in the narrative. As a result, no bite really informs the humour, it displays no malice.

In this, as indeed in many of its characteristics, At Swim-Two-Birds is comparable with Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1759 - 67), which must be regarded as one of the literary ancestors of its particular brand of humour. Sterne's portrayal of the hobby-horses of his characters reflects much the same attitude as O'Brien's in At Swim-Two-Birds: the intelligent man's recognition that man, his irrationality doubly ludicrous in view of his vain claim to reason, is inherently comic, but that, this being ineradicably his nature, biting satire is useless and unwarranted, only such humour as may prompt recognition.

Like Tristram Shandy, At Swim-Two-Birds is a masterpiece of digressive comedy, the two writers adopting similar methods

by which to describe the anarchic riches of the human mind. In both, the literary technique itself is to all appearances anarchic, when in fact it has demanded careful structuring. What may be called the 'literary mischievousness' of both Sterne and O'Brien, manifesting itself in their blatant manipulation and disruption of fictional procedure, their untrustworthy authorial or quasi-authorial presence, and their technical and tonal sophistries,³⁵ is extremely purposive, the brilliant superficiality of the narrative maintaining the involvement of the reader's mind while precluding the more passive indulgence of his indiscriminating emotions. In order to do so, both At Swim-Two-Birds and Tristram Shandy are characterised by an enormous wealth of episode, anecdote and interest. Yet both lack purposive force. In neither is the comic point sharply apparent, nor even the intimation that there is a single comic point, considerably obfuscating the reader's natural attempt to form a judgement. All these things, I believe, derive from a shared purpose behind each writer's comic approach: the intention to free the reader from the limitations of easy, habitual perceptions, an intention shared by good Irish writers since the ancient Irish satiric poets. In At-Swim-Two-Birds, of course, this is achieved as much by the subject matter of the work as by the author's treatment of it.

The events of the narrative of At Swim-Two-Birds are, as has been seen, wildly abnormal: fantastic, semi-human or non-human characters are quite seriously presented in a context informed by the bizarre. Both the characters and the themes of the novel focus on irrationality, hallucination and fantasy, these things being both the locus and the raison d'etre of the comedy. Magic and dreams which, as Professor Mercier remarks, are two

related forms of irrationality,³⁶ are important constituent parts of a humour which manages to maintain a balance between culpable and delightful foible. Not only between the 'real' Dublin episodes and the 'unreal' Trellis ones, but also between paragraph and paragraph, the narrative oscillates between reason and unreason, sense and nonsense, a certain amount of arguably unthoughtful laughter being surprised out of the reader by the resultant incongruity, a prominent element of the comedy. Perhaps, however, one cannot describe laughter as either 'thoughtful' or 'unthoughtful' with justice; we are not referring here, at least, to the difference between wit and farce as the cause of the laughter. Laughter being a spontaneous reaction, it should arguably be kept separate in our minds from the degree of intellectual provocation which might coincide with it. There is such a thing, however, as laughter that is evoked in such a way that the reader is forced to suspend his judgement until such time as the author wishes to direct it. This, I believe, is frequently the nature of the humour of At Swim-Two-Birds: it can even be felt that O'Brien abstained from directing his reader's judgement until at least The Third Policeman. A brief examination of a passage taken from the dialogue of the Pooka's party as they journey through the fantastic terrain of the Unreal Domaine will illustrate the nature of this kind of humour.

The Pooka, the Good Fairy, and the cowboys, Slug and Shorty, have just encountered the poet, Jem Casey, in the forest; they are about to discover King Sweeny up a tree. The quotation is necessarily lengthy on account of the nature of the comic

dialogue, in which each subject is discursively elaborated over a series of interlocutions in order that its full value as nonsense can be emphasised.

Can you tell me, Mr Casey, said the Pooka interposing quickly, whether my wife is a kangaroo?

The poet stared in his surprise.

What in the name of God, he asked, do you mean by throwing a question like that at me? Eh?

I was wondering, said the Pooka.

A kangaroo? She might be a lump of carrot for all I know. Do you mean a marsupial?

That's the man, said Slug. A marsupial.

Stop the talk, said the Good Fairy quickly. I see a man in a tree.

Where? asked Shorty.

Too far away for you to see. I see him through the trunks and the branches.

Pray what is a marsupial? asked the Pooka.

I cannot see him too well, said the Good Fairy, there is about a half a mile of forest in between. A marsupial is another name for an animal that is fitted with a built-in sack the way it can carry its young ones about.

If you have wings, said the poet sharply, why in the name of barney don't you take a flight in the air and have a good look instead of blathering out of you in the pocket there and talking about what the rest of us can't see?

If that is what a marsupial is, said the Pooka courteously, where is the difference? Surely the word kangaroo is more descriptive?

What do you take me for, asked the Good Fairy, a kite? I will fly away in the air when it suits me and no sooner. There is this distinction between marsupial and kangaroo, that the former denotes a genus and the latter a class, the former is general and the latter particular.

I don't believe there is any kangaroo in the tree, said Slug. Kangaroos don't go up trees in this country.

Possibly, said the Pooka, it is my wife that is up there in the tree. She shares this much with the birds, that she can journey through the air on the shaft of a broomstick. It would not be hard for her to be thus in front of us in our journey.

Who in the name of God, asked Shorty, ever heard of a bird flying on a broomstick?

I did not say my wife was a bird.

You said she was a broomstick this morning, said the Good Fairy, a shank, that's what you called her.

What I was talking about, said the Pooka slowly, was kangaroos. Kangaroos.

It might be a bird in the tree, said Shorty, a big bird.

There's a lot in that, Slug said.

Very well, said the Good Fairy in a displeased way. No doubt I was mistaken. It is not a man. It is a tit. A tit or a bloody wren.

At Swim-Two-Birds, pp. 123 - 124

In an atmosphere of clashing personalities, this dialogue is underscored by a powerful sense of rushing towards a comic confrontation. Indeed, composed of such interlocutors as these, such a crisis would seem to be inevitable. The Pooka is urbane and placatory, the Fairy irascible and provoking, Slug and Shorty are rather dim-witted and Casey, while making an effort to be down to earth, is exasperated and bewildered. Much of the comedy is rooted in this combination of dynamic characters, none of whom allow themselves to be affected by the words of the others, with the result that the conversation develops at comic cross purposes.

However, the passage relies on the skill of O'Brien's comic design for the full effect of its humour. The kangaroo

motif³⁷ is the element of nonsense thrown in to act as a kind of catalyst within the dialogue. This kangaroo idea is combined with the man-in-the-tree idea, which is further elaborated when the bird idea is also introduced (the Fairy flying, the Pooka's wife flying, and the object in the tree finally being a bird) until absolute nonsense is finally made of it. The first stage in the comic degeneration is Slug's idea about the impossibility of a kangaroo being up a tree. This is immediately followed by the Pooka's remark concerning his wife, from both of which Shorty compiles his comment about birds not flying on broomsticks, and so on, to the climax in the Fairy's beautifully modulated retort, 'It is not a man. It is a tit. A tit or a bloody wren'.

Part of the art in the construction of this dialogue is that every constituent part of it is, when considered apart, some form of sense. Slug's 'Kangaroos don't go up trees in this country', the Pooka's 'I did not say my wife was a bird', even the idea of the witch on her broomstick, are not in themselves nonsense. The only bit of nonsense in the whole passage is the idea of a woman being a kangaroo, and we are already prepared to accept this from the earlier discussion of the idea between the Pooka and the Fairy. Consequently, in the Unreal Domaine in which this takes place, it is also a form of sense. What finally constitutes nonsense in the dialogue, apart from the succession of misapprehensions, is, ironically, the statement that what is in the tree is a tit or a wren, itself the most tenable suggestion in the whole passage.

Another important factor of the humour of the passage is the skill with which question and statement are juxtaposed. The

questions have a maddening quality, being either irritatingly irrelevant ('Pray what is a marsupial? Surely the word kangaroo is more descriptive?') or are themselves coloured with exasperation, which is transmitted to the reader ('Who in the name of God ... ever heard of a bird flying on a broomstick?'). The statements, which are far fewer in number than the questions, alter and regulate the pace of the colloquy, slowing it down but in doing so only emphasising the rising comic temper established by the questions. This kind of juxtaposition often happens within the same speech, such as this one of the Good Fairy's:

What do you take me for ... a kite? I will fly away in the air when it suits me and no sooner. There is this distinction between marsupial and kangaroo, that the former denotes a genus and the latter a class, the former is general and the latter particular.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.123

This particular example also illustrates, of course, O'Brien's use of pedantic expression as a comic device, especially in the Pooka; but this is also associated with his whole technique of turning 'logic' into a comedy of nonsense, a technique effective in a short sentence ('Who in the name of God ... ever heard of a bird flying on a broomstick?') or over an entire novel, of which At Swim-Two-Birds, I think, is an example.

Clearly a great deal of the humour of this passage arises from the use of Dublin speech rhythms and phrases, and even an outsider to Ireland can appreciate the comic effect of such broadly colloquial speech being put into the mouth of such a figure as the Good Fairy. While wave after wave of verbal

extravagance forces the reader to suspend his judgement and allow himself the pleasure of vicarious irresponsibility, this focus upon language, the intricacy of the repartee, subtly directs the reader's attention towards the underlying theme, the rationality or irrationality of the mind. The place of such comedy and also the need for such comedy can be understood from the nature of the theme: we are to understand that the mind is fallible, is not a certain judge as we might suppose it to be, and that this is not limited only to the student narrator. The reader is prevented by the nature of the comedy from considering this theme with his reasoning powers alone, for these may prove as unreliable as those of the fictional characters. The comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds bridges the gap between the irrationality of over-indulged imagination and that of the critical powers that may be brought to bear upon it; it is thus a balancing, mediating factor between two forms of human weakness. And all of this is basically the effect of the linguistic games O'Nolan was playing with less resonance in 'Cruiskeen Lawn'. Here is a prime example of language being more than a medium of expression but rather an integral part of the meaning expressed. In not adhering to straightforward, verifiable statement, but in choosing word-play as his central tool, O'Brien opens the door to all the metaphysical and philosophical instability and vulnerability which must be associated with linguistic instability.

Perhaps the function of comedy is always thus to separate the reader and his easy assumptions, and to compel him to constantly re-adjust his reactions. Such, anyway, is the effect of the humour in Joyce's Ulysses, where, like his technique as a

whole, the comedy of wit and word-play startles the reader into alertness. Much has been said of the relationship between O'Brien and Joyce, in particular of the place of Joyce behind At Swim-Two-Birds; many have seen the novel as embodying a satire of Joyce in the person of the student narrator. Although after At Swim-Two-Birds was greeted by the public and critics as 'Joycean', O'Brien became very impatient with this limited appraisal and vilified Joyce, the text itself really offers few grounds for supposing it a simple derision of Joyce. Certainly the student narrator's college experiences and fictional activities bear many parallels to those of Joyce's Stephen, although the college scenes in At Swim-Two-Birds also not only match O'Brien's own but are in fact often verbatim reports of his own conversations and activities. O'Brien's underlying awareness in At Swim-Two-Birds of his own presence as its author, moreover, demonstrates an active self-concern which supports the autobiographical interpretation. Indeed, it is a point of similarity between Joyce and O'Brien that they are each so concerned with his own role as author.

Nevertheless, as Anne Clissman points out in some detail in her chapter on At Swim-Two-Birds, Joyce is present in the novel and the presence is a satirical one. One factor in particular which O'Brien, on the evidence of the structure and nature of At Swim-Two-Birds, must have challenged in Joyce is the latter's belief in an author's God-like ability to order his fictional universe. As will be discussed in a later chapter when At Swim-Two-Birds itself is considered, the novel defies this interpretation of the role of author and his domination over the characters: the very predicament of Trellis embodies this. But O'Brien must have

found much to praise in Joyce, for he had much in common with him as a verbal technician and artist which he must have recognised and admired in the other man. In particular, both writers show a powerful delight in the verbal ingenuity which stems from the Irish comic tradition, and a similar inclination to encyclopaedism both in their technique and in their subject matter. Their encyclopaedism and linguistic elaboration both combine to give their writing an ambivalence of tone and meaning which each shares with the other and with the Irish tradition. Both demonstrate a genuine love for and involvement in the Irish language, and the same contempt for those who do not share this or who misuse that language. Above all, both have a huge capacity to be vitriolic or scathing about aspects of objects they care for: Dublin, Ireland, and, in O'Brien's case, Joyce himself. Those aspects of the student narrator which resemble Joyce to his detriment certainly exist. There is a definite connection, for instance, between Joyce, the student narrator, and alcohol. The narrator discovers the power of alcohol in the course of At Swim-Two-Birds, and reports being drunk several times. Joyce is said, as a result of alcohol, to have suffered from "verbal hallucination", a condition which involves hearing intelligible inner voices, rather as in Waugh's successful story The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold (1957). While it is possible that the disembodied voices of Finnegans Wake are related to this condition, it is also highly reminiscent of the nightmarish 'voices' which result from the student narrator's fictional activities in At Swim-Two-Birds. Yet again the praise O'Brien has Mick (in The Dalkey Archive) utter of Joyce, featuring "his dexterity and resource in handling

language ... his precision .. his subtlety in conveying the image of Dublin and her people, his accuracy in setting down speech authentically, ... his enormous humour", (p.103) cannot be overlooked despite the satirical portrayal of Joyce later in the same book. O'Brien's treatment of Joyce, then, features the same duality which we have come to look for in his writing; he can delight in Joyce and delight in the artistic gifts he himself shares with Joyce, while at the same time attacking the mystique which has come to be built up round him, including those aspects of Joyce which he feels have collaborated in building up that mystique.

Another very important common factor between O'Brien and Joyce is their use of ancient tales. Joyce's use of legends is, of course, primarily Greek myths, Dedalus and Ulysses, but Finn MacCool is the principle figure of Finnegans Wake (1939), and is also alluded to in the 'Cyclops' episode of Ulysses. Although Joyce quotes from fake epics of Finn by James MacPherson, which are wistful and melancholic in flavour, his actual presentation of them in Finnegans Wake shows an awareness of the marvellous, grotesque and violent nature of the original Finn tales. Alone of the tales used by Joyce in his work, the Finn story also has a comic aspect in its original form. For both O'Brien and Joyce, the greatest gift of the Finn cycle for their own work was perhaps not its qualities of heroism and, later, near-romance, but its comic style and unique connection with the fabulous and the fantastic. In O'Brien particularly this aspect of the Celtic heritage is important in describing the nature of his early humour, and in pointing up the way in which it developed.

There are two important aspects of the humour of the Finn tradition. One of these, the type of humour most central to At Swim-Two-Birds, is bound up with the development of the tales from the magic and marvel of early Irish culture. As early as the eighth century, fantastic humour appeared in the Finn tales, which subsequently accumulated magical and fantastic elements that were at first unintentionally ludicrous and then deliberately so; the Irish have always had a highly developed sense of the absurd, and these tales exemplify it, Finn in the very late tales being almost as much of a humorous figure as Conan Mac Morna. Many of the better known Finn tales, however, revel in particular in the quality of the ridiculous, especially in the sense of characters being made to look ridiculous, Conan being the most outstanding butt of this humour over a long period. In At Swim-Two-Birds Conan is not overtly made a fool of, as in his original context, but the nature of the dialogue between him and Finn here successfully reproduces the sense of the ridiculous that would have informed an ancient story:

Relate further for us, said Conan.
It is true that I will not, said
Finn.

With that he rose to a full tree-
high standing, the sable cat-guts
which held his bog-cloth drawers to
the hems of his jacket of pleated
fustian clanging together in
melodious discourse.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.14

This similarity of the ridiculous humour in At Swim-Two-Birds and in the original Finn stories is partly due to the dominant place in both of fantasy, magic and witty language; the use to which fantasy in particular is put in At Swim-Two-Birds is discussed

at length in Chapter Three. In both, however, the magical nature of the fantasy is coloured in places with the suggestion of something far more grim, something touching, albeit slantingly, the roots of the pain of life. In the case of the Finn tales, Conan's unfortunate adventures frequently result in him experiencing humiliation through some kind of physical disablement, being perhaps turned to stone, rendered speechless, or, in one case, losing the skin off his buttocks and being forced to replace it with sheep-skin such that the Fianna can shear him for wool. Such is the treatment of these incidents that the brutality of the subject is made almost subservient to the comedy, but it remains a significant part of that comedy. What is actually happening is that in the move from the heroic to near-romance in Old/Middle Irish poetry, comedy is put to serious use in the transition. The result is a greatly increased complexity of tone and inflection, enriching the potential significance of the tale as a whole. This is the second aspect of the comedy of the Finn tales which is important in the context of At Swim-Two-Birds. The latter too contains much humour that is bound up with insistent corporeality: the 'hum' that comes off the narrator, his infection with lice, the disagreeable sneeze of Mr Corcoran, and the 'unpleasant buff-coloured puke' which Kelly releases all over the disciple of Rousseau. The humour of such things as these is really in much the same vein as that of Conan's buttocks: it acknowledges the existence of the animal body and its curious, repulsive, comic and intimate nature and adds a further dimension to the humour of the novel. Readers of At Swim-Two-Birds have expressed the feeling that with the torturing of Trellis by the

Pooka the novel changes so dramatically in flavour that they have experienced a sense of alienation from the humour which they had previously been enjoying. Although this section of the novel is clearly intended to echo the Sweeny passages of earlier in the work, the latter, protected by the archaism of their expression perhaps, had not had the same disruptive effect. The tone has been deliberately complicated, and it is probably not excessive to suggest that a quality of the grotesque has been introduced, on account of the rending of Trellis's person with its severe emphasis on the distortion of the body. The question must arise, however, of the exact nature of this grotesque; is this the grotesque of Beckett, for example, whose characters suffer increasingly with bodily distortion, disablement and finally disintegration? Is it the grotesque of Joyce's brothel scene in Ulysses, a kind of cinematic portrayal of physical mores? Of these two, Beckett's is surely a grotesque which also partakes of the macabre, having always such a close association with the idea of death that it might amount to an obsession. While this is clearly not O'Brien's position, the comparison must not be dismissed too hurriedly, as At Swim-Two-Birds is the only one of O'Brien's novels not to have a considerable connection with death: The Third Policeman is located in a death realm and the Protagonist is constantly threatened with death from the gallows; in The Hard Life, Mrs Crotty and eventually Collopy himself die, the latter in magnified and elaborated detail; and in The Dalkey Archive the action is divided between the plot to kill the population of the earth and the refusal to die of Joyce and finally even of De Selby. Nevertheless, O'Brien's grotesque, at least in At Swim-Two-Birds, is

not Beckett's; nor is it the sexual grotesque of Joyce's brothel. Perhaps its single most powerful element is its playfulness, its sense of rioting imaginative power, its elaboration of the theme of bodily vulnerability:

An anabasis of arrow-points
beneath the agnail, razor-cut to
knee-rear, an oak-stirk in the
nipple, suspension by nose-ring,
three motions of a cross-cut
athwart the back, rat-bite at
twilight, an eating of small-
stones and a drinking of hog-slime,
these are eight examples.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.175

It has already been said that O'Brien's first novel displays to a great extent the mark of the 'play-spirit' of the Gaelic heritage, and in its nature this grotesque element is not fundamentally different in its impulse. In addition, At Swim-Two-Birds is a work of the imagination which is highly inventive, even experimental in nature, and involves the breaking down and restructuring of reality into a new, fantastic entity; the grotesque, in the playful, headstrong form in which it is found in this novel, is a natural extension of this process. Furthermore, a certain amount of grotesque is surely the inevitable concomitant of nonsense humour, as a close examination of Carroll's work alone will confirm. However, though successful on the level of the 'play-spirit' alone, the grotesque part of At Swim-Two-Birds cannot be said to be exclusively purposeless and playful, for if it were those readers who found themselves alienated by it would not have been so. Alienation is perhaps not too strong a word, either, for the grotesque treatment of the torturing of Trellis is quite in keeping with the theme of the dangers of the

imagination; O'Brien has so far treated this the reader cannot assume any easy position of his own faculties, and the process continues v alienation. It is not in fact the body which shattered in the torturing episodes, it is not the frailty of the mortal animal that O'Brien upon the reader. The grotesque here disorient and in so doing disrupts the reader's easy as ality. Moreover, one characteristic of O'Bri its verbal power and witty convolutions; acc of it is that the disorientation of the reader familiarity of language. Once again it is se language is diminished, trust in the powers of thought must equally be diminished. Thus, w nature of the 'play-spirit', O'Brien's use o end of At Swim-Two-Birds is a radical, disru in keeping with, and extending, the develop theme in a similar way to his use of ingenic

It does, however, alter the charact technique generally in a way not confined to his theme at this particular point; in his with the exception of the Gaelic satire An again writes the sort of exhilarating, play satirical prose of the first novel. The de grotesque climax of At Swim-Two-Birds seems humour of The Third Policeman and is remar two much later novels. Yet in The Third P actual grotesque in the form of bodily dis

suggestion that the grotesque torture of Trellis has affected the rioting comedy of the earlier passages of At Swim-Two-Birds. The Third Policeman is, by contrast, immobile, inflexible, stubborn, and informed with sterility.

In a letter to William Saroyan on 14th February, 1940, O'Brien wrote of The Third Policeman:

It is supposed to be very funny, but
I don't know about that either
there is any amount of scope for back-
chat and funny cracks.³⁸

The doubt conveyed in these words is not unfounded; the humour of The Third Policeman is seriously constrained by the novel's overall form. No movement, traditional in comedy, from disorder to order is permitted here, no resolution or ultimate discovery of truth. The ending of the novel, unlike that of At Swim-Two-Birds, is an archetypal non-ending; it contains no suggestion of a new beginning in any real sense, only, as O'Brien himself wrote of it, a portrayal of experience as 'the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered'.³⁹ In fact, far from comprising a solution, it is 'very nearly unbearable'.⁴⁰ The bleakness of this novel, especially compared with its predecessor, is undeniable, but this is not to say that its humour is not powerful. Perhaps the most important quality of the humour of The Third Policeman which differentiates it from that of the earlier book is its perpetual relevance to the novel's theme; even where the humour is situated in nonsense and unreason it is appropriate to a serious issue.

The Third Policeman, to a much greater extent than At Swim-Two-Birds, is centrally, in fact exclusively, concerned

with the obsession and unreason of its single central character. The novel is progressive in form, in contrast to the digressive nature of At Swim-Two-Birds, but, in fact, both are as they are for the same reason. O'Brien, like Sterne, felt that a linear form in fiction did violence to the facts of observed existence, so in At Swim-Two-Birds a digressive form was emphasised. O'Brien has not swerved from this belief in writing The Third Policeman, but chooses to reflect in its construction the 'linear' outlook of the Protagonist whose mind, limited by obsession and the single-minded reliance on the powers of his own intellect, he means to portray. Thus The Third Policeman reflects man's liability to mental inflexibility as eloquently as Tristram Shandy expresses that equally manifest inflexibility, the hobby-horse obsession. It is, in fact, appropriate to find the form of The Third Policeman odd and unnatural as a successor to At Swim-Two-Birds, in that this shows the measure of the author's success: the linear fictional form is as odd and unnatural as is the obsessed mind of the Protagonist.

This rigidity of mind of the Protagonist is, of course, gravely and unhumorously portrayed on account of his being the fallible consciousness behind the narrative. Though thus seriously presented, however, the Protagonist is simultaneously caricatured by the author through the naive sincerity with which the character presents himself as recognisable and trustworthy to the reader. Thus, while our first impression of him is of a trustworthy narrator, an unavoidable reaction to the first person style, the enormity of his pretensions gradually reveal themselves until we find ourselves certain of their monstrosity. From this

pressure we are never relieved, as the apparently imminent crisis is perpetually postponed. This is the background against which the novel's main theme of the satire of the intellect is worked out.

There is thus a very different relationship between irrationality, hallucination and humour in The Third Policeman and At Swim-Two-Birds. Whereas in the latter the irrationality and hallucination were overtly presented as humorous, this open and direct connection is withheld from the reader of The Third Policeman, with the result that what constitutes the humour of the novel is very much more problematical. One may even feel that one's laughter or inclination to laugh is inappropriate. One perceives madness in the hallucinatory realm of The Third Policeman, but, unlike the madness element of At Swim-Two-Birds, one is not sure of its 'joyousness'. For instance, the story of MacDadd is redolent of madness, but shaded by the ambivalence I refer to; it is told to the Protagonist by MacCruiskeen in the context of the former's own imminent hanging:

'I believe they are going to stretch you,' he said pleasantly.

I replied with nods.

'It is a bad time of the year, it will cost a fortune', he said, 'You would not believe the price of timber'.

'Would a tree not suffice?' I inquired, giving tongue to a hollow whim of humour.

'I do not think it would be proper', he said, 'but I will mention it privately to the Sergeant'.

'Thank you'.

'The last hanging we had in this parish', he said, 'was thirty years ago. It was a very famous man called MacDadd. He held the record for the hundred miles on a solid tyre. I need to tell you what the

solid tyre did for him. We had to hang the bicycle'.

'Hang the bicycle?'

'MacDadd had a first-class grudge against another man called Figgerson but he did not go near Figgerson. He knew how things stood and gave Figgerson's bicycle a terrible thrashing with a crowbar. After that MacDadd and Figgerson had a fight and Figgerson - a dark man with glasses - did not live to know who the winner was. There was a great wake and he was buried with his bicycle. Did you ever see a bicycle-shaped coffin?'

'No'.

'It is a very intricate piece of wood-working, you would want to be a first-class carpenter to make a good job of the handlebars to say nothing of the pedals and the back-step. But the murder was a bad piece of criminality and we could not find MacDadd for a long time or make sure where the most of him was. We had to arrest his bicycle as well as himself and we watched the two of them under secret observation for a week to see where the majority of MacDadd was and whether the bicycle was mostly in MacDadd's trousers pari passu if you understand my meaning'.

The Third Policeman, pp. 90 - 91

Perhaps it is the juxtaposition of this undoubtedly humorous tale with the idea of the Protagonist's 'stretching', his fear of which has inevitably been conveyed to us, even though somewhat undercut, which subdues the comedy of this passage, or perhaps it is the persistence of the particular 'logic' of this realm exemplified in the bicyclosis idea which affects one's reaction; whatever the reason, one's merriment is qualified and complex. It is made even more so, indeed, by other quite different passages, such as Michael Gilhaney's lack of balance due to his percentage of bicycle atoms, to which joyousness is an entirely appropriate

reaction, despite, in this case, the same 'logic' of bicyclosis being involved. The reader's laughter is by no means a simple or consistent thing in The Third Policeman, because there is in the narrative a curious, highly effective balance between his awareness of the theme of human irrationality and his instinctive response to the comedy of the irrational and illogical in which it is expressed.

This complexity is, of course, successfully exacerbated by the fantastic nature of the narrative. Fantasy is an element of the comic which is a particularly definitive part of the Irish literary heritage, both Irish and Anglo-Irish writing having long-established traditions of fantasy emerging from everyday fact, from the fantasy intrinsic in some of the adventures of, for example, the Finn cycle, to the modern version of 'pub oratory'. Fantasy in its close association with fact is equally part of the Irish imagination and the Irish comic tradition. As such it is one of the basic constituent parts not only of works like James Stephens's The Charwoman's Daughter and Mary Lavin's The Becker Wives, in which fantasy is seen to replace fact in the mind of a woman; it is also an important tool of the Irish comic writer. For O'Brien when he was writing At Swim-Two-Birds fantasy became a complex and multifaceted device which he was able to use structurally and thematically as well as linguistically, all the implications and effects of which must be discussed when the themes of the novel are considered. Suffice for the moment to say that in At Swim-Two-Birds fantasy is at once more obtrusive and less constantly sustained than in The Third Policeman. In this second book, which in some respects develops and refines aspects

of its predecessor, the element of fantasy is for the first time sustained without interruption for the length of the novel. It is therefore both less obtrusive as a fictional device and more subtly effective. It is effective primarily on account of a single important quality of fantasy, a quality upon which the author relies to a large extent in The Third Policeman for his tonal complexity: not its comic potential, but its contradiction of perspectives. Therefore, although one is aware of having stepped with the Protagonist into some kind of hellish or purgatorial, nonsensical realm, this is not really a lucid, unequivocal comic datum. The reader is never entirely certain of the perspective of the scene before him, of the relationship between the fantastic and the actual, either with regard to the narrative adventure or to the significance of the novel as a piece of prose. Another way in which this can be seen is as the problem the reader has in discerning the degree to which the humour of the novel is informed by the satirical. Upon the answer to this, or the failure to make a satisfactory answer, depends the nature of the laughter with which the reader responds to the novel.

A clear distinction between what is satirical and what is comic is only possible at certain extremes. If the comic or humorous is defined as a type of writing which aims solely to evoke laughter, and the satirical as one which is designed to provoke a reaction of some critical kind towards a person, or failing, beyond the immediate scope of laughter, whether it be derision, contempt or strong indignation, there is clearly going to be much in the tonal wealth of most comic writing which will not be confined to either one definition or the other. This is

very much the case with O'Brien. While he never ruptures the tonal sophistication of his novels with the voice of a Juvenal or a Dr Johnson, yet, in the way in which his humour contributes to themes of the mental instability of man in both At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, it must be said that both narratives have a sustained satirical tone.

The nature of the satirical tone in At Swim-Two-Birds is very reminiscent of some of Swift's satire, in which the Irish people, their institutions, their fallacies, are subjected to a sustained irony. O'Brien does not satirise as if it is his object to force his victims to quail before him. Rather, whole aspects of the novel are imbued with a satirical temper, not a vitriolic one, for this would be inappropriate to the subjects satirised, but sustained and incipient. Frank O'Connor expressed his feelings on this subject along the same lines when he wrote:

None of us could ever fashion a story or a play into a stiletto to run into the vitals of some pompous ass. Oliver Gogarty, like Brian O'Nolan of our own time, could make phrases that delighted everybody, but the phrases never concentrated themselves into the shape of a dagger; they were more like fireworks that spluttered and jumped all over the place, as much a danger to his friends as to his enemies. Irish anger is unfocused; malice for its own sweet sake, as in the days of the bards.

Frank O'Connor, 'Is this a Dagger?'
Notion, (1958), pp. 370 - 371

"Unfocused Irish anger" captures rather well the missing purposiveness, the diffuseness of the satiric tone of O'Brien's narratives

as a whole, although he does focus in places on cameos of much stronger satire, among them the leaping competition in At Swim-Two-Birds and obviously Joyce in The Dalkey Archive. The quality of the narrative itself, however, suggests that the satiric tone alone would not have satisfied the author, that his reaction to the foibles of man required this to be tempered. In the journalism, of course, the swift attack was supreme, but in the narratives O'Brien shows a taste for sustained but qualified irony and parody. This centres on the Irish heritage, of course, when Finn is parodied in At Swim-Two-Birds, successfully ridiculing mystique and misplaced reverence which now adheres to the ancient heroes, while not detracting from the real merits of the poetry. In somewhat the same way Irish pretensions to virtues not their own are the butt of O'Brien's satiric tone throughout the first novel, yet the attack is made as if by a comrade. Scenes in which the narrator and his friends drink heavily, roam the streets, and kick around their college basement undercut the narrator's pretensions to aesthetic creativity, as does his pompous discourse to Brinsley in the context in which we then see it developed, but O'Brien's tone is gentle and familiar. The satire of the narrator's pretensions to creativity is the umbrella under which other foibles are mocked, since one of the favourite qualities which the Irish treasure in their national character is imagination; yet At Swim-Two-Birds itself is a huge imaginative romp. This becomes more complex when the parody of The Artist as a Young Man is taken into account, Joyce not only being satirised in his own right but as a national figure around whom much mystique and pretension has accumulated, yet O'Brien's autobiographical

presence here is in no doubt.

While this intricate satiric tone invades the aspects of At Swim-Two-Birds overtly concerned with the real Dublin world, a fantastic element dominates other parts of the novel which seems to alter the complexion of the narrative somewhat. Unlike in Swift's writing, where word-play and fantasy blend harmoniously into the satiric whole, in the latter parts of At Swim-Two-Birds the fantastic element subdues the satiric tone somewhat, and makes the reader's reaction a more complex and unsettled one than it might have been had the Pooka and the Fairy not set off together. The actual effect of this change of narrative quality will be discussed at length in a later chapter. It is balanced, however, by a similar complexity in The Third Policeman.

The Third Policeman and Swift's Gulliver's Travels have in common a fallible narrator with an 'Everyman' element who makes a naive and 'trustworthy' appeal to the reader while actually being satirically though unobtrusively undercut by the author. In each case the central character's foibles and pretensions are elaborately given rein until to the reader they become almost blatant, while the Protagonist himself remains constitutionally unaware of them. Unlike Gulliver's Travels, however, the actual activities of the Protagonist of The Third Policeman frequently partake of a nonsensical nature uninformed by a satiric meaning readily available to the reader. Whereas, in the case of the incident in Gulliver's Travels in which Gulliver urinates on the burning apartments of the Lilliputian Empress in order to put out the fire, the reader is able to recognise Swift's

indication of the contrast between this bestial deed and Gulliver's inflated opinion of himself, the reader of The Third Policeman is not permitted any easy interpretation of, for example, the readings taken by the policemen in their 'Eternity'. This and other examples of the nonsense humour of The Third Policeman remain absurdities never penetrated by O'Brien. They happen in a generally dream-like, nonsensical, and even in places surreal fictional domaine, which has all the appearance of randomness and irrationality. The reader experiences as a result a certain degree of emancipation from the pressure of reason, a liberation of the mind from significance, the effect of which is two-fold. Firstly he is made to experience irrationality for himself, and secondly it is shown to him that human reason is fallible: the theme of the novel.

As a result, in The Third Policeman even more than in At Swim-Two-Birds, the reader is deliberately exposed by the humour to a prolonged interpretative difficulty. He is constantly asked to make sense of patent absurdities (not only the fantastic devices of MacCruiskeen, but also, for example, the meaning of 'Joe', the significance of the one-legged men and the other fantastic elements of the domaine), to confront repeated oscillations between apparent sense and nonsense, reason and unreason, and even to accommodate occasional touches of pathos which further complicate the tonal inflexions of the narrative. He is asked, not only to suspend his judgement, but also to doubt it, to doubt even his comic response. This conflict itself gives rise to a kind of inward laughter, but one that is characterised by a lack of release of tension; humour's reconciliation of confusion is not

forthcoming. The comedy of The Third Policeman is a planned confusion designed to exercise the reader to the full; the exercise is in understanding - in right understanding - by means of the substantial failure of the normal processes of understanding which the author wishes to show are fallible. It is really less a comic procedure than an enquiring one that the reader undergoes. His delight in detecting idiocy in the narrative is both a design to stimulate his enquiry and a trap for his enquiring mind, which alerts us again to the satiric presence of the author.

However, these difficulties and problem^{atical} effects are to be felt rather in the effect of the novel as a whole than in particular passages, for The Third Policeman, like At Swim-Two-Birds, shows O'Brien's comic ingenuity and skilful manipulation of language to a high degree. Much of the humour of the novel can be attributed to its quality of elaboration, exaggeration and enormity; one thinks immediately of the mechanical devices of MacCruiskeen, the prolonged and complicated bicyclosis theme, the extensive commentators on de Selby and even those that commentate upon them, de Selby's own elaborate theories such as the barrel of the sausage, even the fact that the policemen must all be giants and Finnucane's gang all one-legged men. It might ultimately be said that elaboration is one of the central devices of O'Brien's comic technique at this stage, as it works both in its own right and in exacerbating elements which are already comic in another fashion. The effect of the elaboration technique can be seen very effectively when the Protagonist invents the loss of an American gold watch as a pretext on which to enlist the help of

the Sergeant in finding his 'black box':

'I came here to inform you officially about the theft of my American gold watch'.

He looked at me through an atmosphere of great surprise and incredulity and raised his eye-brows almost to his hair.

'That is an astonishing statement', he said at last.

'Why?'

'Why should anybody steal a watch when they can steal a bicycle?'

Hark to his cold inexorable logic.

'Search me', I said.

'Who ever heard of a man riding a watch down the road or bringing a sack of turf up to his house on the cross-bar of a watch?'

'I did not say the thief wanted my watch to ride it', I expostulated.

'Very likely he had a bicycle of his own and that is how he got away quietly in the middle of the night'.

'Never in my puff did I hear of any man stealing anything but a bicycle when he was in his sane senses', said the Sergeant, ' - except pumps and clips and lamps and the like of that. Surely you are not going to tell me at my time of life that the world is changing?'

'I am only saying that my watch was stolen', I said crossly.

'Very well,' the Sergeant said with finality, ' we will have to institute a search'.

He smiled brightly at me. It was quite clear that he did not believe any part of my story, and that he thought I was in delicate mental health. He was humouring me as if I were a child.

'Thank you,' I muttered.

'But the trouble will only be beginning when we find it', he said severely.

'How is that?'

'When we find it we will have to start searching for the owner'.

'But I am the owner'.

Here the Sergeant laughed indulgently and shook his head.

'I know what you mean,' he said.

'But the law is an extremely intricate phenomenon. If you have no name you cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not exist and when it is found it will have to be restored to its rightful owner. If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on

you though they look as if they were from where I am sitting. On the other separate hand you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you'.

'It had fifteen jewels', I said despairingly.

'And on the first hand again you might be charged with theft or common larceny if you were mistaken for somebody else when wearing the watch'.

'I feel extremely puzzled', I said, speaking nothing less than the truth. The Sergeant gave his laugh of good humour.

'If we ever find the watch', he smiled, 'I have a feeling that there will be a bell and a pump on it'.

The Third Policeman, pp. 53 - 54

This passage is similar in quality to that from At Swim-Two-Birds quoted earlier in this chapter in which the characters of the Pooka's party are at cross purposes, upon which they elaborate to good effect. The kernal of the above passage, however, is that nonsense is treated quite unequivocally as sense, and sense as nonsense, nonsense being the norm and having the upper hand in the person of the Sergeant. The elaboration begins with the latter's legal sophistries which are pursued on a comically rising note up to the point at which the Protagonist says despairingly that the watch had fifteen jewels; here the veil of at least partial comprehensibility and acceptability breaks down effectively under the double blow of the lack of sequentiality of the remark and our knowledge that not only is there no such watch but that the Protagonist knew, a moment before, that he himself had invented it. Finally, as the Sergeant returns to his bicycle obsession, with the remark about the bell and pump, the passage seems to have come full circle, which increases the sense of the impenetrability and unassailability of the rule of nonsense within it.

The humour of exaggeration and elaboration in The Third Policeman is frequently coupled with a major comic technique centring on faulty logic. Sometimes the logic is really faulty, as in the above instance, sometimes it only takes liberties with sense, as in the bicyclosis theory. Many of the characters are logicians in their way, but biased by a mad preoccupation such as bicyclosis; however, the very conception of the adventure itself works on the same principle, each hallucinatory episode created from the last by a subtle 'logical' progression. The result, perhaps, of this use of crazy logic, and of the consequent accretion of the humour of meaninglessness and the drawing out of an idea to its absurd extreme, is really only the humour of incongruity. Frequently this sense of incongruity adheres to the narrative situation, such as in the juxtaposition of the quasi-real landscape and the surreal police barracks, or the combination of the naive Protagonist, the obsessive Sergeant and the bicycle Gilhaney in search of a stolen bicycle appropriated by the Sergeant. This must be one of the simplest forms of the comic, unlike its linguistic counterpart, verbal incongruity, of which the best examples are to be found in At Swim-Two-Birds, as has been noticed, though many occur in The Third Policeman.

Incongruity, is, of course, one of the effects created by the skilful caricaturist, and O'Brien has taken advantage of the fantastic realm of The Third Policeman to exercise his considerable talent for caricature. That he enjoyed doing this immensely is demonstrated by the rather superfluous detail of having the Sergeant tap his head, which makes 'a booming hollow sound, slightly tinny, as if he had tapped an empty watering-can

with his nail'.⁴¹ One of the most outstanding pieces of caricature is the Protagonist's description of old Mathers after the explosion, in which the Protagonist has a vivid impression of the apparently receding reality of Mathers' eyes. Another example is the scene in which the Protagonist first comes upon the Sergeant in the police barracks, his great red hand to his gaping mouth, murmuring 'It's my teeth'. Indeed, it is when one considers the caricature in O'Brien's humour in The Third Policeman that one realises the extent of purely humorous physical detail that there is in both of these early novels. In The Third Policeman the hallucinatory domaine is peopled by giant policemen, one-legged bandits who run a most serious three-legged race, and men who are part bicycle and tend to fall over when stationary; all of this, of course, is doubly comic in view of the actual physical non-existence both of the Protagonist and of all his hallucinatory creations. In At Swim-Two-Birds the humour of the body ranges from the lice-ridden, swollen-legged Dermot Trellis and the lichen-stained rump of Finn to the grotesque humour of Trellis's torture. It is not until The Hard Life, however, that physical humour assumes a really dominant position in O'Brien's comedy.

Although The Third Policeman is very different in general nature from its predecessor, it is both highly successful as a comic novel and has more in common with At Swim-Two-Birds than

may appear. It is, in fact, the natural successor to the first novel, in which one of the author's concerns was with his own apprenticeship as a writer. In 1939, when At Swim-Two-Birds was completed and O'Brien started work on The Third Policeman, that apprenticeship was over and the author set out to write from the experience he had gained and the opinions he had formed over the past four years. The changes which appear in The Third Policeman are the result of this experience, but the novel seeks to maintain the same high standards and uses many of the same devices. There is even a similarity in the equivocal nature of the blend of satire and humour in the two books. Moreover, both depend to a great extent on the technique of fantasy for their effect; fantasy as a part of O'Brien's approach was never to be used again after the rejection of The Third Policeman. It was a greatly embittered satirist and humorist who returned to fiction twenty years later. That is why At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman make one unit as comic literature, and The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive make another. The comic outlook of the young O'Brien in the early period has a distinct style. Although institutions like the police and the Gaelic Athletic Association are mocked, and failings like self-delusion and pride are ridiculed, it is hard to feel, in At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, that O'Brien regarded the world around him as a serious entity fraught with folly and misery which has to be harshly chastised in the manner of a Dr Johnson, a Juvenal or even a Swift.

There is too much in his humour which fails even to attempt to do this, and too little direction of the satirical elements for it to be successful

in this way. As there is certainly more to the novels than mere frivolity, one is led to feel that O'Brien saw the world as in some way innately informed with humour, and this, coupled with the very important factor of his own comic talent and delight in exercising it so successfully, accounts for the spirit of the first two novels. His presence, moreover, can be felt vibrantly in both, tinging the humour with a pleasant self-consciousness resulting in both the gaiety of the ridicule and one's sense of its place in the Irish tradition of being able to laugh at oneself. Perhaps one could conclude with a quotation from The Third Policeman which the fanciful might see as an analogy of O'Brien's position as a comic writer:

'And why is Fox crazy?' I inquired.

'I will tell you that much. In MacCruiskeen's room there is a little box on the mantelpiece. The story is that when MacCruiskeen was away one day that happened to fall on the 23rd of June inquiring about a bicycle, Fox went in and opened the box and looked into it from the strain of his unbearable curiosity. From that day to this ...'

'And what was in the box?'

'That is easily told. A card made of cardboard about the size of a cigarette-card, no better and no thicker.

'I see', I said.

I did not see but I was sure that my easy unconcern would sting the Sergeant into an explanation. It came after a time when he had looked at me silently and strangely as I fed solidly at the table.

'It was the colour', he said

'It was not one of the colours a man carries inside his head like nothing he ever looked at with his eyes. It was different

Did you ever in your travels meet with Mr Andy Gara?' he asked me.

'No'.

'He is always laughing to himself, even in bed at night he laughs quietly and if he meets you on the road he will go into roars, it is a most enervating spectacle and very bad for nervous people. It all goes back to a certain day when MacCruiskeen and I were making inquiries about a certain missing bicycle. ... Andy was a sensible man at the time but a very curious man and when he had us gone he thought he would do a clever thing. He broke his way into the barrack here in open defiance of the law. He spent valuable hours boarding up the windows and making MacCruiskeen's room as dark as night time. Then he got busy with the box. He wanted to know what the inside of it felt like, even if it could not be looked at. When he put his hand in he let out a great laugh, you could swear he was very amused at something'.

'And what did it feel like?'

The Sergeant shrugged himself massively.

'MacCruiskeen says it is not smooth and not rough, not gritty and not velvety. It would be a mistake to think it is a cold feel like steel and another mistake to think it blankety. I thought it might be like the damp bread of an old poultice but no, MacCruiskeen says that would be a third mistake. And not like a bowl-full of dry withered peas, either. A contrary pancake surely, a fingerish atrocity but not without a queer charm all of its own.'

The Third Policeman, pp. 133 - 135

Inside the closed box is something which defies reason and cannot be rationalised; it is not itself rational as we conceive rationality. If one tries to penetrate its mysteries, one is forced to laugh, to see things differently as a result. If this be interpreted generously one can see the box as the mind of man, those who scrutinise it being compelled to regard life differently

thereafter, and adopt a comic outlook. For O'Brien in his early years, perhaps, this scrutiny was an experience indescribable except by means of a compulsive comic technique.

Notes to Chapter One

1. Lynn Doyle, Ballygullion, Belfast, 1908.
Eric Cross, The Tailor and Ansty, Dublin, 1942.
2. Vivien Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, Oxford,
1962.
3. In speaking of the author in a context other than that
of the novels, for which he took the pseudonym
Flann O'Brien, I will use his real name, Brian
O'Nolan.
4. Myles na Gopaleen is also seen as Myles na gCopaleen.
5. Most of the information about Brian O'Nolan's early
years comes from Kevin O'Nolan, 'The First
Furlongs', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan,
ed. Timothy O'Keefe, London, 1973, pp. 13 - 31.
6. Ibid., p.17.
7. Ibid., p.15.
8. Ibid., p.15.
9. Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles', Myles. Portraits
of Brian O'Nolan, (op. cit.), p.36.
10. Ibid., p.36.

11. Ibid., pp. 36 - 37.
12. Ibid., p.39.
13. Ibid., p.40.
14. Ibid., pp. 40 - 41.
15. Ibid., pp. 41 - 44.
16. Ibid., p.47.
17. Jack White, 'Myles, Flann and Brian', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, (op. cit.), p.62. The brackets are, I believe, Mr White's.
18. The Best of Myles, ed. Kevin O'Nolan, London, 1968.
(Picador, 1977), Preface.

In its more recent years the tone (of the column) was often more sombre, more fiercely satirical, and (contained) many passages of savage denunciation.
19. Ibid., p.110.
20. Ibid., pp. 156 - 158.
21. The Irish Comic Tradition, (op. cit.), p.5.
22. The Best of Myles, (op. cit.), pp. 180 - 181.
23. Ibid., p.190.
24. Ibid., p.195.
25. Ibid., p.202.

26. Ibid., p.204.
27. Ibid., pp. 208 - 209.
28. Ibid., pp. 125 - 126.
29. Ibid., pp. 114 - 115. This also recalls George Moore's Hail and Farewell (1911 - 1914), in which a similar idea occurs.
30. Ibid., p. 116.
31. Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975.
32. J. C. C. Mays, 'Brian O'Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination', Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, (op. cit.), pp. 99 - 100.
33. The Irish Comic Tradition, (op. cit.), pp. 9 - 10, 79 - 80, 244.
34. AS2B, p.14. For other examples of O'Brien's position within the novel see Chapter Four.
35. Rudiger Imhof, 'Two Metanovelists: Sternesque Elements in Novels by Flann O'Brien', Anglo-Irish Studies IV, 1979, pp. 59 - 90.
36. The Irish Comic Tradition, (op. cit.), p. 5.
37. It is interesting to note that in 1930 John Collier's book His Monkey Wife, or, Married to a Chimp achieved some popularity, the theme turning on the wife, Emily, who is in fact an ape.

38. The passage concerning The Third Policeman in this letter is quoted in full in the Picador edition of the novel to which my page reference refers.
39. Brian O'Nolan, letter to William Saroyan, 14 February, 1940. Quoted in Picador edition.
40. Ibid..
41. TP, p. 33.

Chapter Two

O'Brien's Development as a Comic Writer

Part II - The Passing of Innovation. The Hard Life, The Dalkey Archive and the Final Perspective.

In 1961, O'Brien began work in earnest on his third novel, The Hard Life, after not having written fiction in the form of a novel since The Third Policeman in 1939 - 1940. The Hard Life demonstrates that much had changed in O'Brien's outlook and the nature of his comic technique in the intervening years. There is no exuberance in this work as there was in At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, in the sense in which a narrative reflects an author's explorative creativity; while the first two books were highly innovative, The Hard Life is, as regards the fictional form and approach, highly conservative. The innovative work of the young O'Brien was never again to be reflected in his fiction. In fact, it is not unfair to say that, as comic fiction, his work is marked by a certain progressive diminution. Lush and complex manipulation of language, for example, is never seen again to the same extent after At Swim-Two-Birds, nor does O'Brien subsequently make use of the comic and thematic potential of Irish legend. Fantasy as part of a comic technique is not used again after The Third Policeman; the nature of fantasy in The Dalkey Archive is quite different, as I have already explained. O'Brien's concern with himself and his position as author reappears in The Hard Life only to be put to

rather ineffective use, and thereafter has no part in the comic fiction; with this concern, of course, that warm humour which derives from the willingness and ability to laugh at oneself also largely perishes.

The author's friends and acquaintances speak of him as, at this period, showing increased cynicism and coldness of heart towards the world at large, and an inability or disinclination in his journalism to distinguish between objects deserving, or less deserving, of his satire.¹ Yet the evidence of O'Brien's letters to O'Keeffe are remarkable proof of the ebullience of his comic spirit and the strength of his hopes for, and belief in, the success of these later novels as comic pieces. This is particularly so, and particularly curious, in the case of The Hard Life.

In June of 1961, O'Brien wrote to Timothy O'Keeffe that The Hard Life was 'a very important book and very funny', adding that 'its apparently pedestrian style is delusive';² in later letters, however, he refers more briefly to the work as 'a treatise on piss and vomit'³ and as having a 'major implied theme about lavatories'.⁴ In these latter comments he is putting stress upon the continuing saga of Mr Collopy's mission to establish a system of public conveniences for women in Dublin, a theme extended in remarks about the 'clinical hydrometer', in the interview with the Pope, and in a variety of puns throughout the novel, such as the Mayor's familiarity with chains,⁵ which culminate in the excruciating one on Collopy's tombstone - 'his name is writ in water'. O'Brien's other letters to O'Keeffe concerning The Hard Life deal only with the matter to be put on

the cover of the book; however, these comments are perhaps more illuminating than the others in one respect. They are not only rather amusing in themselves, but also suggest in O'Brien an important new element in his attitude towards his fiction: a certain purposeless disposition towards them, a willingness to indulge in a romp of nonsense purely for the diversion of the fancy. The comments read:

Material is yet to be supplied for back of cover. There is room for another portrait here, but whose? Plato, St Augustine, or Groucho Marx? The accompanying letterpress can be solemn humbug.⁶

As regards the back of the cover, the reviews etc could be accommodated on an inner flap. The back could carry a picture of a head (anybody's - Martin Luther's?) with the slogan "Thomas Aquinas would have liked this book, for he wrote ..." and here would follow a piece of bullshit written by me (with occasional Latin glosses). This would amuse the sophisticates, impress the ignoramuses, and drive the Jesuits frantic with anger.⁷

'Solemn humbug' and 'bullshit' are quite accurate descriptions of this work in its entirety. In places, admittedly, it is punctuated, sometimes at great length, with satirical casuistry aimed to make the most of the comic potential of the Jesuits, or simply to satirise the Order as the above suggests, but in general The Hard Life is purely an entertainment, not sharing the qualities of a comic novel so much as those of a protracted comic column.

O'Brien says of it:

I feel that any biographical material should be omitted, particularly the disclosure that Flann O'Brien is a pseudonym.

There is no point in it if the real name is also given. Incidentally, if a pen-name is admissable, why not a pen-face?⁸

O'Brien's emphasis here on anonymity is appropriate if he regarded the work in question as other than a serious novel against which he was willing to stand, as I believe was the case. I do not suggest that the above comment was intended to convey this to O'Keefe, as clearly the pseudonym had been in use since At Swim-Two-Birds; the fact remains, however, that comedy of The Hard Life is not, even where most humorous, that of an organised and a carefully formed comic novel.

The result of this quality is also the best proof of its truth. The Hard Life evokes, in many places, the audible laugh if it evokes laughter at all; the reader is not bewitched by its author's cunning, so has recourse to immediate amusement. There is no complexity involved in this reaction, no inner laughter of a thoughtful or compound quality. There is no seriousness either in the reader's amusement or the writer's intention. Nobody and nothing in the narrative is subject to any ulterior design, unless it is with regard to the little mystery surrounding the true nature of Collopy's obsession. The novel ends on a note which is exclusively concerned with this lavatorial theme, the 'humour of piss and vomit', to use the author's own words. The reconciliation of comedy, the sense of the fulfilment of a comic design, is absent, while this conclusion yet seems in harmony with the work as a whole. Reconciliation is, indeed, irrelevant to The Hard Life because it does not concern itself with a problem calling for reconciliation or the satisfaction of a formal fulfilment. Even a conclusion

as such is not required in a work in which there is no shape: The Hard Life, unlike At Swim-Two-Birds or The Third Policeman, is in no way circular in form, merely passing, rather from episode to episode, dialogue to dialogue, in a linear fashion. Most important of all, however, The Hard Life calls for no final solution or regenerative movement at the end because in it O'Brien has not fundamentally been in the least concerned, one feels, with his Dublin characters. His outlook has changed from that of the first two novels; it is now no longer in the nature of a warm, humanitarian outlook, but is informed by a much less sympathetic awareness of the comic nature of man. In its shallowness and paucity as comic fiction, and in the shallowness and paucity of its characters, The Hard Life gives a greatly reduced sense of human depth and richness than did its predecessors.

One can even suggest, moreover, that if the discourse between Collopy and Father Fahrt, for example, had been presented as isolated pieces of Jesuit satire in a context such as 'Cruiskeen Lawn', both the humour and the ridicule would no doubt have come across with considerably more impact than they do in the context of the novel. What this in turn suggests is that the material and the medium of The Hard Life are badly matched, and this contributes considerably to the disparity between the effect of the humour on the reader and the claims made for it by O'Brien. As it is, the comic material is presented very discursively, often in the form of long pieces of casuistry, or alternatively in the manoeuvres of the plot. There are no effective, short passages to which one can point as highlights of the comedy, or indeed reproduce and examine. This, though not in itself, of course,

a sign of the failure of that comedy, is further compounded with another failure, which is rather more serious: this is the absence of a dream-, fantasy-, hallucination- or any other appropriate stylistic situation effectively carried through the novel which might formally affirm the irrationality or other comic failing in the characters, or generally contribute to the comic 'tour-de-force' effect necessary to be certain of the success of comic prose. What lets The Hard Life down most seriously is the absence of purpose, organisation and power which differentiates it from its predecessors. It presents no challenge to the reader.

Such amusement as it affords, however, lies in the physical comedy of the effect of Gravid Water on Mr Collopy, in the humour surrounding his lavatorial obsession, in the humour clearly looked for from the pretentiousness and audacity of Manus, and in the comedy of the conversations of Collopy and Father Fahrt. The latter in particular are redolent with the comic potency of Dublin speech rhythms, coupled with the comic contrast arising from Father Fahrt's attempted refinement and Collopy's unconsidered volubility:

I will tell you a funny one, Father, Mr Collopy said. A damn funny one. I will give you a laugh. We had a committee meeting last Wednesday. Mrs Flaherty was there. She told us all about her dear friend, Emmeline Pankhurt. Now there is a bold rossie for you if you like, but she's absolutely perfectly right. She'll yet do down that scoundrel, Lloyd George. I admire her.

She has courage, Father Fahrt agreed. But wait till you hear. When we got down to our own business, discussing ways and means and ekcetera, out comes the bold Mrs Flaherty with her plan. Put a

bomb under the City Hall!

Lord save us!

Blow all that bastards up.

Slaughter them. Blast them limb from limb. If they refuse to do their duty to the rate-payers and to humanity. They do not deserve to live. If they were in ancient Rome they would be crucified.

But Collopy, I thought you were averse to violence?

That may be, Father. That may well be. But Mrs Flaherty isn't. She would do all those crooked corporators in in double quick time. What she calls for is action.

Well, Collopy, I trust you explained the true attitude to her - your own attitude. Agitation, persistent exposure of the true facts, reprimand of the negligence of the Corporation, and the rousing of public opinion. Whatever Mrs Flaherty could do on those lines, now that she is at large, there is little she could do if she were locked up in prison.

She wouldn't be the first in this country, Father, who went to prison for an ideal. It's a habit with some people here.

The Hard Life, p.59.

It is becoming increasingly clear that O'Brien's verbal humour is directed more and more to a specifically Irish readership with each succeeding novel; The Hard Life depends to a great extent on its Dublin inflexions and Irish implications for its humour, and The Dalkey Archive, too, makes a particular appeal to Irish readers in, for example, the Dublin accent of St Augustine, Hackett's tirades, and, to a more limited extent, in the presentation of Joyce. Regarding The Hard Life alone, however, the greatest source of humour is probably the ridiculous events of the plot; but, inescapably, a dull narrator inevitably makes for a dull narrative, a pedestrian style, at least when there is

no clearly distinguishable authorial voice behind it, as is the case here.

The Dalkey Archive, however, is far more successful as a comic novel, despite being, like The Hard Life, much more conservative in conception and execution than At Swim-Two-Birds or The Third Policeman. This greater success is undoubtedly the result of the author's having had a serious purpose in writing it in addition to his comic impulse, as his comments in letters to O'Keefe amply testify. After his initial promise that he intends to embark on a 'real book',⁹ he writes at some length about working on the Time theories of Dunne and Einstein, of satirising the modern obsession with science and space travel, and of making full use of the comic or satiric potential of Saint Augustine and James Joyce.¹⁰ Both of these seem to lead him to explore the 'comic content of sanctity',¹¹ and to the derisive study of 'various writers'.¹² Whether or not all these proposals were successfully carried through, their original existence in the mind of the author adds power to his satirical pen.

The place of satire in these novels, brought to a focus by O'Brien's stated intentions with regard to The Dalkey Archive, would seem to be a prominent one, especially in contrast with At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, in which the blend of satire and humour in the comic texture has appeared to favour the humorous. In The Hard Life, as a result of the poverty of

the humour rather than of a particularly satirical drive in O'Brien, the reader's attention is drawn to the satire of the Jesuits within it, and to the satirical treatment of the Collopy-led reform group, the police and the Gaelic Athletic Association, even though some of these may be very cursorily treated. The characters of The Hard Life, with the possible exception of Finbarr, are seen very much from the outside, extrinsically, such that it is not difficult for the reader to develop a satirical attitude towards them. The interview with the Pope is probably the most successful example of the derisive sketch, its comedy turning on a single ridiculous element, cunningly presented and blatantly purposeless. As a result of this purposelessness, however, The Hard Life must be said to be only in part, but not generically or predominantly satirical. The Dalkey Archive, however, presents a rather more complex blend of satire and humour; moreover it displays a balance between these elements which is also different from that of At Swim-Two-Birds or The Third Policeman, for at least in The Dalkey Archive satire is acknowledged.

The clearly satirical treatment of religion, of James Joyce, of the Irish idea of 'Messianism' and to a more limited extent of literature will be discussed in detail when the novel as a whole is considered in a later chapter. In addition, O'Brien's presentation of the Irish people in both The Dalkey Archive and The Hard Life is treated in a manner alternating between the satirical and the simply humorous.

In making skilful use of the distinctive idioms and speech patterns of his Dubliners, their great store of talk, their limitations, misconceptions and boundless confidence, be they Collopy, Sergeant Fottrell or Hackett, there is a genial measure of sustained parody. However, in The Dalkey Archive, uniquely among the novels, O'Brien introduces extensive ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, God and the Devil, in De Selby's plan to destroy the world and Mick's resolution to prevent him, in Sergeant Fottrell's anti-bicyclosis activities, and additional diminutive elements. Although De Selby's plan is fantastic, in fact constituting the sole element of real fantasy in the novel, and not offered in a serious manner to the reader, its concomitant implications minutely adjust the quality of the humour. This is compounded by the fact that in the previous novels O'Brien has been concerned to ridicule intellectual absurdity in every case, never moral aberration; in The Dalkey Archive, though with a very light touch, the implications begin to take a more moral, or at least spiritual, inflexion. The Dalkey Archive is the nearest of the novels to a protreptic statement of O'Brien's positive idea: the necessity for man to achieve a proper relationship with reality on a spiritual as well as on a personal level.

Inextricably involved with this serious or satirical level, however, is an enormous quantity of genial humour in The Dalkey Archive. O'Brien spoke, in one of his letters, of making 'a monstrous comic debauch' in the novel of the theories of Dunne and others, the result of which is the episode under the sea off Dalkey where Mick and Hackett witness a confrontation between

De Selby and Saint Augustine. Elsewhere, De Selby provides some comedy with his eccentric manners and designs, and the lengthy discussion which often pivots round these is used to protract the humour, whether successfully or not is arguable and certainly it varies from place to place. In places a satirical note is involved, but frequently the humour is incidental to it. Protraction, elaboration and casuistry are effective elements of the comedy of The Dalkey Archive and The Hard Life, as they were earlier of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman. Perhaps the most pronounced feature of The Dalkey Archive, however, is O'Brien's obvious joy in compiling an extravaganza around a massive conglomeration of diverse material; his treatment of Dunne and Saint Augustine is an elaborate, philosophical romp, and it is very successful when given free rein. On top of these there are Joyce, Mary, The Trappists, Father Cobble, Sergeant Fottrell and all the wealth of material of which this novel is made up. Light-hearted liberation is central to the reader's enjoyment of The Dalkey Archive, and it is facilitated by the plethora of incident and concern. The reader is made free of a small chaos; the humour which he experiences can be corporately said to turn on 'the failure of human dignity' in many guises.

Two instances in particular encapsulate the humour which O'Brien draws from the failure of dignity in The Dalkey Archive. One of these is the passage in which Joyce is finally confronted by Mick with the matter of the authorship of Ulysses. Joyce explains:

I was shown bits of it in type-script. Artificial and laborious stuff, I thought. I just couldn't take much interest in it, even as a joke by amateurs. I was immersed in those days in what was intrinsically good behind the bad in Scaliger, Voltaire, Montaigne, and even that queer man Villon. But how well-attuned, they were, I thought, to the educated Irish mind. Ah, yes. Of course it wasn't Sylvia Beach who showed me those extracts.

Who was it?

Various low, dirty-minded ruffians who had been paid to put this material together. Muck-rakers, obscene poets, carnal pimps, sodomous sycophants, pedlars of the coloured lusts of fallen humanity. Please don't ask me for names.

Mick pondered it all, in wonder.

Mr Joyce, how did you live in all those years?

Teaching languages, mostly English, and giving grinds. I used to hang around the Sorbonne. Meals were easy enough to scrounge there, anyway.

Did the Catholic Truth Society pay you for those booklets you wrote?

Not at all. Why should they?

Tell me more about Ulysses.

I paid very little attention to it until one day I was given a piece from it about some woman in bed thinking the dirtiest thoughts that ever came into the human head. Pornography and filth and literary vomit, enough to make even a blackguard of a Dublin cabman blush. I blessed myself and put the thing in the fire.

Well was the complete Ulysses, do you think, ever published?

I certainly hope not.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 176 - 177

The short, clipped sentences of Joyce's speech here are skilfully modulated to produce an effect of precision suggesting primness. By the side of this his easy and fluent condemnation of the 'sodomous sycophants' and 'literary vomit' effect the satirical undercutting of both his 'Skerries' persona and his original

character. As to content, the best of the comedy lies in the condemnation of Ulysses as 'pornography and filth' being put into Joyce's own mouth, accentuated by the prim little codas like 'Please don't ask me for names' and 'I blessed myself and put the thing in the fire'. Joyce's comment that Scaliger, Montaigne, Voltaire and Villon are 'well-attuned to the educated Irish mind' is ludicrous, of course, whether it is based on what is left of these writers after a narrow-minded exorcism of their anti-clerical elements, or reflects back to the qualifications 'bad' and 'queer'. Joyce's assumption of great piety here is, in the context of our knowledge of him from other sources, quite ridiculous, so that in this episode he emerges stripped of the dignity with which he is enshrined in the modern mind and which, the reader is made to feel, might have been at pains to cultivate for himself during his lifetime. Thus the humour of lost dignity involves again, the satirical treatment of pretentiousness. The same two elements, loss of dignity and ludicrous pretentiousness, constitute also the comedy of this second passage, taken from Mick and Sergeant Fottrell's theft of the DMP substance:

The sergeant stood up and looked at Mick searchingly.

We are on a rarefied secret business tonight, he said in a confidential tone, and we want nobody to be showering obnoxious attentions on us contemptuously. For me to go out on the roads or streets of this parish without my bicycle would be worse than going out without my trousers on me.

Well, I know, but ...

I have never appeared in public without my bicycle, though that is not to say that I was ever so vexed a fool as to get up on it.

Mick realized that here was no question of etiquette but of discipline tender as steel. Clearly his own role was to be adroit, diplomatic. The thing was to get De Selby's container and hide it overnight as unnoticeably as possible. Argument or contention was unthinkable.

Of course, Sergeant, I quite realize that a bicycle wheeled by one's side is a form of disguise. I quite approve. But one thought has just crossed my mind.

Ah, a micro-wave? And what is that?

I've just remembered that you have my bicycle locked up in one of the cells. Would it be a proper thing for me to wheel mine?

The sergeant frowned. The point was apparently a knotty one in cycle liturgy. Mick bit his lip.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 152 - 153.

The whole of this passage is light-weight but delivered with an appearance of great seriousness. It is almost mock-epic in tone, a melodramatic tension being established with the 'rarefied secret business', the Sergeant's confidential tone, his final deliberative frown and Mick's biting of his lip. Both the Sergeant and Mick take themselves very seriously here, and both are undercut by the author's treatment of them, stripping them entirely of dignity by means of ridicule. The misused words of the Sergeant are cleverly chosen so as to sound appropriate and slip off the tongue while remaining nonsensical, such as 'obnoxious', 'contemptuously', and 'micro-wave'; Mick's pretention and his tendency to endow himself with high status is concisely conveyed in the image 'discipline as tender as steel' and in the epithets 'adroit, diplomatic'. This blend of pretention and loss of dignity is central to the humour here and the flavour of much of The Dalkey Archive.

Contributory to the humour thus originating in lost dignity and pretentiousness is O'Brien's frequently indulged humour of the non sequitur in dialogue. In this respect Sergeant Fottrell is an invaluable element in the humour of The Dalkey Archive, and indeed the purest and most successful humour in the novel derives from the scenes in which he is involved. However, the following scene, in which Hackett, the worse for drink, expounds upon the injustice done to Judas Iscariot, demonstrates both the power of the non sequitur in O'Brien's manipulation of comic dialogue, and in addition the humour he tries to derive from the purely argumentative diatribe.

They say he bought a field with the money, he ventured.

Ah now, interposed the sergeant, I have often thought that that divil of a man was at heart a country Irishman, consecutively because of his eerie love of the sod -

Hardly, Mick muttered.

His soft yearning for good parturitional land phlegmatically, with its full deposits of milk and honeysuckle.

As I said before, Hackett barked savagely, Peter was a worse louser and lackey, perpetrated his low perfidy after Judas had betrayed his Master, and got nothing but thanks for his day's work. Yes sir! The Case of the Missing Witness. Judas may have had a good and honourable intention, as De Quincey held. Peter's conduct was mean and cowardly, his first concern being his own skin. Yes, that's one thing I'm going to work for.

What?

Rehabilitating Judas Iscariot.

He was the class of a man, the Sergeant put in, that you would meet exactly in a place like Swanlinbar, or in Cushendun of a fair day.

How will you do that?

Agitate to have the record amended. All the obloquy heaped on him is based on nothing but inference. I hope to have part of the Bible re-written.

The Holy Father would have a say in that.

To hell with the Holy Father. I will work to secure that the Bible contains the Gospel according to Saint Judas.

Saint Judas, pray for us, the sergeant recited solemnly, then drank solemnly.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 66 - 67

It is the combination of the various qualities of the three characters here which so enhances the comedy. Hackett provides the stimulus of savage, alcohol-induced partisanship and preposterous declarations of intention, Mick has the rôle of awkward peace-maker, returning answers to Hackett and so fuelling the fire of the comic argument, while the Sergeant is the catalyst, his irrational interjections, coloured with satire of the Irish of which he himself is blissfully unaware, forming a highly amusing pattern of non-sequential remarks. It is these humorous interruptions which make the passage particularly successful; there are unfortunate passages elsewhere in the novel, however, which rely for their humour solely on the argumentative interaction of the characters without such highlights. Such passages, of which the discussion of the matter of Jonas and the 'whale' is one, are less spontaneously comic and demonstrate the importance of irrationality in O'Brien's humour.

Finally, The Dalkey Archive benefits considerably in terms of its humour from the technique of incongruity previously successful in the early novels. Even in The Hard Life something of this kind of humour was involved, in the Papal interview, for instance, and even in Collopy's increased weight, incongruous in view of his slight build. The latter depends, of course, on the

reader visualising such scenes as the ascent to the railway station, but this is encouraged by the precision of the narrative. The element of incongruity in The Dalkey Archive takes many forms, from Mick's estimation of himself as God-like to Joyce's appearance as a Catholic bar-man in Skerries. Its pervasive tone, together with the heavy irony which can be felt at the very beginning of the novel, encourages the reader to appreciate in the narrative any ironic, ridiculous or satiric nuance within the comedy. The latter, however, from moment to moment appears the more compelling and dominating. Such is the nature of the blend of the satiric and the humorous in The Dalkey Archive.

The Dalkey Archive is, as a result, and in contrast to The Hard Life, not only successful in places but an overall technical, or comic, success. Its humour is compelling and its satirical element enhances its appeal. However, this is not to say without qualification that The Dalkey Archive is a success as a piece of comic fiction. In my opinion one can say of it that it is a technical (comic) success, with all that involves of skill and contrivance, but not that it is also a thematic success; the confusion surrounding the novel's themes will be discussed shortly. Thus, while being comic and highly readable, the novel is unsatisfying in that it does not answer, or even pose, any real question. While in a way this enhances the irrationality of the humour, it does nothing for the quality of the novel taken as a whole, and this diminishes the comic effect in the long run. To be truly effective, for instance, the foolishness of man, should this be the author's subject, has

to be considerably exaggerated in comic fiction. While one can point to De Selby's scheme and Mick's pretensions as being excessive enough, in the experience of reading the novel this is not the case. In the absence of a durable fantastic context, and especially in view of the novel's rather pedestrian narrative style - we follow Mick's every action relentlessly, including his least riveting pause for thought - The Dalkey Archive lacks a certain impetus. Its humorous dialogues wander blithely from sense to foolishness and back, but, with the exception of Sergeant Fottrell, 'foolishness' rather than 'irrationality' is in question, and even this is not thematically followed through. The novel is supremely governed by the 'play-spirit', that quality which has its roots in both humour and satire, simultaneously and ambivalently, but it is unsupported by a thoroughly constructed or effective texture of wit and thematic inflection; the latter is lazily attended to in comparison with the two early novels.

The highly individual comedy of O'Brien's novels from At Swim-Two-Birds to The Dalkey Archive has now been initially examined, at least according to the response of a single reader, whose feelings may not, of course, be those of others. It has been suggested that there appears to be a very considerable alteration in O'Brien's comic style between these works, and in the degree to which the novels are ambitious and successful as comic fiction. I account for the greater success which I

attribute to the two earlier novels not by the amount of effort put into them by the author, for I feel that At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Polileman were, of the four, probably the more easily achieved, but by the combination of thematic and constructional control and verbal humour paramount in the first novels. Verbal humour is, in my opinion, O'Brien's greatest gift, and when this is relaxed the work concerned does not reach the comic potential of which its author is capable. At Swim-Two-Birds is as ebullient as it is because its emphasis on wit and language never wanes. Those parts of The Dalkey Archive which are the most amusing are passages in which O'Brien's talent for the manipulation of language is indulged, such as in the Sergeant Fottrell episodes and the many, unfortunately intermittent brief passages where the humour is predominantly linguistic or underlined by phrasing or wording:

... And now this Joyce phantasm, a man back from beyond the grave, armed only with the plea that he had never gone there, yet hiding under a name unknown in a little town.

The Dalkey Archive, p. 106

Thus, Mick interposed, if you extract all oxygen from the atmosphere or destroy it, all life will cease?

Crudely put, perhaps, the scientist agreed, now again genial, but you may grasp the idea.

The Dalkey Archive, p. 20

O'Brien's mastery of verbal humour, the result as will be seen of his bilingualism, is, however, most readily seen in the 'Cruiskeen Lawn' columns and in the Gaelic satire, An Beal Bocht (The Poor Mouth).

The latter, though not part of this study, can be discussed in this connection as far as the limitations inherent in the English reader's appreciation of it will permit. It is, even when one cannot appreciate the nuances originally intended by the author concerning the translation of Gaelic into English, replete with the immense verbal mastery of a writer thoroughly conversant with the nuances of two languages:

The return in darkness of the pig was amazing but still more amazing was the news which he imparted to us when he had partaken of the potatoes, having been stripped of the breeches by the Old-Grey-Fellow. The Old-Fellow found a pipe with a good jot of tobacco in one pocket. In another he found a shilling and a small bottle of spirits.

Upon me soul, said he, if 'tis hardship that's always in store for the Gaels, it's not that way with this creature. Look, said he, directing his attention to the pig, where did you get these articles, sir? The pig threw a sharp glance out of his two little eyes at the Old-Fellow but did not reply.

Leave the breeches on him, said my mother. How do we know but that he'll be coming to us every week and wonderful precious things in his pockets - pearls, necklaces, snuff and maybe a money-note - wherever in Ireland he can get them. Isn't it a marvellous world today altogether?

How do we know, said the Old-Grey-Fellow in reply to her, that he will ever again return but live where he can get these good things and we'd be for ever without the fine suit of clothes that he has?

True for you, indeed, alas! said my mother. 13

Quite apart from the ridiculous nature of this passage, regarding the pig in breeches which is expected to tell of its adventures

(the parallel between pigs and Gaels is one which O'Brien exploits to the full in this work), and the debate concerning the wealth which has fallen from his pockets and how to get more of it, the humour here centres on the Irish/Gaelic speech pattern, the inversions of word order, the distinctive use of 'but', and the spontaneous expressions such as 'Upon me soul' and 'True for you, indeed'. All this is heightened by the immense fluency of these Gaels and their far from succinct style. It is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that most readers would smile or laugh frequently while reading each page of The Poor Mouth.

The immense comic power of the 'Cruiskeen Lawn' pieces and An Beal Bocht raises interesting questions. In simple fact, none of the novels is really as humorous as either of these two works, and several possible explanations come to mind to account for it, each in some way connected with verbal humour. One of these is that in the column and in An Beal Bocht O'Brien came closest to a predominantly satirical position, the 'Cruiskeen Lawn' column being an ideal forum for satirical comment, and An Beal Bocht having a satirical purpose from the outset. It was, he wrote,

an enormous jeer at the Gaelic morons here with their bicycle clips and handball medals, but in language and style it was an ironical copy of a really fine autobiographical book written by a man from the Great Blasket Island off Kerry (long dead and island now uninhabited) and translated into English under the title The Islandman by the late Robin Flower of the British Museum. 14

Able to concentrate his powers on the exclusively comic and satirical demands of these pieces, O'Brien's considerable talent was unrestrained. This letter suggests a second explanation for the verbal emphasis and comic power of these particular works, however, and that is their proximity, in impulse and often in subject matter, to the Gaelic heritage, itself characterised by verbal humour to a large degree. 'Cruiskeen Lawn' was originally written in Irish and maintained, according to its nature, a close connection with Irish concerns. An Beal Bocht's relationship with Irish matters speaks for itself. In writing both, O'Brien must have been called upon to draw upon his personal proximity to the Irish language and tradition, its idiosyncracies and potential.

A third possible reason for the supreme comic power of 'Cruiskeen Laan' and An Beal Bocht lies in their form. In the brief, concentrated medium of the column, and likewise in the episodic nature of the Gaelic satire, O'Brien could focus his comic impulse and lose none of its impetus. In the novels, by contrast, not only was the scope much greater, but the need for the author to concern himself with theme, development and the general organisation of a large piece of work was exigent, and would inevitably tend to lead to a diffusion of the comedy. Of the novels, At Swim-Two-Birds is the most comic, and it has, although circular overall, an episodic structure. A distinct exacerbation of the tendency to diffusion is what mars The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive, where the humour is of a much less biting and effective kind as a result of the comic impulse having become subservient to the organisation of episode and plot. I believe

O'Brien was aware of this danger even as he wrote, and that one letter in particular betrays his concern; it is that in which he insists that:

These rough glances at my project may seem to disclose a mass of portentous material that looks unmanageable. Not so. There is a pedestrian sub-theme that keeps the majestic major concept in order as in a vice. Undue length is the only risk I see.

15

This is echoed in a later letter in which he explains that The Dalkey Archive 'is not meant to be a novel or anything of the kind but a study in derision'.¹⁶ Both suggest a concern in O'Brien with the organisation of his material, and, latterly, a desire perhaps to obviate the necessity for it.

The fact that neither The Dalkey Archive nor The Hard Life are as thematically or constructionally complex as their predecessors does not in fact affect the argument that concern with these elements may have detracted from the success of their comedy. Their texts alone suggest that O'Brien was probably more actively concerned with the narrative organisation of these than of either At Swim-Two-Birds or The Third Policeman. Furthermore, this constructional effort, if indeed it was an important factor in the comic texture and quality of the later novels, might account for the sense of liberation that pervades only the early works. The nature of this early humour suggests that it had its roots in the author's delight in his own virtuosity; his was a playful if moderately self-controlled mind testing and boasting its own powers, permitting itself a temporary freedom from restraint, drawing not only on its own experience but on its own personality. The writing of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, in as

far as both are concerned with human irrationality, could be said to be purposive, but the comedy, qua comedy, was not. It was liberated of purpose.

It has been said¹⁷ that all comedy is purposive, even if that purpose is confined to revealing human absurdity rather than trying to correct it; the nature of O'Brien's satire in the comic fiction would not contradict this interpretation. In the case of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, however, a very large part of O'Brien's comic impulse can be felt to be purely personal, consisting of private jokes, personal experiences, and personal concerns, while at times, such as in the Finn episodes of the first draft of At Swim-Two-Birds,¹⁸ getting inordinately protracted because of personal whimsy and delight. It can further be felt, however, that this special personal commitment ended with the rejection of The Third Policeman, to be replaced, around 1960, with a memory of the original impulse, with the flattery and encouragement of a new publisher, and with an idea of himself as a novelist with standards to keep up. In connection with his work on The Dalkey Archive, and in response to a rather critical reaction on the part of O'Keefe to the first draft, O'Brien comments, 'I know some of the writing is deplorable for a man of my pretences',¹⁹ a comment which confirms this state of lost facility and high personal expectations. The author of The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive is, by contrast with his earlier self, detached from his writing, and the comedy of these novels is, as a result, far more the product of effort and innate talent than of enthusiasm, verve and skill. This may account for a curious feature of these later works,

which is that their humour is considerably more effective if the narrative is read aloud. This is not, as is usually the case, because there is a distinctive voice behind it, but, on the contrary, because this voice is absent and needs to be present for the reader to truly appreciate the comic nuances. The Dalkey Archive makes a particularly successful stage play;²⁰ this arrangement brings to the fore the humour that is based in episode and plot, while the humour which benefits from the spoken voice is additionally leavened with action such that a theatre audience experiences comedy of a pace and rhythm to which it can easily respond. In the case of these two later novels one loses nothing by this exterior presentation of the author's personality, simply because that author is far more distant from the work originally than in the autobiographically-based At Swim-Two-Birds or in The Third Policeman, the result of that early apprenticeship.

Perhaps it is harder to separate the writer of comedy from his work than the writer of almost any other kind of literature. In O'Brien's case one cannot attribute the change in the later novels, the loss of innovation and ebullience, and the diminished comic power, to anything other than the change in the man. The picture of O'Brien in 1960 is of a deeply divided personality: a man who still maintained a belief in the possibility of high quality achievement in literary work, yet who drove himself to accomplish daily an increasingly bitter satirical column in which he took less and less satisfaction; a man who must have been aware of the serious degeneration of his health, but who yet refused to acknowledge this, outwardly at

least and perhaps also inwardly; a man who was aware, conceivably, of the decline of his own ability to achieve his former high standards in comic prose, yet who persisted in claiming wild success for each succeeding piece of work. Comedy is an implicit affirmation of life, even if it does not imply actual laughter, as long as the impulse behind it is also comic. The comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds and An Beal Bocht was just such an affirmation, of the highest quality. While The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive also suggest affirmation, their overall quality, in accordance with the above description of the author's position at the time of writing them, suggests that it was an affirmation achieved through effort.

For generations, humour has been a device with which man can cope with suffering; that is not to say that this is its exclusive function, simply one possible function. Human reaction to suffering is frequently complex, of course, but in Ireland particularly, where many generations have known great and continual hardship, a simple reaction to suffering has become infused with an impulse to humour and irony. Even in response to tragedy and death, despite the simple outburst of keening and weeping, the Irish tradition of the festive and often macabre wake demonstrates the complexity of a response in which humour plays a significant part. For, affirmation of life or not, comedy is not necessarily a symptom of optimism; this is an entirely different question. It can be, rather, a means of integration, integration of the individual in the world in which he lives, even the integration of the self within its individual identity, such that whatever difficulties or complexities are met,

they can be dealt with. This particularly Irish use of comedy, familiar from works so disparate in other respects as Joyce's Ulysses and Yeats's The Herne's Egg, Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and Beckett's Waiting for Godot, is also O'Brien's. While it can be readily seen, however, that the reader of O'Brien's comic fiction might derive some such benefit from his humour, it is not so apparent but also true that the comedy could have much the same effect on the author as on the reader. In At Swim-Two-Birds O'Brien put himself in something of the rôle of the clown, exercising his innate skill in tumbles and juggling, revelling in an especially close commitment with the novel. In the later novels, by contrast, he was in greater need of the integrative power of comedy. Thus in both stages he was perhaps the beneficiary as well as the purveyor of his own comic impulse, a factor which could be isolated as at the root of the essential Irishness and strange harmony of An Beal Bocht, in which humour and suffering are inextricably mixed, and indeed also of those areas of the novels which have seemed so problematical: the curious blend of suffering and humour in the torturing of Trellis and the miserable death of Collopy.

In this particular aspect of O'Brien's comedy may lie the reason for the novels' failure to attract wide-spread appreciation. The purposive quality of his comedy was uniquely introverted. In that it is an introversion of a characteristically Irish kind, however, and in as far as it is demonstrably brilliant in execution especially in the early works, it merits a greater appreciation than at present it receives.

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, ed. Timothy O'Keefe,
London, 1973, pp. 75 - 76.
2. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 7 June, 1961.
3. Ibid., 6 November, 1961.
4. Ibid., 25 November, 1961.
5. DA, p.30.
6. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 11 August,
1961.
7. Ibid., 19 August, 1961.
8. Ibid..
9. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 28 May, 1962.
10. Ibid., 21 September, 1962.
11. Ibid., 30 April, 1963.
12. Ibid., 15 November, 1963.
13. Flann O'Brien, An Beal Bocht, Dublin, 1941, translated
as The Poor Mouth by Patrick C. Power, London,
1973, (Picador, 1975) pp. 39 - 40.
14. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 27 February,
1960.

15. Ibid., 21 September, 1962.
16. Ibid., 15 November, 1963.
17. Allan Rodway, English Comedy. Its role and nature from Chaucer to the Present Day, London, 1975, p.37.
18. Niall Sheridan reports that the final draft of AS2B, which he thereafter edited before its publication, was too long, comprising some 800 pages of typescript. He writes:

He had got such fun out of sending-up the Fenian cycle that he over-indulged himself and the weight of this material seriously unbalanced the latter half of the book.

'Brian, Flann and Myles', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, (op. cit.), p.47.
19. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 27 November, 1963. This part of the letter is quoted by Anne Clissmann, Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975, p.295.
20. I am thinking particularly of Allan McClelland's adaptation for the Hull Truck Theatre Company, who produced the play at the Bush Theatre, Shepherd's Bush, London on December 21st, 1981, which I was fortunate enough to see.

Chapter Three

AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS

At Swim-Two-Birds is a work of the greatest range and versatility; among O'Brien's novels it is undoubtedly the most elaborate and the most experimental in the multiplicity of its themes, devices and characters. This is perhaps its most important feature second to its comedy, for it suggests complexity, disharmony (or rather, an excessively wealthy plenum which nevertheless strives to cohere) and a manifold nature far from alien to the modern world from which the author writes. Becoming more single-minded with maturity, perhaps, O'Brien subsequently organised his later books around strongly individuated ideas which mostly dominate the work in question. In his first novel, however, not only is this not the case, but one would be misinterpreting the work to attempt to read it in this manner. Not that it is impossible to do so, for several avenues are presented by O'Brien to the unwary reader which seduce him towards accepting a simplistic interpretation of the work; nothing would have given this proven master manipulator of words greater satisfaction, one can guess, than to claim the limitations of his readership. The temptation to regard At Swim-Two-Birds as 'about' modern experimental novel-writing, for example, is one which many have indulged. But the temptation must be resisted, and the wealth of implication and comment must be allowed to make their own pattern on the mind.

The first of many diverse elements to make an impression upon the reader's mind is the ancient Irish characters Finn McCool and King Sweeny. This Celtic element makes plain the connection O'Brien feels and wishes to establish between his own twentieth-century novel and the Irish traditions of literature and language which lie behind it. In particular regarding the humour with which I have so far been concerned, the appearance of the Celtic character's draws a direct connection between At Swim-Two-Birds and the Irish comic tradition, its forms of satire, its joyful ridicule, its farcical humour and its skilful word-play.

The mythical content of the novel consists of the introduction, on the first page, of the ancient hero Finn MacCool, (the giant chief of the Fianna, a tribe of heroic outlawed warriors; central figure of the Fenian or Ossianic Cycle of tales), and, subsequently, the story which he tells of the Mad King Sweeny, also an authentic Celtic tale, although not originally connected with the Fenian Cycle. When Finn has finally completed his recital of Sweeny's history, neither appear again, until Sweeny is reintroduced in the final 'section' in a rather different, no longer exclusively Celtic form and setting. Finn also reappears later in the novel, but nothing that he contributes there is a development of his role in the early section, only a reminder of what has been learned there.

Of these two distinct Celtic myths one can only note, by way of comparison, that both are outstanding, in different ways, for some aspect of modernity. This, one feels, must have influenced O'Brien in his choice of them from among the hundreds

of extant myths available to him. Buile Shuibhne¹, the Celtic original of the Sweeny story is unusual in being a single narrative tale outside any of the saga cycles, and the language is remarkable for its sense of freshness and timelessness. It therefore resembles the modern short story to which twentieth-century Ireland is accustomed. It is however, presented in a mixture of prose and verse, both in succession often giving the same episode. Nevertheless, the prose sections form a narrative of clear, mostly linear quality, disrupted only by a few passages which seem imperfectly sequential (a characteristic of many early texts). This can, if need be, be explained satisfactorily to the modern reader as expressive of Sweeny's madness, but this is hardly necessary. The verse sections are very moving and striking in effect, especially where description of the valleys and mountains of Ireland are the subject. As the tale's translator, J. G. O'Keefe, remarks, the story is treated with an independence and freshness which preserve its sense of spontaneity and individuality, making readily available the beauty and emotion contained in its poetry, the first person "lays"² of the suffering king.

The modernity of the Finn legend lies less in style (for unlike the Sweeny tale its history has been predominantly oral, not written) than in its still enduring place in the Irish narrative tradition. There are very early references to stories of this hero and his semi-nomadic band of poet-warriors, the Fianna, although until the twelfth century there is no important record of the tales in manuscript form. However, in the course of the twelfth century the more learned story-tellers adopted

Finn as the central character of heroic narratives, and the cycle was subsequently enriched by the newly-developing forms of the lyric and the ballad. From this time the acute formalism and grandeur of the old Irish tales become noticeably less grand in tone, while a more imaginative background and more diffuse structure developed; the tales of the Finn cycle, being oral, easily accommodated to this. In this Anglo-Norman period, also, a great many of the Irish stories began to incorporate a love theme and incidents of a fantastic nature, and so likewise did the Finn tales, because innovation and the marvellous were already inherent in their nature.³ Due to their flexibility in the oral tradition, new episodes could be added and the narrative language could adapt itself to the living language of its generation. As a result of this kind of development, the legend of Finn is still spoken of in Ireland today.⁴

O'Brien's choice of these two particular Celtic tales may have been governed in part, therefore, by their qualities of modernity; his intentions in introducing Celtic material at all, however, can be surmised as being more complex. They were based, I believe on O'Brien's perception of a commonality of basic ingredients to be found in Celtic saga and in his own creative talent; a use of aspects of the Celtic heritage in his own narrative could provide an excellent correlative for his own serious comic purposes, and this has clearly been successful in At Swim-Two-Birds. For example, the ambivalence to be felt in the Celtic sagas, not only in reading them today but in their original structure, an ambivalence that could be called the 'play-spirit' with Vivien Mercier, or the 'serious use of comedy',

is one which O'Brien incorporates in a particularly effective manner in his early novels. In conjunction with this, his humour is connected very closely with that linguistic instability which is also a characteristic of Celtic saga, which in both cases raises questions of metaphysical instability and generates an atmosphere of exploration and uncertainty such as must arise from an absence of verifiable statement. Fantasy, of course, is clearly akin to such an atmosphere, and works very effectively in both the Celtic and the O'Brien fictions. The Irish and Anglo-Irish tradition of fantasy emerging from every-day fact leads, moreover, to O'Brien's having, in all these supporting elements, as had the Celtic poet before him, a fertile arena for the exercise of his satiric talents whenever he should wish to exercise them.

A closer examination of O'Brien's presentation of the Celtic aspects of his narrative will reveal how successfully he makes use of these traditional narrative features, and to what end.

In the case of the tale of Sweeny it will be seen that O'Brien adhered very closely to the facts and indeed the words of the original, while with Finn he made many changes to suit his own purposes (the tradition is, after all, a flexible one). The opening description of Finn in At Swim-Two-Birds takes that part of the Finn legend which is found in the continuing oral tradition (rather than in Duanaire Finn) where Finn is a giant;⁵ in Duanaire Finn his intelligence and the magnitude of his character are emphasised, rather than the magnitude of his person. In this initial piece of comic grotesquerie O'Brien

makes him not only physically giant but also 'not mentally robust':

Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development. Each of his thighs was as thick as a horse's belly, narrowing to a calf as thick as the belly of a foal. Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his backside, which was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.9

Having been initiated into this tone, reminiscent of an ancient language but diverted to a comic purpose, we are next treated to a comic extravaganza on Finn: 'Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn MacCool and his people, being humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology' (p.13). As regards the rigorous humour of the extract it should be remembered that at this point the narrative is still very much under the control of the narrator, whose rather derisory attitude is felt not to be the same as O'Brien's. It is O'Brien who elliptically refers to the ambivalence in tone, the stature curiously maintained by Finn alongside the satire, when he guides the hand that writes 'quasi-humorous' in the narrator's sub-title. The treatment of him at the hands of the original story-tellers can therefore be ambivalent, and O'Brien surely means to recall this in his own presentation of Conan, a laconic character perhaps doting on the aged Finn, perhaps patronising him for a foolish old man, perhaps even satirically leading him on. Conan's position is never clarified by O'Brien.

Finn's subsequent narrative begins with an extended account of the 'natural musics' that he likes, an account which contains many beauties but which is overwhelmed by comic exag-

geration. Exaggeration is a feature of the Celtic legends and one of the 'failings' to which they are always liable, a feature which O'Brien picks up and uses with wicked success in his presentation of the ancient hero. It is also a major characteristic of O'Brien's whole comedy in At Swim-Two-Birds and the other fiction, contributing to the linguistic insecurity which is soon reflected in that of events. Here the humour consists in an extraordinarily extended list of birds' names, obviously chosen for their obscurity where they are not completely made up, for the annoyance and titillation of the reader:

..... Also the whining of small otters in nettle-beds at evening, the croaking of small-jays behind a wall, these are heart-pleasing. I am friends to the pilibeen, the red-necked chough, the parsnip land-rail, the pilibeen mona, the bottle-tailed tit, the common marsh-coot, the speckle-toed guillemot, the pilibeen sleibhe, the Mohar gannet, the peregrine plough-gull, the long-eared bush-owl,

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.14

And so it goes on for a further seventeen names, including the obscure Dublin bird, the 'cruiskeen lawn', by which O'Brien makes a joke against himself for his Irish Times readers, and the passage concludes with the voice of Conan suggesting, "Relate further for us". This, however, is not before a note of brutality has been introduced, a note which is to recur and be given increasing prominence as the novel progresses.

The lamenting of a wounded otter in a black hole, sweeter than harpstrings that. There is no torture so narrow as to be bound and beset in a dark cavern without food or music, without the bestowing of gold on bards. To be chained by night in a dark pit without company of chessmen - evil destiny! Soothing to my ear is the shout of a hidden black-bird,

the squeal of a troubled mare, the complaining of wild-hogs caught in snow.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.14

These and other dark glimpses of pain and suffering are a part of the author's exploration of reality by means of ambivalence of tone and idea, deeply involved in his comedy.

Meanwhile there follows an extravaganza of comedy descriptive of Finn. It is not only ludicrous and taken frequently to the point of complete meaninglessness, but it is also a real linguistic delight, so that at the same time as being aware that the sense is ludicrous the reader is overwhelmed by the richness of the language, the syntax of which is purposefully reminiscent of the Celtic:

With that he rose to a full tree-high standing, the sable cat-guts which held his bog-cloth drawers to the hems of his jacket of pleated fustian clanging together in melodious discourse. 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, the better for good feasting and contending with the bards. The chest to him was wider than the poles of a good chariot, coming now out, now in, and pastured from chin to navel with meadows of black man-hair and meated with layers of fine man-meat the better to hide his bones and fashion the semblance of his twin bubs

At Swim-Two-Birds, p. 14 - 15

This is a carefully constructed blend of heroic hyperbole and grotesque, the latter gradually achieving the upper tone as the description hastens on, flirting decorously with bad taste and avoiding it by a combination of antiquarian phraseology and the respectability of precision. From this point, up to which the humour has included jokes involving incongruities and the

humour of mundane physical articles (it will be seen that much of O'Brien's humour is concerned with the body and things physical), the exaggeration and verbosity give way to the utter nonsense of the mock lays, a joke based on two postulates. These are the utter comedy of anything so giant as Finn, as described so far, boasting of being a gnat, and the commonplace in ancient mythology of a god or hero being able to change his shape:

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

I am the breast of a young queen, said Finn.
I am a thatching against rains.
I am a dark castle against bat-flutters.
I am a Connachtman's ear.
I am a harpstring.
I am a gnat.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p. 15 - 16

Despite their nonsense, these verses are impressive, resonant of strength, confidence and dignity. The two verses are divided in the text, however, which detracts from their overall impressive quality, a detraction strengthened by the nature of the prose which divides them. O'Brien is using the technique of combining prose and poetry to describe the same object or incident, as later in the Sweeny tale, but he makes the nuances of the two at variance, thus the verses suggest a certain positive, poetic quality, while in the prose there are suggestions of physical and moral degradation: it becomes apparent over the three short paragraphs, for example, that the colouration on Finn's clothing is not entirely caused by weave and dye, but by

rummaging, hog-baiting and carousing in the ditches of Erin. This, considered in juxtaposition to the above verses, poses a discreet and playful ambiguity as to the quality of this Irish inheritance.

This tone of ambivalence has been carefully created by O'Brien by conscious control of the narrative texture, balancing the comic against extracts of quality often taken very accurately from translations of an original. (It is not known which version of the Finn legend O'Brien may have referred to). The culmination of this is a long passage beginning with perhaps the most extravagant description yet of Finn's face:

The mouth to his white wheyface had dimensions and measurements to the width of Ulster, bordered by a red lip-wall and inhabited unseen by the watchful host of his honey-yellow teeth to the size, each with each, of a cornstack; and in the dark hollow to each tooth was there home and fulness for the sitting there of a thorny dog or for the lying there of a spear-pierced badger. To each of the two eyes in his head was there eye-hair to the fashion of a young forest, and the colour to each great eyeball was as the slaughter of a host in snow. The lid to each eye of them was limp and cheese-dun like ship-canvas in harbour at evening, enough eye-cloth to cover the whole of Erin.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.16

Ambiguity in this passage certainly does not consist in the dimensions and nature of Finn's face, only, and to an ever diminishing degree, in the author's attitude to his hero. The passage as a description is very resonant of Celtic technique; images are central to Celtic thinking and language, Celtic talk always being less given to abstracts and more to pictures. The passage therefore makes two deliberate demands on the Irish

language heritage: the ingenious one on Celtic use of imagery, and the more satirical and obvious one on Celtic speech patterns and exaggerations.

Poetry and magic, which are inseparable in the Finn context, comprise many of the additions O'Brien makes in the comic exaggeration of the trials governing entry to the Fianna:

Till a man has accomplished twelve books of poetry, the same is not taken for want of poetry but is forced away For five days he must sit on the brow of a cold hill with twelve-pointed stag-antlers hidden in his seat, without food or music or chessmen. If he cry out, or eat grass-stalks, or desist from the constant recital of sweet poetry and melodious Irish, he is not taken but is wounded One hundred head of cattle he must accommodate. With wisdom, about his person when walking all Erin, the half about his armpits and the half about his trews, his mouth never halting from the discoursing of sweet poetry

At Swim-Two-Birds pp. 16 - 17

It is not only in such a mythical context that O'Brien has resource to magic, however. While the Finn and Sweeny elements display the Celtic precedent which we know to have derived from earliest times and to be inextricable from Celtic satire and Celtic 'fini' alike, those parts of At Swim-Two-Birds concerned with modern Dublin and the inner lives of its inhabitants show O'Brien using magic in a contemporary and ageless comic technique.

The conclusion of this section comes rather abruptly, and with a change of tone similarly sudden. It resembles a call from the past for a just reappraisal of that past by the poets and writers of the modern world. Though couched in Finn's tumultuous and idiosyncratic style, it is an assertion of the

value of the literature of the past, and carries a passionate reproach to modern Irish writers for their treatment of their heritage:

Small wonder, said Finn, that Finn is without honour in the breast of a sea-blue book, Finn that is twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web. Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story? Who could have the saint Ceallach carried off by his four acolytes and he feeble and thin from his Lent-fast, laid in the timbers of an old boat, hidden for a night in a hollow oak tree and slaughtered without mercy in the morning, his shrivelled body to be torn by a wolf and a scaldcrow and the Kite of Cluain-Eo? Who could put a terrible madness on the head of Sweeney for the slaughter of a single Lent-gaunt cleric, to make him live in tree-tops and roost in the middle of a yew, not a wattle to the shielding of his mad head in the middle of the wet winter, perished to the marrow without company of women or strains of harp-pluck, with no feeding but stag-food and the green branches? Who but a story-teller? Indeed it is true that there has been ill-usage to the men of Erin from the book-poets of the world and dishonour to Finn

At Swim-Two-Birds, pp. 19 - 20.

More direct and less elaborate in tone than the preceding extravagances, this passage posits the idea of the failure of modern Irish writers (book-poets) to honour their unwritten Celtic literary heritage. When, later in At Swim-Two-Birds, O'Brien explores facets of modern writing, Finn being introduced at intervals, this passage becomes part of a texture of questions and contrasts concerning the relationship of ancient and modern, and the position of the writer.

Although the tales of Finn, as found in manuscript, seem to be later in date than the Sweeny story, which achieved a final

written form while the Finn tales continued to be developed in the oral tradition, it was necessary to examine the Finn elements of At Swim-Two-Birds first, because these are O'Brien's introduction to his readers of the Celtic element in the novel, and, as has been seen, a certain attitude of inquiry has been set up towards it. In the passage quoted immediately above, Finn refers to the tale of Sweeny as having been told by himself, thus making the connection between the two tales for the first time. Thereafter Finn is not properly introduced again until the long and important scene in the Red Swan Hotel where Trellis's characters are able to speak freely while his power over them is diminished by sleep (p.62). Finn is now introduced as:

the old grey-beard 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.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.62

From this it is debatable whether we are expected to imagine him as even a little more giant than the other characters; mostly the impression he now gives is that of an old man, the old story-teller of the oral tradition, sitting with his assembled audience round the fire preparatory to the telling of ancient tales.⁶ He thus overtly represents a tradition which in modern Ireland is being permitted to vanish, and this situation is emphasised by the response of his audience to his attempts to tell his story - very different from the awed and receptive gathering round the venerable story-teller of the past. Yet despite his hearers's irreverence and the humour of the episode, Finn emerges as the representative of a notable cultural heritage

rather than as the earlier somewhat parodied hero, and his presence in this twentieth-century novel, together with the innate high quality of the Sweeny narrative, finally vouches for the value that is to be found in the ancient literature.

Before Finn attempts to begin his recital, Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont, his audience, discuss his story-telling in a quasi-critical fashion, itself perhaps a piece of satire on the critical abilities of the modern reader, for the discussion centres on the rather limited permutations of stories having 'a beginning and an end'. The reader is recalled by this to the opening passage of the novel where the young narrator complains that he does not agree with a book having just one beginning and one ending; but what is most noticeable here is that the modern listeners, characterised by an inflated opinion of their own ideas, continually interrupt Finn's attempts to tell his story, three times doing so at length. These interruptions are placed in the narrative in such a way that the Celtic tale is shown up at its most poetic, but, as with the verses spoken by Finn earlier, the breaking up and the lively, compelling language of the interruptions undermine the effect of the Celtic element and force the reader to make his own value judgement with some difficulty. O'Brien's method is his use of language.

The first of these interruptions comes when Shanahan is inspired to tell the others about the poet Jem Casey (p.72). In the Sweeny story, meanwhile, a certain element of pathos and desperation has been described, Sweeny being moved by suffering to utter a poem in praise of nature. Celtic literature abounds in nature poetry, and much of it is beautiful. Although repeti-

tion, already a feature of this lay in the original, is taken to an extreme in O'Brien's version, the poem is still very powerful, and the rude interruption, especially since it consists of the 'poetry' of Casey, effectively highlights its poetic power. Casey is presented as a modern poet of the sort who declares himself unequivocally of and for the majority of people, the working people. His eulogy is lengthy and enthusiastic, and even involves a comparison, not intended by Shanahan as such, with the recitals of Sweeny's lays: 'A labouring man, Mr Lamont, but as sweet a singer in his own way as you'll find in the bloody trees there of a spring day, and that's a fact'. (It is of course Sweeny who recites poetry from the thorn-trees of Erin). The reader thus alerted, the ebullient Shanahan makes an overt comparison with the stories of Finn. His treatment of Finn's storytelling as something to which patriotic devotion is due, while nobody today can pay real attention to it or remotely relate with it, is vividly posited as the prevailing modern attitude. Reappraisal is O'Brien's constant demand. When Casey's poem, 'A Pint of Plain is your Only Man', is recited, a literature that is readily available to the majority is discredited in the example, which recommends alcohol as the cure for all ills; escapism rather than confrontation is the larger issue in both the poem and the underlying literary comment, whereas in the contrasting story of Sweeny, Sweeny's hardships and torments mostly prompt him to translate his suffering into the most controlled, dignified and transcendent poetry:

He arose death-weak from the ground to
his standing for the recital of this
lay

... he delayed there till he had fashioned these staves as a farewell address, a valediction on the subject of his manifold sorrows

It snowed on his tree that night, the snow being the worst of all the other snows he had endured since the feathers grew on his body, and he was constrained to the recital of these following verses

At Swim-Two-Birds, pp. 67, 82, 84

O'Brien is not an introverted writer, as may appear from his involvement at this point with Celtic literature; what he wants the reader to reappraise are attitudes to life, attitudes of mind, not just literary attitudes. Yet his satiric method is introverted, using ancient and modern literary characters, even imaginary ones, to propose his alternatives. This is surely apposite as it shares the Celtic choice of images rather than direct comment to express meaning, and shows O'Brien's personal ability in using contracting types of language to effect the contrast.

Despite these comic interruptions, which allow for a certain amount of humour to attach to the Sweeny story, Finn's narrative perseveres, adhering very closely to the manuscript version of the original legend, Buile Shuibhne. This is appropriate, in that the ancient (and indeed modern) story-teller would often know a story word for word and be able to reproduce that tale many times with never a change of phrase; likewise those who learned it from him, and so on. O'Brien himself was brought up speaking Irish, knew and used the Irish text of Buile Shuibhne and found himself in the position of story-teller. He reproduces the incidents of the story, treating them at once in the fashion, and often in the words, of the original, and

also, like the oral tradition of the Fenian cycle, adapting them for his contemporary purpose. His language is sensitive both to the beauties of the original and to the repetitions and strange idiosyncracies also to be found there. He is never prepared to overlook opportunities either for humour or for lyricism, so his narrative is rich in nuances of every kind and highly expressive of the modern writer's simultaneous chariness and admiration of the Celtic original.

If one attitude tends to prevail, however, it is that of admiration for the quality of the Celtic writing, and O'Brien enhances this in the changes he makes. Notice the expert manipulation of sound and word to give the effect of precipitation and impulsiveness in this opening passage:

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, for he ran out of his cloak when his wife Eorann held it for restraint and deterrence, 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; after that he took the hard grip of the cleric's hand and ran with a wind-swift stride to the lake without a halting or a letting go of the hand because he had a mind to place the cleric by the side of his psalter in the lake, on the bottom, to speak precisely

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.64

Here, as in other places in the narrative, the tumultuous flow of fluid, mostly monosyllabic words, running together on alliteration and an abundance of adjectives, carries the reader through the tale. It may also have the effect of making the precipitous adventure seem slightly comical, yet it does not

overwhelm the story itself. O'Brien does not make this a comic section, because he is keeping very closely indeed to the original; in fact, his translation from the Gaelic, is often an improvement on the translations published. Compare the curse of Ronan at the Battle of Magh Rath; this is the translation by J. G. O'Keefe:

My curse on Suibhne!
great is his guilt against me,
his smooth, vigorous dart
he thrust through my holy bell.

That bell which thou hast wounded
will send thee among branches,
so that thou wilt be one with the birds -
the bell of saints before saints.

Even as in an instant went
the spear-shaft on high,
mayst thou go, O Suibhne,
in madness without respite!⁷

This is O'Brien's version in At Swim-Two-Birds:

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 -
the saint-bell of saints with sainty-saints.

Just as it went prestissimo
the spear-shaft skyward,
you too, Sweeny, go madly mad-gone
skyward.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.65

This version is a subtle mixture of clarification of meaning by the adjustment of diction and syntax to suit our modern ears, with in places a deliberate complication of the issue by the humorous exaggeration of the Celtic manner of repetition; 'the saint-bell of sainty-saints' is an obvious example, and 'madly mad-gone' another. What in effect this does is to underline, and

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undercut, the emphasis placed in Celtic poetry on emphasis itself. Vividness was sought at all costs, including that of the excessive kind of diction which today we would score out in favour of more moderate and economical forms of expression. This predilection for vividness by means of a diction pushed to its very extremes is highlighted in many another lay uttered by Sweeny and translated in his own manner by O'Brien; these mostly have to do with nature, and involve a lot of repetition which to us is reprehensible. Nevertheless, it is a technique which accomplishes its object, which is to stress the individuality of elements in the natural world, their quality, as Manley Hopkins would call it, of 'inscape'. The celebration of this quality of nature is a feature of much Celtic nature poetry. The quality and effect of O'Brien's alterations of the original are worth further scrutiny as, like this one, they enhance the valuable Celtic quality of his material.

Pursued again into a state of madness by the torments of a wicked hag, Sweeny utters a lay of great beauty and nostalgia about the trees and country life he has known in his wanderings over Ireland. The following is the version found in At Swim-Two-

Birds:

Bleating one, little antlers,
O lamenter we like
delightful the clamouring
from your glen you make.

O leafy-oak, clumpy-leaved,
you are high above trees,
O hazlet, little clumpy-branch-
the nut-smell of hazels.

O alder, O alder-friend,
delightful your colour,
you don't prickle me or tear
in the place you are.

O blackthorn, little thorny-one,
O little dark sloe-tree;
O watercress, O green-crowned,
at the well-brink.

O holly, holly-shelter,
O door against the wind,
O ash-tree inimical,
your spearshaft of warrior.

O birch clean and blessed,
O melodious, O proud,
delightful the tangle
of your head-rods.

What I like least in woodlands
from none I conceal it -
stirk of a leafy-oak,
at its swaying.

O faun, little long-legs,
I caught you with grips,
I rode upon your back
from peak to peak.

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

At Swim-Two-Birds, p. 71 - 72

No one could deny on reading this that O'Brien was having fun as a comic writer in this piece; one tends to think after a while that a word made up of two joined together without a hyphen must be a misprint. However, so close is this version to the original poetry as we have it that another conclusion suggests itself. The original tale abounds in diminutives such as O'Brien's version contains, that being a form of which the old writers were particularly fond, and a mere transcription of them gives humorous verse; similarly the many apostrophes, recurring as they mostly do at the beginning of extremely short lines, seem comic exaggeration yet are close to the original. Repetition of an adjective or noun already used in a line is likewise not a

comic addition. Here is a selection of the verses of the much longer lay of the original Buile Shuibhne, translated by O'Keefe:

O little stag, thou little bleating one,
O melodious little clamourer,
sweet to us is the music
thou makest in the glen

Thou oak, bushy, leafy,
thou art high beyond trees;
O hazlet, little branching one,
O fragrance of hazel-nuts.

O alder, thou art not hostile,
delightful is thy hue,
thou art not rending and pricking
in the gap wherein thou art.

O little blackthorn, little thorny one;
O little black sloe-tree;
O watercress, little green-topped one,
O herb on which grows the strawberry

O yew-tree, little yew-tree,
in churchyards thou art conspicuous;
O ivy, little ivy,
thou art familiar in the dusky wood.

O holly, little sheltering one,
thou door against the wind;
O ash-tree, thou baleful one,
hand-weapon of a warrior.

O birch, smooth and blessed,
thou melodious proud one,
delightful each entwining branch
in the top of thy crown.

My aversion in woods -
I conceal it not from anyone -
is the leafy stirk of an oak
swaying evermore (?)

O little faun, O little long-legged one,
I was able to catch thee
riding upon thee
from one peak to another

Glen Bolcain, my constant abode,
'twas a boon to me,
many a night have I attempted
a stern race against the peaks.

From this it can be seen that what has appeared humorous in O'Brien's version is simply a rendering of features of the original which, in their context, contribute to the lyricism, the exceptionally modern personal note, of the poetry. When O'Brien later uses similar satirical techniques in a novel otherwise peopled by drunken students, eccentric Dublin figures, a handful of cowboys, a Pooka and a fairy, his linguistically-based satire and humour have about them both a Celtic ambiguity and a Juvenalian power.

The Celtic heritage having, both actually and in its association with Celtic language forms, dominated the pages of the novel, the emphasis shifts after Finn's narration of the tale of Sweeny to express a theme which has connections with the Celtic element presented, and yet has a broader application also: the theme of the nature of the imagination. At its most immediate level, O'Brien presents two aspects of the imagination, the first being the fertile but essentially self-disciplined imagination of the story-tellers responsible for Finn and Sweeny: the adventures of these heroes may seem to border on the excessive and riotous but the verses in particular show control of form and development. The other aspect is explored at length in the rest of the novel, and is actually the imagination in riot. The misuse of the imagination with which O'Brien is concerned in At Swim-Two-Birds is that indulgence of it which looses it from the restraints of conscious control and from an appreciation of the facts of reality. He approaches this both as a danger to the individual, who might indulge in this form of fantasy to the detriment of his mental health and outlook, and as a danger also to be looked for in the

creative writer. The narrator, upon whom much of the theme is centred, is at once a troubled young man who finds peace only in escape from the real (a situation often enough treated by Irish novelists) and an example of a creative writer whose daily habit it is thus to set loose his imagination. One remembers the Irish writers of the previous generation who worked on the principle of the liberation of the imaginative powers, (the loosing of the imagination,) such as Yeats, AE and others, and also those who wrote about it, such as George Moore (A Mere Accident, The Mummer's Wife, The Lake); there are many appropriate examples whose theme was similar to O'Brien's here: the power of the imagination for creativity or escape. O'Brien was assuredly aware of this inheritance when he took up the theme in At Swim-Two-Birds; like his predecessors he extends the theme by implication to embrace also a whole society who prefer elaboration or fantasy to the rigours of reality.

Throughout his presentation of the imagination in riot we are reminded by O'Brien's continued use of Celtic forms of expression, that this is in particular an extension of his early use of Celtic elements to evoke qualities of Irish thinking and speech. The creations of the autogamous, self-willed imagination, in appearing to have form and life of their own, are an embodiment of the Celtic tendency to substitute formal images for more abstract forms of thought and expression, and are a comic exaggeration (another Irish tendency) of the inaccuracies, misconceptions and falsehoods to which that tendency can potentially lead. While embracing a possibly universal foible, O'Brien is centrally concerned with the Irish people as much in Orlick Trellis as in

Finn MacCool. This connection is made clear in the parallel of Finn as narrator and student as narrator. The narrator's addiction to lying in or on his bed, a preference largely dictated by idleness but incidentally also requisite for his fictional activities, is so indulged as to lay him open to infection by lice. It is in such a state of withdrawal into the mind that he composes the lengthy scene where Finn is encouraged by Conan to talk of the ancient times:

I put the letter with care into a pocket at my right buttock and went to the tender trestle of my bed, arranging my back upon it in an indolent horizontal attitude. I closed my eyes, hurting slightly my right stye, and retired into the kingdom of my mind. For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism. The bright square of the window was faintly evidenced at the juncture of my lids. One book, one opening, was a principle with which I did not find it possible to concur. After an interval Finn MacCool, a hero of old Ireland, came out before me from his shadow, Finn the wide-hammed, the heavy-eyed, Finn that could spend a Lamma morning with girdled girls at far-from-simple chess-play.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.13

The scene which follows, though heavily coloured with the hubris of the narrator and his pastiche of the exaggerations of the Celtic style, is rich in humour and powerfully written: the products of a withdrawal from the real world in order to concentrate on the creative powers of the imagination can be fertile. At Swim-Two-Birds thus begins from the point where a withdrawal into the imagination can have a valid creative purpose, and, since the subject of this flight of the imagination is Finn, we are perhaps meant to recall a particular historical precedent for a

poet's withdrawal. This precedent is explained by Eleanor Knott in her instructive work on ancient Irish poetry:

In the procedure followed in composing a poem we seem to discern something of the Druidic origin of the craft of the 'fili'. The poet retired to a darkened room or cell, and there, lying on a couch, he composed his verses unhurriedly.⁹

This seems to have been a standard practice among the Celtic poets, and Professor Knott gives several examples of where it has been specifically mentioned in early manuscripts. It is not too much to believe such a precedent is being recalled in At Swim-Two-Birds, especially in the light of one of the student narrator's theories of the ideal novel, which points out that 'A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character' (p.25).

The idea of creative retirement, however, has other Irish precedents more recent than the ancient Celtic one. Later in his life James Joyce was prone to stay in his room for long periods in order to write, and still today the retirement habit of Beckett is renowned. Bertrand Russell, writing in 1935 when At Swim-Two-Birds was being written, advocated leisure as, among other things, conducive to creative activity, in an essay entitled 'In Praise of Idleness'.¹⁰ O'Brien has taken the idea to a comic extreme, and developed it to its fantastic limit. His emphasis on the bed itself (those insect-ridden couches of the student narrator and of Trellis) carries heavily derogatory suggestions. There may be a glancing satiric reference here to the earlier generation - Yeats, whose poetic output was so great and whose emphasis was always on hard work,¹¹ yet who still regarded himself as idle;¹² George

Moore of whom Yeats said, 'You work so hard that, like the Lancelot of Tennyson, you will almost see the Grail',¹³ and others. Such references can frequently be sensed in O'Brien's novels. A more overt significance of the bed-habit, however, is the implication of a more serious mental condition, not suffered by either Yeats or Moore, but recalling Goncharov's Oblomov: imaginative retirement which fails to take account of the realities of life, that accepts a position of self-indulgence, leaving itself vulnerable to physical and mental stagnation and putrefaction. On the title page of Apostate, Forrest Reid quotes an idea of Heraclitus of Ephesos:

They that are awake have one world
in common, but of the sleeping,
each turns aside into a world of
his own.¹⁴

Although celebrated by Reid,¹⁵ O'Brien suggests it is a world which can be indulged in intemperately and without intellectual direction and discretion, and derives humour from it accordingly. On a more serious level, not only does the narrator, absorbed totally in his imaginative bed-dominated procedures, reveal a general lack of connection with the real world and a particular misanthropy towards his uncle and those friends of his uncle whose preoccupations are not of the literary kind, he also reveals, as the creator of Trellis, that within the sphere of his imagination he is a victim of its eccentric powers. Trellis, for example, can be seen in the dual light of an author-character suffering his own difficulties and torments of mind, and as the dream-embodiment, the fantasy taking on a certain reality, of that part of the narrator's consciousness which is totally manipulated by his ungoverned, indeed grossly

indulged, imagination. As the level of control over his imagination progressively lessens, and the narrator sinks more deeply into his subconscious (culminating in the Pooka's journey and the trial of Trellis), O'Brien can reveal through its own action the nature of a progressively more undisciplined, finally very unbalanced mind in its eccentric and violent fluctuations. In the final section of the novel, that involving Orlick Trellis (the offspring of the distracted imagination, Dermot), Trellis Senior is said to be asleep and thus the products of his imagination beyond his control. Likewise they are beyond the control of the narrator also, who scarcely ever even appears in this part of the narrative. There is no intellectual control, and the processes of the imagination take their natural, destructive course, until the narrator is recalled, by the attainment of his degree and the approbation of his uncle, to an element of reality, and Dermot Trellis is 'saved'.

Since Trellis is to be recognised as the narrator's most inner and extreme mental condition, his bed-habit is examined in more detail than the narrator's. Like the narrator, Trellis makes every attempt, if that is not a contradiction in terms, not to leave his bed, and consequently a deplorable physical condition ensues:

Dermot Trellis was a man of average stature but his person was flabby and unattractive, partly as 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 undertrunks in bed. He never went out and rarely approached the windows.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.26

This is obviously not the productive Celtic withdrawal into the peace of the soul, but an intrinsically sterile withdrawal from things healthy, realistic, belonging to the world of human contact and the conscious mind. The subsequent description of Trellis's bedroom (p.3) places much emphasis on the bed, into which care and artistry has gone, but in which also 'many of his forefathers had died and been born'. This is one of several examples of unusual syntax; we expect to read 'had been born and died', but the emphasis is put on the death. Similarly, 'He had lost all physical reaction to bad or good weather' confirms the impression of the moribund; even the alarm-clock has been 'emasculated', every attempt made to prevent the obtrusion of fertile life. The controlling consciousness is deliberately submerged. In this stage Trellis (the narrator) creates John Furriskey and presumably all the rest, offspring of an imagination not controlled by the consciousness, except that it is directed by inherent preoccupations which habitually beset it. These account for much of the nature of Trellis's various creations.

He can be seen, for example, as the imagination of an Irish writer of a certain sort intent on writing a 'moral book'. The satire here is firmly directed at the kind of Irishman who is subject to besetting moral prejudices and narrowness of outlook

which concede nothing to an understanding of humanity. Although it appears to Trellis that:

a great and a daring book - a green book - was the crying need of the hour - a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.36

he is said by the narrator to intend to fill the book with 'plenty of smut', assaults on young girls, bad language and so on, because 'He realises that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public' (p.35). O'Brien's laughter can be heard clearly behind this aside. If Trellis is regarded as part of the narrator's consciousness, however, it can be imagined that the violence to which he is finally subjected by the Pooka might represent the action of the conscience on the autonomous imagination, a mental purgatory only redeemed by the intercession of reality, common sense, or self control. Whether the portrait of Trellis is considered in its own right, or as part of the narrators, it remains a portrait of a mind dominated by the anarchy of the imagination, beset by ideas of a prohibited nature (smut), complicated by a moral twist or warp, and also fettered by ignorance and prejudice. The prejudice lies in Trellis's belief in the inherent evil of all colours except green,¹⁶ and his consequent refusal to extend his reading beyond books with a green cover:

Although a man of wide learning and culture, this arbitrary rule caused serious chasms in his erudition. The Bible, for instance, was unknown to him, and much of knowledge of the great mysteries of religion and the origin of man was acquired from servants and public-house acquaintances and was on

that account imperfect and in some respects ludicrously garbled. It is for this reason that his well-known work, Evidences of Christian Religion, contains the seeds of serious heresy.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.99

From the unhealthy outlook and character of this ungoverned mind spring imaginary figures and incidents such as one might expect: unsavoury, grotesque and ultimately destructive. In the end his creations actually prey on Trellis, literally wreaking vengeance upon him for his sexual and authorial misdeeds. Symbolically, this represents the violence of an imagination bordering on lunacy, as in Beckett's Murphy.¹⁷ This is specifically emphasised in the person of Trellis, who is very nearly the victim of his own imagination (or the narrator's):

I am ill, Teresa, he murmured. I have done too much thinking and writing, too much work. My nerves are troubling me. I have bad nightmares and queer dreams and I walk when I am very tired. The doors should be locked.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.216

The irony of this, of course, is that the doors should be opened to the outside world. No specific mention of madness is made, however, in keeping with the technique of mutually oblivious levels of narration, until the author's conclusion:

Professor Unternehmer, the eminent German neurologist, points to Claudius as a lunatic, but allows Trellis an inverted sow neurosis where the farrow eat their dam. Du Fernier, however, Professor of Mental Sciences and Sanitation at the Sorbonne, deduces from a want of hygiene in the author's bed-habits a progressive weakening of the head. It is of importance

the most inestimable, he writes, that for mental health there should be walking and not overmuch of the bedchamber.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.217

This passage is teasingly rich in suggestions; the whole Conclusion is very dense and perhaps not certain enough in its implications for the clarity of the themes as a whole. On the other hand, it is rich in the evocative imprecision of Irish thought. Among the sexual nuances and linguistic jokes of the above passage, there are grounds for detecting in the German, *Unternehmer* (venturesome, enterprising; undertaker), a suggestion of Freud,¹⁸ and the latter's opinion of artists and writers, especially since Hamlet is simultaneously suggested: his opinion, that is, repealed in 1928,¹⁹ that writers and artists, who deliberately submerged themselves in dreams and the imagination, were literally neurotics. Considering the nature of dreams, his conclusion was that these were of the same substance as those mental structures produced by psychical illness, namely obsessions, delusions, phobias and hysterical symptoms. He regarded all of these as pathological symptoms, the deliberate indulgence in the cause of which was itself neurotic.

The French professor subsequently associates this idea of madness with the theme of the bed-habit, ironically picking up Trellis's earlier words, 'I walk when I am very tired. The doors should be locked'. The emphasis here on the want of hygiene of the bed-habit may perhaps recall the several occasions earlier in the novel on which the motif 'Mens sana in corpore sano' has been mentioned. The second of these occasions (p.163) involves the narrator's uncle, who has maintained the importance

of exercise throughout. The first occurrence of the phrase, however, is more extraordinary: Trellis is describing his plans for the moral book, and uses the Latin in a most inaccurate sense:

The woman is corrupted, eventually ravished and done to death in a back lane. Presented in its own milieu, in the timeless conflict of grime and beauty, the tale would be a moving and salutary one. Mens sana in corpore sano. What a keen discernment had the old philosopher! How well he knew that the beetle is of the dunghill, the butterfly of the flower!

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.36

Ironically, Trellis has voiced the idea which condemns him: he is the dunghill, while the Celtic poet was the flower. Their different indulgence of the imagination severally produces the beetle and the butterfly, the neurosis or the poem. As a result of his corruption of the fertility of the creative imagination, Trellis must finally be subjected to the tortures of his own creation - the Pooka.

With this torturing of Trellis it becomes obvious that there is a very distinct connection between Trellis and Mad Sweeny. Not only do they both suffer torments of the most grievous kind, but in both cases this has to do with madness, Sweeny's overt madness drawing attention to Trellis's kind of madness when the comparison is realised. O'Brien ensures that this is effective by deliberately echoing language reminiscent of Sweeny in the passages which later concern Trellis. When Orlick begins to initiate Trellis's punishment, he is irresistably drawn to speak of clerics and sacrilege, after the fashion

of the Sweeny tale:

On a certain day this man looked out accidentally through a certain window and saw a saint in his garden taping out the wall-steads of a new sun-bright church, with a distinguished concourse of clerics and acolytes along with him, discoursing and ringing shrill iron bells and reciting elegant latin. For a reason he was angry. He gave the whoop of a world-wide shout from the place he was and with only the bareness of time for completing the plan he was engaged with, made five strides to the middle of the garden. The brevity of the tale is this, that there was a sacrilege in the garden that morning. Trellis took the saint by a hold of his wasted arm and ran (the two of them), until the head of the cleric had been hurt by a stone wall. The evil one then took a hold of the saint's breviary - the one used by holy Kevin - and tore at it until it was a-tatters in his angry hand; and he added this to his sins, videlicet, the hammering of a young clergyman, an acolyte to confide precisely, with a lump of stone.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.171

Later when the Pooka has been conjured up to torture Trellis, the latter comes to resemble the suffering Sweeny still more:

That night they rested at the tree of Cluain Eo, Trellis at his birds'-roost on a thin branch surrounded by tufts of piercing thorns and tangles of bitter spiky brambles

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.184

Having thus established a connection between Sweeny and Trellis, O'Brien ensures an ironic reflection on the potential and pitfalls of the Irish imagination, the virtues and dangers of the creative sensitivity of which as a people the Irish have always been proud. He also demonstrates the fallibility of this Irish virtue by means of showing it so apt for humorous treatment, as demonstrated by the book as a whole. This is doubly effective as the humorous

treatment to which he subjects it is itself composed of features of that imaginative power, being resonant with lyrical language which owes much to its Celtic heritage, and with images and vividness so informing the dialogues that they are transformed to a larger-than-life quality. That same larger-than-life nature is, of course, what is being satirised as well as the instrument of the satire.

Thus, Sweeny can be seen to be central to At Swim-Two-Birds; he is the epitome of the creative imagination, so brilliant that it partakes of madness; he is an archetypal, semi-divine figure, the embodiment of an ideal unrealisable by mankind, in whom madness and poetry are intrinsically fused. He is also, at times, a ridiculous figure, when his recitals become excessive. He is thus an image of the virtues and dangers of the Irish imaginative powers. In At Swim-Two-Birds, O'Brien creates a narrative texture of shifting states of mental being which illuminate the delicate borderline between madness and richness. 'Madness' of a kind can be productive if applied with control, the reference to Cowper recalls,²⁰ and the reference to Hamlet in the 'Conclusion' insinuates; but the other side of the coin is Dante's 'Abandon hope all you who enter here'. The incursion into the mind of the narrator which forms the greater part of At Swim-Two-Birds is one into a kind of hell of unbounded mental freedom which has resulted in a kind of madness, the madness of lack of intellectual restraints, reflected, of course, in the novel's romping, exuberant style. The whole medley of cowboys and Pookas becomes in itself a representation of mental licence, in particular the final section of the novel

comprising the Pooka's journey and Orlick's narrative. In the latter even Sweeny gets involved and degraded, but by the conclusion he nevertheless emerges as the still point in the novel:

When a dog barks late a night and then retires again to bed, he punctuates and gives majesty to the serial enigma of the dark, laying it more evenly and heavily upon the fabric of the mind. Sweeny in the trees hears the sad baying as he sits listening on the branch, a huddle between the earth and heaven; and he hears also the answering mastiff that is counting the watches in the next parish. Bark answers bark till the call spreads like fire through all Erin. Soon the moon comes forth from behind her curtains riding full tilt across the sky, lightsome and unperturbed in her immemorial calm. The eyes of the mad king upon the branch are upturned, whiter eyeballs in a white face, upturned in fear and supplication. His mind is but a shell. Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? It is extremely hard to say.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.216

The above poetically expressive passage is the central idea of O'Briens 'Conclusion', differing from the rest in its relatively unhumorous tone. In it Sweeny's place as central to the novel is confirmed, although lyrically rather than explicitly. The passage is immediately prefaced by the enigmatic sentence, 'Evil is even, truth is an odd number and death is a full stop'. Although obviously a pastiche of the comedy of the Pooka's numbers complex, this can also be accepted as bearing a suggestion of the balance of truth and falsehood, or the general distribution of evil and the relative scarcity of truth, with the less ambivalent conclusion that death is the only end to the mortal confusion, and the only end to the issues of the book, within whose covers there can be

no ultimate solution. The metaphor of the barking dog and the answering mastiff which punctuate and give majesty to the dark night well, in the context of the imagination theme, refer to writers whose attempt (barking) does go a certain way towards illuminating the persisting 'serial enigma' of human life, 'laying it more evenly and heavily upon the mind'. It is consonant with O'Brien's sense of humour to refer to himself as a barking dog. In the middle of all this sits Sweeny, rightly 'a huddle between the earth and heaven'. Bark answers bark as writers proliferate in their attempts to express Ireland, their attempts seeming increasingly futile against the 'immemorial calm' of the moon;²¹ but Sweeny has become involved in the caprices of the human mind, his mind is emptied of its potency, become shell-like, and left in an attitude of despair and supplication, reflecting the human mind after its frenzied struggle to express and explain, and its defeat at the hands of its own autonomous imaginative powers.

It will be seen that during this demanding 'Conclusion' the focus has shifted slightly from the ungoverned imagination of the writer or individual dreamer to a more general application. O'Brien's penetrating exploration of a state of mind has followed its ultimate course to a larger field of enquiry, unbalanced humanity, the satirist's perpetual concern. The modern Irish writer, however, cannot be lost sight of; in the 'Conclusion' alone, among many examples of foolish obsession, is one which may or may not be a reaction to the newly published Murphy: the man who fears to sit because he fears the breakage of his bottom is very reminiscent of Cooper.²² No Irish writer,

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furthermore, can write totally independently of an awareness of Swift, whose madness and brilliance are renowned, and who may have been in O'Brien's mind during his writing since there is one passage where the style is particularly reminiscent of, or deliberately recalls, Swift:

Many social problems of contemporary interest, he (William Tracy) wrote in 1909, could be readily resolved if issue could be born already matured, teathed, reared, educated, and ready to essay those competitive plums which make the Civil Service and the Banks so attractive to the younger breadwinners of today. 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.

He also envisaged the day when the breeding of Old Age Pensioners and other aged and infirm eligible for public money would transform matrimony from the sordid struggle that it often is to an advantageous business enterprise of limitless possibilities.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.41

The above passage recalls The Modest Proposal in a number of ways: it concerns the usefulness of children, it represents itself as an easy solution, its aim is clearly monetary but this is not at first made explicit, and it is expressed in terms absolutely lacking in the warmth of human feeling - children being, for example a 'tedious anachronism'. To recall Swift in this context is, also, to recall Yeats, whose play Words Upon the Windowpane (1934) not only portrays Swift at a time of great intellectual power when madness threatens, but betrays Yeats's own fascination with Swift's

madness. Yeats's belief that great drama should make one feel that the characters are 'holding down violence or madness', expressed in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, is also one of the most illuminating descriptions which it is possible to find of the state achieved by the mad poet Sweeny at the place called Swim-Two-Birds.²³ The failure to transform the frenzy to a well-governed artistic outcome, moreover, has been the subject of many other Irish writers. Of those that pre-date At Swim-Two-Birds, James Stephens's The Charwoman's Daughter (1912) concerns a mother and daughter in straitened circumstances whose only escape lies in make-believe. The mother, appropriately called Mrs. Makebelieve, lives in her leisure hours in an unreal world in which gallant, wealthy men propose to her daughter and American relatives return bringing her a fortune. A more tragic conflict, for The Charwoman's Daughter does not end in the vicious triumph of delusion, was presented in George Moore's short work A Mere Accident (1887) some years previously. In it the main character in particular, John Norton, is so obsessed with a stringent ideal of ascetism and purity of intellect that he is unable to react in a human, outgoing manner either to the very different values and expectations of his mother, or to the proffered love of her young companion, Kitty, to whom he is attracted against his principles. Moore's conclusion, the suicide of Kitty, is meant to indicate the ultimate triumph of the youngman's life-denying obsession.

Clearly both of the above examples were conceived in a way which demanded the presentation of the theme in a work which explored in depth the personality of the chosen character. J. M. Synge's play The Playboy of the Western World (1907), while

presenting various characters limited by a preconception or a fantasy, couches the theme in comedy, with the result, in this case, that the fantasising of Christy and Pegeen takes on a romantic aura. Perhaps it was this that led O'Brien so fervently to dislike Synge's work, as he undoubtedly did,²⁴ for in many other aspects Synge portrays in this work many of the aspects of 'myth-making' which O'Brien himself presents in At Swim-Two-Birds; a notable example being the way in which the individual constructs and simultaneously hardens his fantasy in talking to others, a kind of boasting procedure which confirms and reassures the weakness of the ego.

Since the publication of At Swim-Two-Birds there have been several other outstanding works written by Irish writers which are concerned with a similar theme. Mary Lavin's The Becker Wives (1946) depicts the gradual development of a fantasy which is inordinately indulged reaching the final stage of madness. Flora, whose predicament this is, so wholeheartedly plays the part of another woman that she ultimately believes herself to be that woman. A similar pattern is followed by another female character in Brian Moore's masterpiece of characterisation, The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne (1955). The ageing Judith's abiding fantasy is that she imagines herself as having a relationship with a man, a fantasy grounded in a prolonged and frustrating spinsterhood and frigidity. The prose in which the story is told is a subtle reflection of the nuances of the woman's mind and speech, working successfully in a naturalistic vein with a similar proximity to the fantasising mind as O'Brien in his non-naturalistic treatment. The outcome, once again, is mental disorder.

Many years after the publication of Judith Hearne, Brian Moore made another study of the fantasising mind in a comic fantasy, The Great Victorian Collection (1975), a novel which particularly bears many points of resemblance to At Swim-Two-Birds. This quasi-naturalistic fantasy involves a young man who 'dreams up' (and it literally appears on the spot) a collection of Victoriana with which, in his spare time, he has been much involved. The Collection materialises while Maloney is asleep in a Trellis-like fashion, suggesting that in his sleep he becomes freely immersed in the realms of his fantasy, and like Trellis's characters the fantasy has an apparently real existence afterwards. Moore extends the idea further and has his hero fear to sleep again in case the Collection vanishes as it came. As obsession led to fantasy and then to the apparent realisation of the dream, so subsequently the hero suffers madness and death. Moore prepares the reader for this outcome by emphasising throughout Maloney's constant fear that he will go mad and by introducing the madman who appears carrying a banner (bearing an extremely sane slogan) as soon as the Collection materialises. Obsession and delusion are present throughout the novel in the form of Fred Vatterman and his obsessive belief that his girlfriend's father is following them around with the intention of killing him if he ever touches her. This novel and At Swim-Two-Birds, therefore, have in common not only their central idea - for the apparent reality of Trellis's imagined characters corresponds very closely to the tangible appearance of Maloney's obsession, the Collection - but also the way in which the real and the fantastic are indistinguishable and confounded, not only in the mind of the character but also in the

fabric of the narrative. The result of this in both novels is that the power of the mental delusion is most tangibly experienced by the reader.

However, with the major reintroduction of the Pooka MacPhellimey and his early morning conversation with the Good Fairy (p.103) an intensification can be felt in the fabric of the novel, and the narrative from that point until the chance overthrow of Trellis's tormentors gives the impression of forming a section with its own characteristic tenor. Indeed, the impression of the novel which remains with the reader long after the book has been put down is dominated by the occurrences which take place from this first encounter between the Pooka and the Good Fairy to the vivid torturing and trial of Dermot Trellis and his sudden escape. After a first reading it may seem that this section is free from any interruption on the part of the young narrator, so compulsive are these fictional dramas. In fact this is very far from being so, as there are several such ruptures in the narrative, and these are in fact important; nevertheless this impression is a valid one from the point of view of the nature of the section. The reader's imagination is so thoroughly involved with the sequence of fantastic events that they remain his only, or his dominant, recollection of it.

The explanation of this lies in the nature of the 'unreal domaine', as I shall call it, into which the Pooka and the Fairy step as they begin their journey, and into which the reader steps also from his first encounter with the newly-awakened Pooka. Although in terms of the language it is hard to make any certain distinction between the witty, eccentric, fast-moving and inherently

satirical dialogue of the novel before this point and the language of the colloquy between the Pooka and the Fairy, there is a sense in which this witty encounter and the succeeding narrative may be distinguished as somehow 'other'. One can feel that this 'otherness' has been ruptured and expires when Trellis returns drenched to his house and to Teresa, despite the witty, epigrammatic language of the ensuing 'Conclusion of the book: ultimate'. We have been, in this interval, in another terrain, one characterised by a different degree of fantasy. It may be felt that fantasy has been the nature of At Swim-Two-Birds from the beginning, but I am distinguishing now between the fantasy in which the narrator indulges, which forms part of the plot of the novel, and fantasy in the sense of a literary terrain, part, rather, of the style and conception of the novel. In this second half of At Swim-Two-Birds it is as if the fantasy of its central character has been reflected autonomously into, not only his own manuscript, but also O'Brien's manuscript, thus providing it with ultimate expression.

In his entertaining chapter on 'Fantasy in Irish Humour and Ribaldry',²⁶ Vivien Mercier has provided many amusing and informative examples of the Irish tradition of fantasy writing. This ranges from tales of leprechauns or the Other World, the magical and the marvellous, to the ludicrous fantasy and buffoonery often associated with the Finn Cycle. All of this dates from earliest times, Professor Mercier goes so far as to say pagan times, and extends, in a modified form, to encompass modern Anglo-Irish writers who detect various potential in the fantastic mode. Yeats used fantasy for its tragic and symbolic potential, for

example, in The Land of Heart's Desire (1894), while Synge's The Well of the Saints (1905) combined fantastic humour with more serious overtones. Perhaps the best known and most traditional Irish fantasy is found in the works of James Stephens, however, in The Crock of Gold (1912) and The Demi-Gods (1914).

Although there is such a large element of modern Dublin life in the first half of the novel, there are grounds for calling even this area 'fantasy'. Fantastic characters populate it throughout: the Pooka (the 'puca' of the Celtic tradition), here uniquely urbane and conservative, appears at the outset; so also does Finn, to a much greater extent, bringing with him the complete 'other world' of the Ossianic Cycle and King Sweeny; and then there are the characters less indebted to ancient imaginations - those from Tracy's western novels, and those from Trellis's Red Swan Hotel.

The Good Fairy, however does not appear until the 'unreal domaine' section, in which also Jem Casey hears woodland creatures talking, and the 'aesthoautogamy' which produces Orlick is found, thus accentuating the particularly marvellous nature of this section of the novel. Here the 'fictional' world seems quite divorced from the 'real': the characters have a greater autonomy, far removed from the purpose envisaged for them by Trellis, even unencumbered by the artistic ambitions of the student narrator, and totally contrary to the behaviour the reader might expect from them (I am thinking here of the reversal of the roles expected of a Good Fairy and a Pooka). In other words, this section has developed an integrity of its own. When Orlick begins his narrative there can be no doubt of this; natural order as we

know it is reversed - a man is born middle-aged, the good is less than good and the bad less than bad, characters can 'write' the author and can create the destruction of their creator. The impossible has become substantial and irreducible.

An early indication that this is an independent 'unreal domaine' is the location of the section in an unreal, 'fairy' landscape of its own, quite distinguishable as soon as the Pooka steps out in it with the Fairy in his pocket as a magical landscape. Although not unnaturally covered with undergrowth and thickets, these are quite bizarre: 'tendrils and creeper-ropes ... spidery suspensions of yellow and green and blood-red yams (p.113). The unreality of the landscape, its distance from a real countryside, can be palpably felt. In this kind of fiction, such a sense of distance is a primary requirement in order that the fantasy might have a life of its own. It can be created by distance in time, in space, or in dimension. William Golding has furnished good examples of each in his first three novels. The Inheritors is distanced in time, being set in the Neanderthal era, The Lord of the Flies (and also most 'space' fantasy, such as Lewis's trilogy) is set in a location far from our familiar territory, and Pincher Martin, being the adventure of the mind of man stubbornly resisting death, may be said to be in a different dimension. The Third Policeman, of course, belongs primarily to this last order, although it bears traces of being distanced in space and even in time, according to the delusions of the central character. At Swim-Two-Birds suffers from a similar complexity. The distance in space indicated by the grotesque Arcadia into which the Pooka steps is but a superficial indication of a distance

in dimension which obtains, in this case a mental dimension of which the 'unreal domaine' is an intensified expression. Its nature is indicated by a feature familiar to fantasy, the supernatural irruption followed by a return to normality. The 'unreal domaine' section of At Swim-Two-Birds shows an irruption in the violent autonomy of the characters, culminating in the torturing of Trellis and his subsequent 'trial', and a return to normality when the manuscript is burnt. Over the novel as a whole it can be said that the narrator, in his mind, suffers the 'irruption' (of the 'unreal domaine' en entier) and thereafter experiences a return to his senses.

It has already been said that the special, fantastic world created in the final section of At Swim-Two-Birds is frequently interrupted by the narrator, whose intrusions seem to draw attention to its being a fictional construct. When looked at more closely, these fictional activities of the narrator which intrude upon the 'unreal domaine' have the important effect of maintaining an awareness of the real in the reader's attention while at the same time permitting the aura of mental anarchy to thrill his imagination. Apparently consonant with the fantastic landscape in which they are encountered we meet Jem Casey, the archetypal working man and epitome (perhaps so much so that he becomes of a piece with the fantasy) of a 'slice of life'; Slug and Shorty, who imply the modern reality with which the western is associated; and a certain amount of unmistakably human characteristics: gambling, back-biting, banter and pride. Thus a distinctly recognisable 'reality' intrudes upon the fantasy and certain smaller details within the fantastic adventure deliberately

emphasise this. The Pooka, for instance, is obsessed with the quality of the material in his overcoat (p.144); the Fairy, though supposedly incorporeal, has blackheads (p.138), moves his head (p.124), and needs to be taken nearer to see Sweeny (p.126). There are many such examples, large and small, of this enormous sense of reality impinging on the terrain and characters. The language used by the characters to each other is, of course, the most imposing of these instances.

He spat phlegm coarsely on the grass.
The workin' man doesn't matter, of
course, he added.

But why? asked the Pooka courteously.
He is surely the noblest of all creatures.

What about all these strikes? asked
the Good Fairy. I don't know about him
being the noblest. They have the
country crippled with their strikes.
Look at the price of bread. Sixpence
halfpenny for a two-pound loaf.

Dirty minds be damned, said Shorty
again. Oh, by God I know what you were
doing in that clump, me boyo.

And look at bacon, said the Good Fairy.
One and ninepence if you please.

To hell with the workin' man, said
Casey. That's what you hear. To bloody
hell with him.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.120

'Real' life is so constantly recalled in this fantasy that the narrator's interruptions not only do not puncture it, but are a perfectly congruous part of it. This is because the particular nature of the fantasy both of At Swim-Two-Birds in general and the 'unreal domaine' section in particular is its lack of distinction between natural and supernatural, real and fantastic; or rather, that this accepted distinction breaks down. Woman/female pooka/kangaroo, are all equated. Sheila Lamont is fictional, but becomes pregnant through rape by her author, such

that Orlick is born. The worlds of Faerie, of Celtic myth, of the Wild West and of modern Dublin co-habit easily. All of this contributes to the reader being compelled to feel that the contents of the 'unreal domaine' are, though fantastic, somehow part of the natural order. Put differently, if reality is an element of fantasy, fantasy is also an element of reality.

It now begins to be apparent just how apposite this use of fantasy is in the final section of At Swim-Two-Birds, by reason of its being appropriate both to the Celtic myth elements of the opening section and to the themes concerning the imagination. The close relationship of fantasy with magic, and the historical connection between fantasy and the Celtic tradition of which it originally formed a part, establish a link between the 'unreal domaine' and the novel's Celtic elements, while the particular characteristic of this fantasy, that it expresses the lack of distinction between natural and supernatural, renders it capable of recalling the harmony of this union in the Celtic tradition while satirically exposing the chaos and disharmony of the modern world.

At the height of the 'irruption' of the supernatural in the 'unreal domaine', a peak which is felt to reach its height with the torturing of Trellis by the Pooka, there is a certain change to be felt in the quality of the fantasy: it is no longer the light, multi-sided banter of the exchanges between the Fairy and the cowboys, or the genteel compunctions of the Pooka as he outwits the Fairy at poker. The human body now comes in for a great deal of destructive, indeed distortive treatment, and with this comes a darker note which overshadows the end of the novel. The fantastic is overlaid by the grotesque to a much

greater degree in the torturing of Trellis than in the sufferings of Sweeny which the former recall and complete. As Vivien Mercier remarks in his exploration of comedy, 'the macabre and the grotesque elude the category of magic'.²⁶ Thus the dark note of suffering and death at this point is alien to the fantasy, and in this case alters its effect such that a grimness adheres to the reader's final picture of the destructive imagination.

The deliberate echoing of Sweeny's madness and suffering in the torturing of Trellis emphasises, of course, the darker note which now colours the narrative. Although there is a sense in which the reader is distanced from Trellis's suffering, he is more involved with it than he was with Sweeny's, because by this stage the imagination which first dallied with the Celtic story has totally succumbed to its own latent violence and is out of control, rioting towards madness. It is thus that the grotesque of the final stages of the narrative is appropriate to the final stages of the theme of the imagination. But this is true not only on the level of the plot, the narrator - Trellis level of the novel, in which the approach of madness is overtly portrayed; the ultimate dangers of the creative imagination are also figured on the level of the book's form and construction, and in the 'unreal domaine' which undergoes this severe change.

An important aspect of the darker emphasis which overtakes the 'unreal domaine' is the way in which it reflects a terrible introversion: the imagination is felt to be focused inwards upon itself and upon the bleakness and violence of an introverted entity. The fantasy of the final pages of At Swim-Two-Birds is a presentation of the fantasising mind which has paradoxically lost the self-

control to portray itself; it is expressive of the loss of true creative power by the creating mind. When the torture of Trellis episode reflects that of Sweeney, moreover, the novel has become self-reflective in the same way as has the creative mind. This persistent introversion in both form and content of the novel accounts for the sense of irresistible acceleration and intensification which dominates the conclusion of the work. It is a formal tour de force.

The concept of introversion thus evidence in the latter part of At Swim-Two-Birds can also be felt to have played a notable part in the execution of the whole. The passage in which the narrator expounds his ridiculous "literary aesthetic" to Brinsley is as significant to this major aspect of the novel as it appears extravagant and ridiculous:

It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or 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. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.25

Its significance lies in the contradiction of its tenets provided by the rest of the book: the ensuing narrative is concerned, not with how the novel tyrannises the reader, or the characters, but with how it tyrannises the writer. Can the writer 'regulate at will the degree of his credulity', it asks? Thus the real focus of the narrative is not on fictional technique but always on the writer. In the student narrator, O'Brien is not creating a mouth-piece for his own ideas on fiction, nor a character who will reflect his own ideas: he is instead a satirical tool for the humorous

exploration of the position of a writer. It is finally seen to be beyond the power of the narrator and his created author figures (all reflections of the original author, O'Brien, one must conclude) to impose control upon the activities of the fiction. Thus the novel expresses an embracing introversion, not a helpless one, but a conscious exploration executed with a satiric approach. An idea is put forward, and the novel shaped in accordance with that idea. Only in the context of the fantasy of At Swim-Two-Birds is this idea merely 'fantastic'; in the context of O'Brien's discourse on novel-writing it is a serious idea which the writer is exploring within and by means of the narrative framework. Rather than the fantastic idea 'It is wrong for an author to impose his will on his fictional characters', we must read 'It is wrong for a modern author to impose a completely rational design on his fiction, to describe a perfectly ordered world'. The increasing 'loss of control' suggested by the language of At Swim-Two-Birds as it moves from eccentricity through multi-clause colloquy to outright anarchy, as described, is the natural outcome of an experiment in narrative disorder. O'Brien's conclusion, emerging from his personal confrontation with the art of writing a novel (At Swim-Two-Birds), is that ultimately a 'muddle' is a more honest reflection of the human mind than a 'mystery' fashioned according to the design of the author.²⁷

Herein lies, of course, a large part of O'Brien's quarrel with James Joyce, and indicated how early this began. What O'Brien ultimately could not tolerate in Joyce, despite his admiration for the latter's supreme artistry, was the cohesion and order which, of all writers, Joyce particularly imposed on reality and consequently

on his art. In At Swim-Two-Birds no amount of authors are able to impose their will on the material of their art; his creation revolts against the attempt, and the result takes the form of rampant, uncontrolled life. O'Brien's use of Celtic saga in his novel, furthermore, provides a substantial point of comparison and contrast with Joyce, with Ulysses in particular, for in the latter, of course, the element of Greek myth is a means by which the author imposes control and organisation of reality within the novel. In At Swim-Two-Birds, the saga element is an intrinsic part of the chaos expressed by the whole, a part which suggests order but fails to impose it. O'Brien, in contrast to Joyce, is implying that what is required of the modern writer is no longer an amalgamative, cohesive force, but self knowledge, humility, awareness of modern reality and satire. In a passage towards the very end of the novel, O'Brien, using Joyce's favourite technique of the pun, permits the reader an almost explicit reference to the conclusion of his personal enquiry. When the manuscripts are burned and Trellis returns exhausted to his house (which all symbolises the end of the exploration of imaginative anarchy), he follows his maid, Teresa, up the stairs:

He reached unsteadily for the lamp and motioned that she should go before him up the stairs. The edge of her stays, lifting her skirt in a little ridge behind her, dipped softly from side to side with the rise and the fall of her haunches as she trod the stairs. It is the function of such garments to improve the figure, to conserve corporal discursiveness, to create the illusion of a finely modulated body. If it betray its own presence when fulfilling this task, its purpose must largely fail.

Ars est celare artem, muttered Trellis, doubtful as to whether he had made a pun.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.216

It has been said that Teresa symbolises Ireland;²⁸ much more appropriately must it be said that she, being so much a slice of life, one of the few characters who would, one feels, continue to exist outside the fantastic narrative, must symbolise reality, the material from which the novelist draws the contents of his work. As such, her garments can be seen as the way in which the author presents his material: his 'corset', the framework within which he shapes his raw material, must 'improve the figure', 'conserve corporal discursiveness', and 'create the illusion of a finely modulated body'. Even the diction here suggests its literary significance - 'figure', 'discursiveness', 'illusion'. Nevertheless, this shaping device must not show, or the effect is ruined: ars est celare artem. Of course, as 'Ars est celare artem' suggests, some degree of ordering must needs go into the creation even of a work which seeks to represent disorder; but O'Brien's views of a writer's limitations are broadly expressed in the 'Conclusion of the book, ultimate':

Evil is even, truth is an odd number
and death is a full stop. When a
dog barks late at night and then
retires again to bed, he punctuates
and gives majesty to the serial
enigma of the dark, laying it more
evenly and heavily upon the fabric
of the mind.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.216

In the context of O'Brien's exploration of the modern novel, this conveys the idea that the even, ordered picture is wrong (evil), that the truth is only to be expressed by an irregular design (odd number), and above all, that the author can draw no final line under his picture of life (only death, literally, is a full stop).

O'Brien thus intimates that the choice of material facing the writer is limitless, and this must be acknowledged. He chooses as his final image for the writer (apart from mad, creative Sweeny baying the moon) that of a single dog, one among many across all Ireland, simply giving voice, unable to say it all or anything approaching all, but with his piecemeal contribution, nevertheless, he 'punctuates and gives majesty to the serial enigma of the dark, laying it more evenly and heavily upon the fabric of the mind'.

If such was the intention, such certainly was the effect of O'Brien's satirical, humorous and introverted first novel.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. Irish Texts Society, Buile Shuibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne) being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt. A Middle-Irish Romance. Edited, translated and with an introduction by J. G. O'Keefe, 1913.
2. Both ballad and speech-poem are commonly known in Irish as 'laid' (lays), Modern Irish 'laoidh'.
3. Gerard Murphy, The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland, Dublin, 1955, pp. 5 - 6, 18 - 20, 30 - 31, 49.
4. I am grateful to an Irish friend for the story of Finn's responsibility for the creation of the Isle of Man. The two versions I was offered were (a) that Finn, in a temper, picked up a piece of earth from where he stood in Ireland and hurled it from him; this became the Isle of Man, and the area whence it was plucked became Lough Neagh, and (b) Finn, enormously giant, created the Isle of Man accidentally by a piece of mud falling off his boot as he was stepping over that section of the sea. Professor Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 1962, p.33, reports the same legend, and himself quotes Duanaire Finn, Part III, ed. Gerard Murphy, Dublin, 1953, pp. xvi - xviii.

5. Vivien Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, 1962, pp. 33 - 34.

6. The tradition of oral story-telling is described by

Standish O'Grady in an article for The Transactions
of the Ossianic Society, 111, 1857, p.59.

... tales used to be read aloud in
farmers's houses on occasions when
numbers were collected at some
employment, such as wool-carding, in
the evening, but especially at wakes.
Thus the people became familiar with
these tales.

An account of such story-telling still occurring
more recently in country parts of Ireland, and
also the decline of this custom, is vividly
described by A. & B. Rees, Celtic Heritage, London,
1961, pp. 21 - 22. It is consonant with the
marvels of Celtic legend that the hero Finn
affects his bodily transformation.

7. Buile Shuibhne, (op. cit.), p.13.

8. Ibid., pp. 63 - 71.

9. Eleanor Knott, Irish Classical Poetry. Commonly called
Bardic Poetry, Dublin, 1957, p.45.

10. Bertrand Russell, In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays,
London, 1935, pp. 9 - 29.

11. See W. B. Yeats, 'Adam's Curse', Collected Poems, second
edition, 1973, pp. 88 - 90.

12. Yeats: "My old procrastinating self". (Autobiographies, London, 1955, p.144).
13. Ibid., pp. 437 - 8.
14. Quoted by Benedict Kiely, Modern Irish Fiction. A Critique, Dublin, 1950, p.97.
15. Ibid., p.95.
16. This singularisation of the colour green, as previously in the 'green book' which Trellis wishes to write, is of course a satiric dart at the Irish in particular, whose national colour is traditionally green.
17. The comparison is in fact even more appropriate with Beckett's Malone Dies, in which Malone is increasingly beset by the voices of characters whose presence is ultimately, one feels, not really due to his summoning.
18. Freud was born in Freiberg, a small Moravian town of about 5,000 people, in 1856; at that time Moravia was a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire, today it is part of Czechoslovakia. If a suggestion of him is indeed intended in Unternehmer, it is possible that O'Brien may have confused Freiberg, Moravia with Freiburg, Germany- or he may have known that Freud's ancestors originated from the Rhineland when they were driven by anti-Semitic persecution; or, with many others, he may have been misled by the

sound of the name. However, there are in At Swim-Two-Birds several satiric references to Germans of which this might be a part (pp. 161, 176, 217) comprising perhaps a private joke or alternatively the current state of affairs in the pre-War years. It is also interesting to note the following passage from Aldous Huxley's Antic Hay (1923); more is said concerning the connection between O'Brien and Huxley in Chapter Six. Moreover, one must remember that the narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds has a copy of Huxley in his bedroom (p.11).

The German professors have catalogued
thousands of people whose whole pleasure
consists of eating dung.

(The Collected Works of Aldous Huxley,
Chatto & Windus, 1971, edition, p.183)

It is not possible to be sure whether O'Brien wrote his 'Conclusion' including the German professor and the mad German elements of it from a knowledge of this passage in Huxley or of an image or vorstellung current in the national imagination.

19. This opinion was repudiated by Freud in Dostoevsky and Parricide, 1928.
20. AS2B, p.149. Lengthy reference is made in an 'extract' to the poet Cowper, who was an extreme religious melancholic whose depression came in severe bouts over a period of many years and led him to attempt suicide. After he had overcome the worse of his mania, Cowper

lived with the Unwins, sharing their peaceful life and able to indulge his intense interest in the natural world (an interest he had in common with the ancient Celtic poets). Writing in fact took him out of his melancholy, and he began his long poem The Task for this therapeutic purpose. The 'task' of writing verses is soon overtaken by poetry of great quality, especially where the poet is occupied with his personal reflections on the natural landscape before him. The connection with Swëeny here is clear.

21. There is also perhaps a suggestion that a madness, or at least senselessness, prompts the dogs to bay. One is reminded of an enigmatic precedent for the baying dogs in As You Like It, V, ii., where Rosalind, still disguised as Ganymede, calls for peace from those around her, saying:

'Pray you, no more of this: 'tis
like the howling of Irish wolves
against the moon'.

Whether Shakespeare was the first to use this expression, or whether it already existed before he used it, remains unknown to me. His use of 'Irish' hounds, however, is particularly interesting.

Also of particular notice, on account both of the date of the work and O'Brien's relationship with the author, Graham Greene, is the following passage from Brighton Rock (1938):

Somewhere in the Channel a boat blew its siren and another answered, and another, like dogs at night waking each other.

(Penguin paperback edition, 1975, p.155)

22. Samuel Beckett, Murphy, p.69:
- It was true that Cooper never sat, his acathisia was deep-seated and of long standing. It was indifferent to him whether he stood or lay, but sit he could not.
23. The derivation of the novel's title is that Swim-Two-Birds is the place where, in Buille Shuibhne, Sweeny eventually finds peace, shortly before his death.
24. Anne Clissmann, Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction, pp. 224 - 225. O'Brien thought that Synge was presenting the Irish as clowns rather than endowing them with their natural dignity.
25. Vivien Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition, Oxford, 1962, pp. 11 - 46.
26. The Irish Comic Tradition, (op. cit.), p.4.
27. E. M. Forster, A Passage to India, London, 1924, (Everyman, 1968), p.56.
- 'I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles', said Mrs. Moore.
'A mystery is a muddle A mystery is only an high-sounding term for a muddle Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle.'
28. John Wain, 'To Write for My own Race - The Fiction of Flann O'Brien', Encounter, 29, No. 1 (July, 1967), p.79.

Chapter Four

THE THIRD POLICEMAN

The Third Policeman, O'Brien's second novel, was written in less than a year, immediately after the publication of At Swim-Two-Birds. It is paradoxically a much simpler work and one which suggests an even greater complexity of interpretation than its predecessor. It is simpler in the elementary sense that it does not attempt to emulate the multitudinous structure of At Swim-Two-Birds on the level of the plot or of its organisation. Indeed, The Third Policeman is particularly tightly knit, with a single plot line and a comparatively limited number of characters. Its humour, moreover, is noticeably less vibrant, perhaps the most astonishing of its differences from At Swim-Two-Birds; not only is there less variety of comic tone in this new book, but the humour of the whole is overshadowed by a certain seriousness, as if the author were becoming less committed to comedy for that comedy's own sake and more preoccupied with the ideas behind it. As a whole, The Third Policeman is enigmatic, particularly since the true nature of the hallucinatory domain in which the events take place is a mystery to the Protagonist and reader alike, but also on the level of the significance which these events seem to bear with respect to the underlying concerns of the author. Though a fantasy like its predecessor, The Third Policeman, unlike

At Swim-Two-Birds, is a self-contained, unruptured fantasy which fails to reveal self-consciously in its own fantastic nature.

As a result of all these things The Third Policeman is probably, again paradoxically, easier to read than At Swim-Two-Birds, but more difficult to accept or assimilate. It is less of a struggle for the reader to orientate himself to it initially, unlike the complex narrative diversions of At Swim-Two-Birds, but it is a more difficult work of which to divine the depths, and can be thought rather more straightforward than it actually is. Nevertheless, it extends some of the ideas initiated in At Swim-Two-Birds, while it expresses, in its very different form, the change that O'Brien felt within him, having completed, with the publication of his first novel, his novitiate as a writer of fiction. The Third Policeman, in its ^{1/2}saucy of construction and directness of execution, represents the author's new confidence. In one major respect in particular, The Third Policeman begins where At Swim-Two-Birds ultimately arrived: with the belief that chaos, not order, is the true expression of man's relationship with his universe.

This is achieved, however, in a texture which is as much characterised by ordered structuring as it is by fantasy. In a series of small chapters, often provided with footnotes, we are presented with the Protagonist, another unnamed Everyman figure in the position of narrator, who, after what he describes briefly as a deprived upbringing, has become obsessed with his scholarly pursuits to the detriment of any real human contact. His obsession takes the particular form of the study of an eccentric scientist-savant called de Selby, whose philosophy, though the

subject of much commentary, is notably lacking in sense, reason and humanity. In the interests of promoting his own scholarly research into de Selby, the Protagonist agrees to take part in a murder for gain, the object of this being the black cash-box belonging to an old man called Mathers. His more devious accomplice, Divney, arranges that the Protagonist is killed in his attempt to pick up the cash-box, which has presumably been replaced with an explosive device. At this point in the narrative the veneer of naturalism begins to fade as the reader realises that the Protagonist has not understood that he has died, and is narrating as if he were still alive. The Protagonist has refused to accept his own death, and is 'alive' in a realm which is unreal, another dimension, a life after death entirely of his own creation. Indeed, everything within this realm is a projection of the Protagonist's imagination.

The Protagonist's hallucinatory domain is not unnaturally created out of that which most dominated his mind during life: his obsession with de Selby. O'Brien presents this in the highly structured way of an eighteenth-century writer of fiction, giving a reminiscence of de Selby, often at the beginning of a chapter, and following it by an adventure or incident in the hallucination which has an immediate connection with that reminiscence.¹ Some of the characters, moreover, suggest aspects of the Protagonist himself: Finnucane, the obvious example, is one-legged like the Protagonist, is likewise a robber and murderer, and speaks his own name with a vanity and pride which characterise the Protagonist also. But the other characters are part of the

Protagonist too, in the manner of anti-selves, created from the fear within the Protagonist and rising up in the hallucination as if to test him. Hence the nightmarish quality of the whole delusion. For although the Protagonist is the author of it all, there is still a part of him which doubts it, a part which recognises his death and which has been smothered in the interest of self-delusion. This doubt manifests itself at intervals in confusion or fear in the face of a turn taken by events, and the Protagonist sometimes has recourse to 'sleep' in order to awake refreshed with new strength to maintain his illusion.² For if the illusion shattered he would cease to exist for sure. When his creative power is at its weakest, however, it can be felt that the events take a turn for which he is not entirely prepared.

One such event is the visit to Eternity, a subterranean fantasy domaine built on mechanical principles.³ Clearly the Protagonist has created this Eternity in order to reassure that part of himself which doubts with the promise of eternal life, but the nature of the place nevertheless takes him frequently by surprise. He expects, for example, a bright white light to signify immortality; instead he finds he must approach the specious Eternity by means of a lift. This is part of his dialogue with his inner self:

Surely, I argued, if we concede that eternity is up the lane, the question of the lift is a minor matter. That is a case for swallowing a horse and cart and straining at a flea.

No. I bar the lift. I know enough about the next world to be sure that you don't get there and come back out of it in a lift. Besides, we must be near the place now and I don't see any elevator shaft running up into the clouds

I still think there is an electric lift.

The Third Policeman, p.109

In order to be able to voice and thus eradicate his inner doubts, the Protagonist invents a talking 'soul', Joe, who stands for the small proportion of reason and spiritual understanding latent in his mind. When such a dialogue does not take place, the conflict in the Protagonist's mind continues to be expressed in the nature of the hallucination.

Eternity, when he reaches it, is a place in which time does not pass;⁴ this accords, of course, with his desire for immortality. Moreover, Eternity provides, as if by magic, everything a man could desire in the way of riches and luxuries; these of course, testify to his materialism and greed. When he tries to help himself to these riches, however, he is prevented, contrary to his will and to his expectation. Again, the hallucination has proved to be beyond his control. It is no more his paradise than it is the real paradise. In one respect only does it accord completely with the Protagonist's will. The Sergeant and MacCruiskeen say that, since time does not pass in their Eternity, they go there to preserve their lives; this Eternity is therefore not a place of immortality in the Christian sense, but it is a place where death is to be avoided, according to the Protagonist's wishes and fears.

The rest of the hallucination is as fundamentally specious and empty as this false Eternity: things, even the Protagonist himself, have no name, and sounds have no meaning. Even shapes and colours have no recognisable essence. The Protagonist is being led, by his own erring will, round in a circle to a final self-

confrontation; the end comes because the part which doubts is becoming stronger, more strong, ultimately, than the part which fabricates the hallucination. The Protagonist is led to re-encounter Mathers's house, in which he died, and there he meets, for the first time, Policeman Fox, the Third Policeman of the title.

The first that we and the Protagonist hear about Fox is that he, unlike the Protagonist and the other policemen, has no desire to avoid death:

'And Fox? Where does he live?'
'Beyant, I think' He jerked again to the place that was to the left
.....
'Then why does he sleep here?' I was not at all pleased that this ghostly man had been in the same room with me during the night.
'To spend it and spin it out and not have it all forever unused inside him'.
'All what?'
'His lifetime. He wants to get rid of as much as possible MacCruiskeen and I are wise and not yet tired of being ourselves, we save it up. I think he has an opinion that there is a turn to the right down the road and likely that is what he is after, he thinks the best way to find it is to die and get all the leftness out of his blood.....'

The Third Policeman, p.132⁵

More than this, for the moment, we are not told. The Sergeant subsequently tells how Fox became crazy after submitting to his curiosity to look into a box which contained things he was unable to assimilate. With this a certain resemblance begins to arise between Fox and the Protagonist, who also met a kind of 'madness'

upon looking into a box containing something which he did not know how to accept. Fox, however, having a desire to die, remains an enigma at this stage of the hallucination.

The Protagonist next encounters Fox at Mathers's house, when, at the end of the hallucination, the former has come round again to his own beginning; it is no accident that he meets Fox there. Fox is established within the very walls of the house, and therefore he symbolically exists at the heart of the Protagonist's past, death, and hallucination. His face suddenly appears to the Protagonist as that of Mathers, and his voice also; as at the very beginning, the Protagonist is very near the reality of his dying moment, the illusion very shallow. When Fox questions the continued existence of the Protagonist, this is the first time that the part which doubts is given verbal expression in the hallucination, and the illusion is seriously shaken:

'I do not understand your unexpected corporality after the morning on the scaffold'.

'I escaped', I stammered.

He gave me long searching glances.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

Was I sure? Suddenly I felt horribly ill as if the spinning of the world in the firmament had come against my stomach for the first time, turning it all to bitter curd. My limbs weakened and hung about me helplessly. Each eye fluttered like a bird's wing in its socket and my head throbbed, swelling out like a bladder at every surge of blood. I heard the policeman speaking at me again from a great distance.

'I am Policeman Fox', he said, 'and this is my own private police station and I would be glad to have your opinion on it because I have gone to great pains to make it spick and span'.

I felt my brain struggling on bravely, tottering, so to speak, to its knees but unwilling to fall completely. I knew

that I would be dead if I lost consciousness for one second.

The Third Policeman, p.158

The Protagonist's will soon re-asserts its power, however, with the idea that the black box, containing the all-powerful Omnium, has been sent ahead of him to his house, and he plans what he will do with this Omnium to satisfy his de Selby obsession, his academic pride, and his greed. We learn, however, that Fox claims responsibility for the creation of Eternity; furthermore, the Protagonist refers to Fox's 'unimpeachable reality'. (p.156). We also see Fox in a perpetually altering light, sometimes the strong, menacing policeman, sometimes the semi-facile creature who requires reassurance with regard to his wallpaper. These changing roles in Fox correspond to opposite roles assumed by the Protagonist, who is strongest when Fox is weakest, and vice versa. In other words, Fox and the Protagonist are complementary aspects of the Protagonist, and the latter's confrontation with Fox at this point is the greatest moment of crisis in the hallucination. Fox's desire for death represents the elements in the Protagonist's reasoning intellect which have throughout resisted the hallucination; he is a manifestation of the part which doubts. The hallucination has come full circle, worn thin to danger point, and been forced to re-assert itself or collapse. The stubborn will is, however, strong enough to overcome the promptings of reason and reality, and the whole hallucinatory cycle must begin again. The interview with Fox was the inevitable journey's end from the outset, hence the title The Third Policeman; it refers not only to Fox, but more potently to the central character himself, the

creator of and enigma within his own death-resisting impulse.

From the thematic summary given above The Third Policeman can clearly be seen as a continued exploration of the theme of imagination having greater control over the mind than reality and the reasoning powers. O'Brien has simply chosen a new fantastic situation through which to work out this idea, a situation which enables him to lay emphasis on slightly different aspects while still satirising the same delusion. In At Swim-Two-Birds, he presented a situation in which the imaginative powers had ascendancy in a creative, clearly fictional endeavour and showed their autonomy against reason in a fictional correlative of the image taking the form of actual character and incident. In The Third Policeman, O'Brien's emphasis is two-fold. On the one hand he shows, in what appears to be a satire of science, the ludicrous development of an intellectual idea according to the whim of an irrational mind, such that by apparently reasonable steps a quite unrealistic conclusion is reached and accepted as tenable despite the evidence of the real world: this satire is clearly centred on the character of de Selby. On the other hand, and in the events in which the narrator is concerned, he again develops the idea of the mind grasping or creating an image and the power of the imagination achieving dominance over reason and reality. This is clearly much closer to the predicament in which the student narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds found himself, but in both aspects O'Brien is again primarily concerned with the power of the imagination and the image it creates to overcome that of reason.

The two aspects of O'Brien's satire mentioned above are

ingeniously interwoven not only in terms of the main theme but also on the level of the plot. De Selby and his commentators provide scope for the treatment of a host of pretensions, such as pedantic learning, absurd philosophy, false reasoning, and futile scholarship; all indicate a state of mind in which intellectual vanity has resulted in a loss of proper perspective regarding man's place in the world and a consequent diminution within him of his sense of reality. But in addition to this de Selby's eccentric fantasies so influence the Protagonist as to have become part of the latter's own delusion, and hence inform the very shaping of the plot and nature of the hallucinatory domaine. This is revealed, for instance, in de Selby's opinion that the world is "sausage-shaped", and that the "alternative direction" is nearly always associated with death:

If a way can be found, says de Selby, of discovering the 'second direction', i.e., along the 'barrel' of the sausage, a world of entirely new sensation and experience will be open to humanity He doubts whether human legs would be 'suitable' for traversing the 'longitudinal celestium', and seems to suggest that death is nearly always present when the new direction is discovered.

The Third Policeman, p.82

The Protagonist, who has supposedly died by the cunning of John Divney, would therefore seem to have found this 'second direction', into a realm, what is more, governed thereafter by the spurious intellect of de Selby. This is confirmed as it is discovered that many more of de Selby's absurd ideas constitute 'reality' in the

unreason of this nightmarish universe. Two examples will suffice. De Selby says, concerning houses (p.19), that they are like a coffin, a warren, or a box, and persists in designing 'houses' that are so unusual in structure as to be unrecognisable as such. Then, in the terrible domaine of the three policemen, we come across old Mathers' house, which is certainly nothing less than a coffin, and has, within its walls, warren-like passages occupied by Policeman Fox. Elsewhere (p.56) we learn of de Selby's theory of mirrors, the fundamental point of which is that time travels backwards, death is avoided. The relevance of this to the Protagonist's situation hardly needs elaboration. In both cases, as in many subsequent ones, a blatant oddity of de Selby's is proved to have a genuine reality in the hallucinatory domaine. Moreover, in many cases, de Selby's theories coincide in implication with the Protagonist's inclination to ignore, retreat from, and utterly shun the fact of death.

De Selby's theory that he could trace his youth by means of a system of mirrors, for example, takes the established facts of the speed of light and the reflectivity of mirrors and distorts them by a system of speciously rational and logical argument:

If a man stands before a mirror and sees in it his reflection, what he sees is not a true reproduction of himself but a picture of himself when he was a younger man. De Selby's explanation of this phenomenon is quite simple. Light, as he points out truly enough, has an ascertained and finite rate of travel. Hence before the reflection of any object in a mirror can be said to be accomplished, it is necessary that rays of light should first strike the object and subsequently impinge on the glass, to be thrown back again to the object - to the eyes of a man, for instance. There is therefore an appreciable and calculable interval

of time between the throwing by a man of a glance at his own face in a mirror and the registration of the reflected image in his eye.

So far, one may say, so good. Whether this idea is right or wrong, the amount of time involved is so negligible that few reasonable people would argue the point. But de Selby, ever loath to leave well enough alone, insists on reflecting the first reflection in a further mirror and professing to detect minute changes in this second image. Ultimately he constructed the familiar arrangement of parallel mirrors, each reflecting diminishing images of an interposed object indefinitely. The interposed object in this case was de Selby's own face and this he claims to have studied backwards through an infinity of reflections by means of 'a powerful glass'. What he states to have seen through his glass is astonishing. He claims to have noticed a growing youthfulness in the reflections of his face according as they receded, the most distant of them - too tiny to be visible to the naked eye - being the face of a beardless boy of twelve, and, to use his own words, 'a countenance of singular beauty and nobility'. He did not succeed in pursuing the matter back to the cradle 'owing to the curvature of the earth and the limitations of the telescope'.

The Third Policeman, pp. 56 - 57.

In this passage as in others the specious intellectual elaboration is once more seen to conflict with reality. Moreover, not only does the idea of mirrors imply a receding relationship with reality, but also the whole incident is notable for its movement backwards from the point of death.

This implication is subsequently confirmed by a recollection of the Protagonist's concerning de Selby's opinion of 'life' itself:

Holding that the normal processes of living were illusory, it is natural that he did not pay much attention to life's adversities and he does not in fact offer much suggestion as to how they should be made In the Layman's Atlas he deals explicitly with bereavement, old age, love, sin, death and the other saliences of existence. It is true that he allows them only some six lines but this is due to his devastating assertion that they are all 'unnecessary'.

The Third Policeman, pp.80 - 81

The serious implications of inhumanity which this introduces is of a different calibre entirely from the satire of the sausage and the pumps. The reader is clearly alerted to this fundamental inhumanity, even as he realises that this dismissal on de Selby's part of 'life's adversities', death being among them, is quite consonant with the Protagonist's inability to accept his own death. Thus, with the introduction of the sausage theory, not only do the de Selby and Protagonist threads come together (with the 'alternative direction' of death), but the satiric ideas of intellectual distortion of actuality, the divorce of man from reality, and the loss of his humanity also form a united idea.

Perhaps the most memorable of de Selby's theories, because it is closely linked with the Protagonist plot and is satirised with such consummate neatness, is that which describes a journey as an hallucination, motion as illusion, and life as 'a series of rests':

Of all the many striking statements made by de Selby, I do not think that any of them can rival his assertion that 'a journey is an hallucination' His theory, insofar as I can understand it, seems to discount the testimony of human experience and is at variance with everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk. Human existence de Selby has defined as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films which belonged probably to his nephew. From this premise he discounts the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life, denies that time can pass as such in the accepted sense and attributes to hallucinations the commonly experienced sensation of progression as, for instance, in journeying from one place to another or even 'living'.

The Third Policeman, p.44

The great artistry of this particular piece is in leaving the touchstone of the satire for a footnote, in which the extreme ignorance and foolishness upon which the theory is based is comically illuminated. This footnote, to 'old cinematograph films', reads:

These are evidently the same films which he mentions in Golden Hours (p.155) as having 'a strong repetitive element' and as being 'tedious'. Apparently he had examined them patiently picture by picture and imagined that they would be screened in the same way, failing at that time to grasp the principle of the cinematograph.

This piece of comic artistry effectively ridicules de Selby as a thinker and of course confirms the reader's confidence in his unreliability, if confirmation were necessary. But the seed of the idea has been sown, and the reader made aware that the tenet

that living can be attributed to hallucination represents complete divorce from reality and from participation in the human situation. The reader has been brought, through the Protagonist's recollections of de Selby, to the ultimate denial possible to the human intellect: the denial, not only of the necessity or importance of life, but of existence itself. Of this ultimate misconception, of course, the hallucination of the Protagonist is the direct manifestation. The Protagonist's problems in this respect begin at the moment of his supposed death, of which he says:

All my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation.

The Third Policeman, p.21

The explanation of this which he fabricates for himself is one prompted by his will, which takes no account of the reality of his situation: he decides that he is still alive. The next problem which he encounters is a vision of the dead Mathers - whom he knows he himself has just helped to kill - apparently alive and drinking tea. He has to make a choice between the external evidence, and the imaginary idea he chooses to believe in preference to it:

I decided in some crooked way that the best thing to do was to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory.

The Third Policeman, p.23

From this point onwards the Protagonist appears to be committed to the tyrrany of his mental image. So, no matter what the contradictions posed by, ironically, an inner, reasoning voice of his own, he must choose to believe whatever may uphold his major illusion - of life itself. In the case of MacCruiskeen's spear,⁶

for example, of which the tip cannot be seen and is suggested to be infinite, part of him asserts that this should not be believed, thus creating a problem for the Protagonist. The spear, however, then draws blood at its remote point, undoubtedly a mechanism to lend credulity to the Protagonist's need to believe in the spear, for denying it would imply the equal incredulity of the supporting hallucination. MacCruiskeen's music-box, similarly, presents no existence to the senses:

He got up and went to the dresser and took out his patent music-box which made sounds to esoterically rarefied to be audible to anybody but himself. He then sat back again in his chair, put his hands through the handstraps and began to entertain himself with the music. What he was playing could be roughly inferred from his face. It had a happy broad coarse satisfaction on it, a sign that he was occupied with loud obstreperous barn-songs and gusty shanties of the sea and burly roaring marching-songs. The silence in the room was so unusually quiet that the beginning of it seemed rather loud when the utter stillness of the end of it had been encountered.

The Third Policeman, pp.91 - 92

The Protagonist believes in the existence of the music, for the same reason as he believed in the spear; because in doing so he avoids undermining the equally 'esoteric' existence of his own being. But the third such challenge he is required to face occasions him more distress: he is delivered a bewildering blow by the experience of MacCruiskeen's chests, each one of which contains a smaller version of itself, like Russian dolls which fit inside each other, but in the case of the chests the series is infinite, many of them being invisibly small (pp. 61 - 65). The chests can be said to recede from being into non-being;

their non-being exists inside their being. They are, metaphorically, a reflection of the Protagonist's own situation, death in life, so it is not surprising that it becomes a little too much for him to cope with:

All my senses were now strained so tensely watching the policeman's movements that I could almost hear my brain rattling in my head when I gave a shake as if it was drying up into a wrinkled pea ...

At this point I became afraid. What he was doing was no longer wonderful but terrible. I shut my eyes and prayed that he would stop while doing things that were at least possible for a man to do.

The Third Policeman, p.64

It is ironically appropriate that the Protagonist can bring no reason to bear on this occurrence, as his reasoning faculty is not under his control, nor is the hallucination before him any longer accessible to reasoning. However, his fear is occasioned, not by this state of delusion, but by the implications of this particular aspect of it. The chests, as they diminish, ultimately reduce to emptiness, fatuity, unreason and, worst of all, non-existence; they are a potent image of death within life.

The Protagonist, however, has more to endure. With MacCruiskeen's mangle he is introduced to the nature of Omnium, the substance that is in, and wholly constitutes, everything that exists. The very name of this substance, and MacCruiskeen's description of its nature, make it no longer possible to ignore the latent religious or spiritual significance of The Third Policeman:

I kept my silence till MacCruiskeen spoke again.

'Some people', he said, 'call it energy but the right name is omnium because there is far more than energy

in the inside of it, whatever it is.
Omnium is the essential inherent
interior essence which is hidden inside
the root of the kernel of everything
and it is always the same'.

I nodded wisely.

'Everything is on a wave and omnium
is at the back of the whole shooting-
match unless I am a Dutchman from the
distant Netherlands. Some people call
it God and there are other names for
something that is identically resembling
it and that thing is omnium also into
the same bargain'.

The Third Policeman, pp.95, 96

The fact that Omnium is in everything and that it never changes both confirm that the suggestion 'some people call it God' is in fact what Omnium is meant to signify. This element of spiritual, even theological, significance underlying The Third Policeman is perhaps the greatest development in the theme of egotistical imaginative autonomy shown in this novel as opposed to At Swim- Two-Birds. Later novels were to confirm O'Brien's close concern with religious ideas, and his introduction of St. Augustine in The Dalkey Archive is clearly connected with the nature of the Purgatory described in The Third Policeman. If the Protagonist's hallucination is viewed, as it must be, as a Purgatorial journey through suffering and the possibility of atonement, his continual choice of this life and his own selfish concerns in it are rightly rewarded by its continuation in perpetuity. For while on the one hand the Protagonist is the creator of the hallucination (like the narrator in At Swim-Two-Birds), on the other hand (like O'Brien in At Swim-Two-Birds) this is also controlled by a force exterior to him: for he has died and is in fact in Purgatory, which is an essential force over him despite the cocoon of his hallucination.

Within this Purgatory he is confronted with incidents of spiritual significance.

To be asked to accept MacCruiskeen's spear, for example, is to be asked to make an act of faith, yet the Protagonist struggles to comprehend the enigma with his intellect:

I fastened my fingers around my jaw and started to think with great concentration, calling into play parts of my brain that I rarely used. Nevertheless I made no progress at all as regards the question of the points (but still tried) to comprehend the sharpness of the points and to get the accurate understanding of them.

The Third Policeman, p.60

Similarly, to have Omnium explained as MacCruiskeen explains it to the Protagonist is to be asked, or given the chance, to recognise and accept God, but the Protagonist's thoughts soon run entirely on his own possible material advantage and increased personal power. To be confronted with the chests, most particularly, is to be given a parable of death in life, the mortality inherent in all things, but this also the Protagonist fails to apply to himself; of one chest he remarks:

It was so faultless and delightful that it reminded me forcibly, strange and foolish as it may seem, of something I did not understand and had never even heard of.

And of another:

I did not see whether it had the same identical carvings upon it because I was content to take a swift look at it and then turn away.

The Third Policeman, p.63

Instead, he reassures himself with the 'loud human noise' of whistling the tunes 'The Corncrake Plays the Bagpipes' and 'The

Old Man Twangs His Braces'. Throughout, in fact, the Protagonist fails to profit by experiences of this kind, due to his intellectual stubbornness and spiritual paralysis; he perseveres in trying to work out the disparities between seeing and believing; though afraid, he tries to control his fate by intellect alone, as when he tries to outwit the Sergeant, both verbally and in his attempted escape. The Sergeant, however, is merely an hallucination within the Purgatory, and as such cannot be outwitted; his flight with MacCruiskeen at the moment of the Protagonist's supposed execution is merely an occurrence which prolongs the latter's purgatorial education. He is to derive no ultimate profit from it, however, and so has to repeat it from the beginning, for ever, or until such time as he can profit from it. His intellectual refusal to accept the reality of his death, and to recognise his false position, prevent him from learning of a spiritual reality larger than himself. He chooses instead to believe in de Selby's 'second direction', which can be understood by intellectual effort, and this precludes him from ever understanding a spiritually conceived alternative 'direction'. Although he does have an almost involuntary, brief spiritual intuition, in which his somnolent thoughts wander from a feeling of faintness with regard to his body to an enquiry into his spiritual nature (p.103), even this nodding acquaintance with a larger reality is abandoned with the return of his fear of death, and his experiences in this strange domaine must continue. Having, upon 'waking' from these thoughts, successfully shaken them off, he moves on to discover Eternity at the bottom of a lift shaft, from a map of cracks on a policeman's bedroom ceiling.

'Eternity', when discovered, is a travesty of the spiritual by the intellectual, scientific and material. Its form is entirely mechanical, access to it being by a lift comprising an inbuilt weighing mechanism, its appearance being of endless metal-lined corridors and a wealth of complex wiring. Its function is the manufacture (by means of the use of Omnium: a very potent metaphor in spiritual terms) of materialistic treasures and marvels of technological achievement, none of which can be put to any purpose, for they cannot be removed. It is a negation of the values of a true, spiritual Eternity, tantalising the egotistical intellect while entirely divorced from the enlargement of the spirit. The Protagonist, certainly does not learn from it. The sweets which are offered to him as consolation for his disappointment signify the immaturity of the purely intellectual and worldly outlook.

Similar experiences carrying a spiritual significance of this kind can be traced throughout the book. In connection with his hanging, for example, the Protagonist is told the seemingly irrelevant story of the balloon-man, with its suggestion of ascending quietly to heaven, which contrasts with the Protagonist's reliance on rescue by the one-legged men and despondent thoughts on becoming part of the breezes after his death (pp. 137 - 140). Later, at Mathers's house, to which he has returned on his 'escape', he sees a bright light shining apparently from nowhere; his only way to deal with it is to fearfully throw a brick at it, having first tried to ascertain its source. His reaction to this light, which clearly symbolises an invitation to Eternity in the same way as did the bright light which the Protagonist expected

to find in the specious Eternity, is fearful, tinged, perhaps, with a sub-conscious recognition of its meaning:

The light had some quality which was wrong, mysterious, alarming.

I was standing within three yards of something unspeakably inhuman and diabolical which was using its trick of light to lure me on to something still more horrible.

The Third Policeman, pp. 152, 154

Thus the Protagonist, even after so many experiences in this purgatorial domaine, still rejects a reality greater than himself.⁷

When talking, immediately after this, with Policeman Fox, the Protagonist regains his focus on his original quest for the 'black box'. This enigmatic object has a meaning on practically every level on which the book can be read. The Protagonist at least, believes it to contain money, and searches for it with a materialistic intention. Even if it contained the explosive that killed him, he still now, in death, pursues it as a kind of salvation. In for ever seeming to recede from him and from the narrative, the black box assumes, for reader and Protagonist alike, the mysterious guise of an answer, the secret, the discovery which must be made before a resolution can be achieved. Ultimately, however, the Protagonist believes that it contains four ounces of Omnium; while this now suggests God or spiritual elucidation, he does not recognise this, or that anything spiritual may be the only real goal of his quest. Therefore the black box continues to elude him and he must repeat his circular purgatorial journey.

It is interesting to note that Fox, when the Protagonist finally meets him, says that he himself created Eternity.

Although the Eternity referred to is mechanical and made with

Omnium, this does invest Fox with the character of the Creator. His having Mathers's face also places him in the Christ-like role of being risen from the dead, and his close connection with the Protagonist recalls that man is made in God's image. (A country policeman as an image of God, of course, constitutes a satire against the police that would have delighted O'Brien). Although this suggestion, it would seem, only briefly holds good, Fox would seem to be the final invitation to the Protagonist, before he is consigned to repeat his experience of Purgatory. For the Protagonist fails even this ultimate 'test', (it is for the reader to decide whether the invitation comes from within the Protagonist or from without) proposing the gross alterations he will make, God-like, in the world, with his four ounces of Omnium:

Formless speculations crowded in upon
me, fantastic fears and hopes, inex-
pressible fancies, intoxicating
foreshadowing of creations, changes,
annihilations and god-like interferences.
Sitting at home with my box of omnium
I could do anything, see anything and
know anything with no limit to my powers
save that of my own imagination.
Perhaps I could use it even to extend
my imagination. I could destroy,
alter and improve the universe at will
..... I could write the most unbeliev-
able commentaries on de Selby ever
written and publish them in bindings
unheard of for their luxury and durability.

The Third Policeman, p.163

The ironies within this passage are strident. 'The most unbeliev-
able commentaries' is even hard to envisage, those already written
being sufficiently incredible. The greatest irony, however, lies
in the only limit to his powers being his imagination. For while
the entire hallucination has, unrecognised by the Protagonist,
sprung from his imagination, the latter is still too limited to

recognise any reality greater than that of his own existence.

O'Brien's purgatorial realm in The Third Policeman is clearly one which bears many of the characteristics of Purgatory as it was described by St. Augustine and since by the theological tradition of the Catholic church; yet in some respects it differs from it. Undoubtedly, however, O'Brien saw the purgatorial domaine he was creating as belonging to the Augustine tradition: not only does he show an interest in St. Augustine in The Dalkey Archive, but the hallucinatory realm of The Third Policeman has already been found to be not Hell, for its aims are not punitive but designed to persuade the guilty to accept their guilt. It is a place where the soul can, if it will, complete its inner inclination to purification until it be fit to enter paradise. It is, in fact, a Dantesque Purgatory. Dante reflects the Augustinian view of Purgatory as a place where those who have inclinations to penitence are sent to complete the act of contrition and purgation through suffering. O'Brien's Protagonist is not seen to have turned to God at the moment of his death, but the underlying voice of acceptance of his guilt has been detected in his hallucination, undermining its strength at times, though always smothered or failing to overcome the Protagonist's wilful blunders. The Protagonist is not, as a result, put to any pain, however, because he would seem to be more culpable of unreasoning blindness than of violence. As a result his suffering takes the form of confusion and loss of self. As in Dante, Purgatory is directed to the freeing of the judgement and the will, so in The Third Policeman the Protagonist must remain on the treadmill until he is no longer the willing victim of his de Selby obsessions.

Again as in Dante, the aim of Purgatory is that the soul may emerge into liberty and be able to endure unscathed the unveiled light of reality. But the Protagonist of The Third Policeman can neither face reality (hence the hallucinatory nature of his suffering) nor endure the intimations of spiritual reality embodied in the "unveiled light" falling from within the walls of Old Mathers's house, where he last confronts and turns away from contrition and purgation.

While an awareness of Augustinian and Dantesque Purgatory was surely in O'Brien's mind when he created the hallucinatory, purgatorial realm of The Third Policeman, yet certain features of the latter suggest that in conjunction with this awareness the author was able to consider and reflect a more recent philosophical interest, blending elements of this also into his fiction. The philosophy of Time posed by J. W. Dunne during O'Brien's early manhood in some respects dovetails with the Augustinian view of the after-life, and certainly accords with his view of Time as omnipresent. While to Augustine Time was completely subjective, to Dunne it was part of a theory of time as multi-dimensional, envisioned as a series of planal dimensions over which the 'observer' or existing entity might wander. In view of this philosophy both dove-tailing with that of Augustine and being one which suggests not only a conceptual but a visual image of existence after the moment of death, I suggest that O'Brien used his knowledge of Dunne in deciding the actual form of his Purgatorial domaine, that is, not a mountain such as Dante envisaged, but a system of regressing circles.

The basic Time theory of Dunne, especially in relation

to the occurrence of death in one dimension only, is clearly in accordance with O'Brien's presentation of the Protagonist's purgatory, and is not at variance with traditional descriptions of that domain. For instance, the explosive device planted by John Divney has killed only the body of the Protagonist. The underlying self, and all the subsequent levels of consciousness of the Protagonist are unaffected by this death barrier and continue to exist. The Protagonist can thus be unaffected by his 'death' to the point of being deliberately unaware of it. Death is only a factor on one level of temporal existence, and the Protagonist now exists on another level. The Protagonist's second self, Joe, is akin to a self on yet another level, a self of which the Protagonist becomes aware only at intervals, in rather the same way as Dunne, when his consciousness was sufficiently relaxed, had access, in dreams or a dream state, to observations of a higher temporal order. That Joe and the Protagonist do, when Joe appears, seem to be both covering the same ground, is entirely in accordance with Dunne too: the Time dimensions subsequent to death in the initial temporal plane do cover the same substratum. For this reason too, moreover, the Protagonist's second cycle through Purgatory repeats or covers the same ground as his first; it is also the substratum of Divney's first purgatorial journey after his death.

Because in Dunne's system the various temporal dimensions open to the Observer cover, graphically, the same temporal field, the Protagonist, as the self after bodily death, can still achieve access to the world familiar to him before his death, at certain brief intervals. Hence his visit to the home of John Divney, and

perhaps also his first encounter with old Mathers after the explosion - this might easily have been prior to Mathers' death. The Protagonist, of course, no longer part of that time dimension, returns to it at a random point and is as likely to intrude upon it years before his death as years after it. Divney's awareness of the Protagonist's presence on the occasion of his final visit may, at first, seem out of place, but it is less strange in view of Dunne's dream experiences prior to his formation of the time theory. Divney is apparently very drunk when the Protagonist appears in his house (p.169), his mind loosed from its conscious limitations in a similar way to the mind asleep or freely-ranging. He therefore can have access to images from other dimensions of time which his sober wife does not perceive. However, this is not only a concept that is acceptable within Dunne's system, but also forms a part of the traditional nature of Purgatory as in Augustine and Dante. The spirit in Purgatory can contact or be contacted by spirits still on earth, but this is not advisable as his progress towards penitence and purgation is thereby impeded. O'Brien's purgatorial domaine is thus quite acceptable in terms of both systems of belief, and the circular form of the Protagonist's journey adds comic poignancy to the fiction.

A particularly notable feature of Dunne's conception of the after-life reflected in The Third Policeman is Dunne's suggestion that the Observer passes the barrier of death with the knowledge of his past experiences of life in fourth-dimensional time intact. "It is unalterable", he explains, "because it is fitted to the unalterable past of the objective world". (p.226, Note 21). O'Brien makes considerable use of this in the persistence

in the Protagonist even after death of his obsession with de Selby. The Protagonist's every thought and action, and also the nature of his particular Purgatory, is governed by his 'de Selby' past, as has been seen. In Dante, too, of course, one's experience of Purgatory is of a kind related to one's own sins, and one must serve the appropriate penance, but O'Brien creates the Purgatory itself in a formal way using only elements of his Protagonist's blind obsessions.

In all this, however, the traditional idea of Purgatory as seen in Dante is in itself adequate to provide O'Brien with most of the elements of his purgatorial domaine. Perhaps what he recognised in Dunne particularly were the opportunities available to him in Dunne's Time theories to explore and extend his favourite theme of the tyranny of image over reality. Withdrawal from the externally affirmed principle of reason in favour of the entirely subjective principle of imagination is akin to a withdrawal from the dictates of three spacial and one temporal dimensions, or in other words, from reality.

While the serialism of temporal dimensions and levels of being substantially informs the plot of The Third Policeman, Dunne's concept of Infinite Regress has perhaps a broader and more significant place in O'Brien's work. The most obvious image of regression in The Third Policeman is the overall cyclical pattern of the Protagonist's experiences. After having been killed in old Mathers's house by Divney's explosive device, he undertakes a journey, which comprises the entire novel, which leads him again to the same house where the story begins. He merges right into this house, expecting all to be as normal, but

this triggers the whole cycle to begin again, and he has no memory of having ever covered the ground before. After a reading of Dunne it is possible to surmise that, rather than going round and round again, the Protagonist of The Third Policeman is in fact retreating farther and farther from fourth dimensional time into ever more distant Time dimensions, which extend infinitely away from 'real life' but yet cover the same substratum. The cyclical or regressive motif thus generated by Dunne's theory of regression is one which recurs not only in The Third Policeman, but in O'Brien's other work, suggesting its power to express his view of the retreat from reality into subjectivism. Consider a familiar idea, from Dunne again:

The nature of the (time) series is now beginning to become apparent. It is akin to the 'Chinese boxes' type - the type where every term is contained in a similar but larger (in this case dimensionally larger) term.⁸

It has already been mentioned that verbal and pictorial images from Dunne are prone to appear in O'Brien's work. The idea of 'chinese boxes', mentioned here in An Experiment with Time, appears in a literal form in The Third Policeman. I refer, of course, to MacCruiskeen's chests, each of which is made to fit exactly inside the previous one until they become so minute as to be invisible - but still exist, ad infinitum, we are assured. This episode is only a part of an important recurring motif in the novel which I call the "wheels within wheels" motif, as this fortuitously implies its complexity of implication as well as the pattern of the image. The first major instance of it was in the whole "novel within novel" structure of At Swim-Two-Birds. It first occurs in The Third Policeman in connection with

old Mathers' eyes; the Protagonist gruesomely envisages eyes within eyes:

Looking at them I got the feeling that they were not genuine eyes at all but mechanical dummies animated by electricity or the like, with a tiny pinhole in the centre of the 'pupil' through which the real eye gazed out secretively and with great coldness. Such a conception, possibly with no foundation at all in fact, disturbed me agonizingly 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 another 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.

The Third Policeman, p.22

Reality is thus pushed further and further back from the frontier of possible discovery with this image. This is the same thing as is subsequently implied by the Russian dolls phenomenon of the chests, although the issue there is less specifically and markedly human. When at last the Protagonist applies the image to Joe, his 'soul', what is really in question is, the reality of human existence, of his own inner life or 'spirit'. This is the ultimate intellectual challenge which a man may make, as the Protagonist's immediate mental breakdown - Joe's threat that he will 'leave' - suggests:

Here I had a strange idea not unworthy of de Selby. Why was Joe so disturbed at the suggestion that he had a body? What if he had a body? A body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of an onion, receding to some unimaginable ultimum? Was I in turn merely a link in a vast sequence of imponderable beings, the world I knew

merely the interior of the being whose inner voice I myself was? Who or what was the core and what monster in what world was the final uncontained colossus? God? Nothing? Was I receiving these wild thoughts from Lower Down or were they brewing newly in me to be transmitted Higher Up?

From Lower Down, Joe barked.

Thank you.

I'm leaving.

What?

Clearing out. We will see who is scaly in two minutes.

These few words sickened me instantly with fear although their meaning was too momentous to be grasped without close reasoning Puzzled and frightened I tried to understand the complexities not only of my intermediate dependence and my catenal untegrity but also my dangerous adjunctiveness and my embarrassing unisolation. If one assumes -

Listen. Before I go I will tell you this. I am your soul and all your souls. When I am gone you are dead

The Third Policeman, pp. 102 - 104

The image called "wheels within wheels" is one which inherently suggests, not only the retreat from reality which is being effected by the Protagonist but also that ultimately only emptiness, nullity and death remain. It is also an image of the pattern of thought which O'Brien is compelling upon his readers. This is a bewildering pattern of shattered assumption and the constant need to reconsider and struggle with the retreating suggestion of reason in the narrative; it is a procedure which not only forces the reader to be constantly attentive but simultaneously gives him a certain experience and knowledge of the convoluted processes of mind which the author wishes to satirise.

Knowing of O'Brien's interest in Dunne, it becomes tenable to identify the "wheels within wheels" motifs and cyclical pattern of The Third Policeman with the Infinite Regress; and

it forms at least as large a structural part of At Swim-Two-Birds as of The Third Policeman. The basic nature of this first novel is that each plot dimension contains itself in smaller dimension, and so on. (Once again, the effect is like that of dream or hallucination). The idea, quoted above, of a serial observer, each more 'seeing' than the previous one, is also held up by the novel; each 'novelist' is only aware of those 'below' him in the scale: Trellis is not aware of the student narrator, nor is the latter aware of O'Brien, Dunne's 'ultimate (as yet) observer'. Of course, Orlick Trellis is not only aware of Dermot Trellis, he also turns the tables on him, thus turning the 'infinite' regress. This is, however, a use O'Brien made of the material he drew from Dunne, and does not negate the Dunne connection. In fact, the regressive pattern in both narratives effectively reflects the regressive nature of the introverted mind as it retreats from reality and true perspective. The turn in the regress effected by Orlick can be seen as the beginning of the revulsion of the self against this dangerous introversion, resulting in the emergence of Dermot Trellis from his dilemma and the narrator from his unhealthy solipsism.

In The Third Policeman the concept of infinite regress, in association with the extra-temporal dimension of the adventure and the serialism of the observer, pictured in the Protagonist, also suggests either that reality regresses or that man's relationship with reality regresses. If Dunne alone were responsible for The Third Policeman, the former would no doubt be the case. For in Dunne the regression of reality is necessarily implied by the regressive nature of time. This would certainly seem to be

reflected in some elements of The Third Policeman, especially when small details are considered, such as the way in which time behaves in the hallucinatory domaine. Upon leaving Eternity, for instance, the Protagonist observes that time appears not to have passed during his trip underground. At other times, however, time appears to be actually going backwards, as the Protagonist observes when he first meets Mathers after the murder (pp. 31 - 32), and as the Sergeant succinctly encapsulates with his statement that 'This is not today, this is yesterday' (p. 53). This erratic behaviour of time certainly points to a regression from reality: but it must be remembered that, here as in At Swim-Two-Birds, the entire realm is an hallucinatory construct in the form of a projection from the Protagonist's subconscious. The regression which O'Brien depicts in The Third Policeman is therefore the retrogressive movement of man from reality. The temporal phenomena described above can easily be explained according to this interpretation, bearing in mind that the single greatest force behind the whole hallucination is the Protagonist's fear of death. For if time does not pass, death cannot occur, and this is still more certain if time goes backwards. Hence the regress of 'reality' in the Protagonist's adventure is linked to O'Brien's thematic idea of regression from reality.

Dunne is not, however, the only writer of the time to have had an influence on The Third Policeman in relation to its cyclical conception and structure, even to the extent of the connection of this with the idea of Purgatory. Yeats, like Joyce, was fascinated by the seventeenth-century scholar Vico, Yeats

being naturally sympathetic to Vico's insistence that the earliest and most primitive force in human history is the imagination. Not only is this idea appropriate to O'Brien, but as a most deliberate reference to Vico is made in the crucial opening paragraphs of The Dalkey Archive, the novel which so much seems to be the rewritten version of The Third Policeman, and was without doubt written 'out of' the earlier work, O'Brien too must have been aware of Vico. Vico also fascinated Yeats and Joyce because, like Nietzsche, he saw history as cyclical: it is the nature of mankind, he asserted, to pass through a variety of stages up to a point of disintegration after which he starts again at the beginning, in a cyclical manner. Finnegan's Wake, of course, reflects Vico's cyclical theory in beginning mid-sentence and ending with the opening of that sentence. There is an obvious parallel here with The Third Policeman, in particular with its cyclical structure, indicated at the end when the Protagonist is seen to be beginning his hallucination in the same form again. O'Brien might, it is arguable, be pursuing this idea entirely alone, or have been aware of Yeats, Vico or Joyce as he wrote. However, it is interesting to look more closely into Yeats's version of the cyclical theory of history with The Third Policeman in mind.

In A Vision Yeats expresses his theory of history based upon the idea of human existence as a series of endlessly repetitive cycles; not only is the whole of history cyclical, as in Vico, but it is a 'stream of souls'. This is Yeats's 'wheel' of existence; rather than the soul moving towards a final end such as would give life direction and meaning, he suggests that:

existence repeats itself eternally, immortality consisting simply of rebirth after rebirth. In the 1937 version of A Vision, (published, of course, during the writing of At Swim-Two-Birds), Yeats put much emphasis on the Thirteenth Cycle, 'which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space'.⁹ The Thirteenth Cycle represents the setting free of souls who have been confined to the wheel of existence, but to achieve it the soul:

must live through past events in the order of their occurrence, because it is compelled by the Celestial Body to trace every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself.¹⁰

To succeed in this is to complete an 'identity' and to be saved, which is the equivalent of the Christian's finding God; this, almost exactly, is what the Protagonist finally fails to do, so he must relive all the events again until they are truly related, understood and made part of himself.

Yeats's last play, Purgatory (1939) would, then, seem to have a quite interesting connection with The Third Policeman. The Protagonist's failure, as just described, to 'complete an identity' and find escape is very similar to that of the old man in Purgatory. Many years earlier Yeats had written that:

the day is far off when the two halves
of man can define each its own unity
... and so escape out of the wheel.¹¹

This is a remarkably accurate description of the confrontation between the Protagonist and Policeman Fox, which fails, of course, to result in an escape "out of the wheel". Meanwhile one can see how O'Brien's Purgatory is akin to the Yeatsian cyclical theory

in the necessity that the Protagonist should re-live past events. He does so, for example, in his re-encounter with Mathers after the killing and in Fox when he imagines Fox to possess Mathers's face and voice; in Finnucane, who possesses so many similarities to the Protagonist and who thoroughly scares him with threats of the latter's own crime of murder; even in the specious Eternity, which is a kind of image, but also distortion, of the Protagonist's situation. As in Yeats's poem 'News for the Delphic Oracle',¹² where the innocents must dream back through their lives until they 'pitch their burdens off' and become immortal, the Protagonist travels through this cleansing process, though deriving no good from it. While one cannot simplify these connections between O'Brien and Yeats by suggesting direct influence, without more evidence, one can recognise that they had ideas in common, ideas being worked out at that time and certainly in Ireland. They worked them out each according to his own nature and beliefs, but not in isolation. The same can be said of the proximity of The Third Policeman to the ideas of Dunne. O'Brien, as was his whole generation, was aware of The Serial Universe, and found in it an intriguing philosophy abundant in ideas and images of the most extraordinary suitability to his own satiric purposes. Dunne proposes a domaine where 'timelessness', or the suspension of conventional rules of time, pertains. This is by way of being an intellectual rationalisation of one of the basic tenets of fantasy: it is as apposite to the portrayal of a state of mind where reality is of reduced significance as is the narrative form of fantasy. In this respect the ideas of O'Brien and Dunne dovetailed, O'Brien also recognising in Dunne an interesting corollery

to the concept of Purgatory as viewed by St. Augustine.

O'Brien, however, was a very different man from Yeats and Dunne, and would not have wished to emulate their high seriousness. His way was ever to embody his most serious ideas in comedy, and the most succinct statement of this position is probably his invention of bicyclosis. While having a certain crude connection with Yeats's 'cycling back' it is, on its simplest and most comic level, an extension of an idea voiced by Bernard Shaw:

I think the most ridiculous sight in the world is a man on a bicycle, working away with his feet as hard as he possibly can, and believing that his horse is carrying him, instead of, as anyone can see, he is carrying the horse.¹³

O'Brien's idea of man and bicycle exchanging identity, such that eventually the man ends up carrying the bicycle, is the comic epitome of Shaw's joke. It can also be seen as an extended image of the reversals, (real - unreal, life - death) which characterise The Third Policeman. However, it is also true that upon this almost Swiftian 'hobby-horse' the Protagonist attempts to ride to freedom from the cycle in which his soul is trapped (I refer to his attempted escape from the police barracks which brings him to Mathers's house and Fox); he is still riding a 'cycle' however, and is brought by it, as in Yeats's scheme of things, to the other half of himself, and to a further turn of the wheel. The eccentricity of this image, together with the narrative flavour of a prolonged but unsuccessful approach to a right relationship with sense and reason, extend O'Brien's satiric theme and confirm his belief as a writer that chaos, not order, are a true fictional expression of man's place in his universe.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. A notable example of this occurs on page 44, when the fourth chapter opens with a de Selby assertion, that 'a journey is an hallucination'. When this is completed, the Protagonist's narrative continues with the ironic statement: 'Of my own journey to the police-barracks I need only say that it was no hallucination'. Not only is it entirely hallucinatory, but the sequence of de Selby's concern with journeys and the Protagonist embarking upon one is part of the nature of this hallucination. Other similar examples can be found on pages 56, 80, 125.

2. See The Third Policeman, London, 1967, (Picador, 1974), pp. 100, 131, 144.

3. I thought I could hear a sound like hissing steam and another noise like great cogwheels grinding one way, stopping and grinding back again ... Hundreds of miles of wire were visible running everywhere except about the floor and there were thousands of doors ... and arrangements of knobs and keys that reminded me of American cash registers.

TP, p.114

The mechanical nature of this Eternity reflects, of course, the Protagonist's continued orientation to the material world devoid of spiritual values.

4. It was not until we emerged, breathless and with bleeding hands, on the green margin of the main road that I realised that a strange thing had happened. It was two or three hours since the Sergeant and I had started on our journey yet the country and the trees and all the voices of everything around still wore an air of early morning ... Nothing had yet grown or matured and nothing begun had yet finished. A bird singing had not yet turned finally the last twist of tunefulness. A rabbit emerging still had a hidden tail.

TP, p.123

Similarly the policemen say that in Eternity their hair does not grow, nor their appetites develop.

5. This clearly has an as yet implicit spiritual significance. Notably the only further mention of a turning to the right is the Protagonist's choice of that direction when he attempts to escape on the bicycle; this leads him to Fox.
6. W. B. Yeats, A Vision, 1937, p.226.
7. W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, 1952, p.376.
8. J. W. Dunne, An Experiment with Time, London, 1927, p.226, (New Edition, 1939, p.158).
9. W. B. Yeats, A Vision, 1937, p.210.
10. Ibid., p.226.
11. W. B. Yeats, A Vision, 1925, p.215.

12. W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, 1952, p.376.

13. This quotation from Shaw is given by Adrian Mitchell in
a review of The Dalkey Archive in The New Statesman,
4 December, 1964, p.893.

Chapter Five

THE HARD LIFE and THE DALKEY ARCHIVE

Of the four O'Brien novels written and published in English, critical opinion has had least to say of The Hard Life. Nor has this, when offered, been very frequently favourable. The Hard Life is the slightest and least challenging of all O'Brien's works, relying on passages of abstruse learning, witty altercation and blatant caricature to supply the place of profound comedy. For the comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman derives its strength and endurance from the underlying strata of insinuations and significances without which comedy resounds hollowly after the first reading. The comedy of The Hard Life is of the last kind.

Two main critical approaches have been made to the novel, to my knowledge. Anne Clissmann, the first to publish a full-length critical work on O'Brien, covered the ramifications in The Hard Life of the 'exegesis of squalor' proclaimed by the author in the sub-title. Her approach found the work exclusively concerned with the author's satire of the squalor of Dublin at the turn of the century, and with his preoccupation with Joyce, whose period and city this was. She deals at length and in detail with the dirt and squalor of the house and ménage of Collopy, and only adds, by way of amplification, that she finds certain parts of the novel 'intended as a parody of Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'.¹ These amount, finally, to the correspondence of the

use of 'the leather' in O'Brien's Synge Street School and Joyce's 'pandybat' incident in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,² and the contrasts between O'Brien's 'real' Annie and 'ideal' Penelope, and Joyce's whore and Stephen's dream woman (also in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man). Whether or not one concurs with this prolonged emphasis upon O'Brien's obsession with Joyce, one must accept Anne Clissmann's ultimate assessment of The Hard Life:

In spite of his confidence in it, however, The Hard Life is probably the least successful of O'Brien's books. It is hilarious in outline, sad and disjointed in execution. It appears to be the result of a hasty patching together of a number of separate, previously effective, elements O'Brien has an increasing tendency to use pedantry as a comic device and to 'pad out' his books with a large amount of factual detail None of these elements are finally made to cohere within a unified and consistent whole.³

An alternative reading of this weakest of the novels has been suggested by Danielle Jacquin,⁴ whose ideas confer on it much greater value while demonstrating a place it may hold within the whole oeuvre. Mlle. Jacquin sees all four novels as embodying a theme of falling, delineating the frailty and helplessness of physical man by a metaphorical motif of rising and, more commonly, toppling. She stresses the ubiquity of the grotesque body in O'Brien's writing: 'People eat noisily, spit, empty their bowels, cough, sneeze, blow their noses, vomit'.⁵ The list could be significantly longer. Many of O'Brien's characters are at least as decrepit as some of Beckett's; one thinks especially of Sweeny and Trellis, and the disabled and broken-down remains of Mr Collopy.

Above all, however, she stresses the significance of the position of the body as suggestive of moral 'standing'; if 'standing' is considered the human norm, the bed-habits of some of O'Brien's characters, the subterranean Eternity, the precarious balance of cyclists and of Sweeny in the trees, and many other features, contribute to an extended allegory consistent with the Christian myth of the Fall. Mlle. Jacquin points out, in addition, the recurrence of the idea of gravity in the novels: its suspension in the Pooka's 'rat-flight', Sweeny's inconsistent ability to fly, de Selby's experiments to annihilate it and Collopy's weight under it causing his death. In discussing this approach she lays particular emphasis on The Hard Life, focusing largely on Collopy and Manus:

The standing position seems so natural that hardly anybody grants it a thought. But in The Hard Life a folder about the art of walking the 'high wire' or aes ductile gives a detailed description of the anatomy of the ear and concludes that 'The purpose of this grandiose apparatus, so far as homo sapiens is concerned, is the achievement of remaining in an upright posture'. For in O'Brien's obsessive universe to walk or to move forward is by no means so easy as it might seem. Mr Collopy's case is a spectacular illustration of this. In spite of his small stature and thinness, the poor man weighs twenty-nine stone, and can hardly raise his feet from the ground, and four men scarcely manage to carry him - horizontally-up the stairs of a railway station. The nightmarish predicament of the old man is simply a particularly startling visualization of the pitiful, baffling struggle of the body against the paralysing power of gravity.⁶

Mr Collopy is one of those men who believe that problems can be solved with words, that clever dialogue and conversation will help to build the world anew and transform society. Accordingly, he spends most of his time in his kitchen, seated, in his armchair, near the range, hardly ever getting up, talking endlessly about the Church, women, patriotism and so on. The sheltering seat has been so much used that it bears resemblance to its owner; it is '(...) a crooked, collapsed sort of cane armchair (...)', well fitted to his gaunt figure. Alas! One day, Mr Collopy the dreamer decides to become a man of action. He starts going out in the evenings to attend street-corner meetings and deliver speeches. These outings soon impair his health, and the gravid water he absorbs destroys him instead of curing him. His mistake will prove fatal: the frail thinker should never have risen from his armchair.⁷

This is perhaps the most cohesive theory with regard to The Hard Life that is not openly acknowledged by the author within its covers. However, it attributes to O'Brien a single predominant image of mankind, and a greater preoccupation with their physical encumbrance than I believe the entirety of his work tends to suggest. If satiric emphasis has been laid overall on any particular aspect of modern man, it is upon the vagaries of his mental faculties. The argument, however, remains interesting.

Not even to Anne Clissmann, or any of the other disparaging critics of The Hard Life, however, has it occurred that this work may be deliberately slight. Only as such can the novel be understood in the light of O'Brien's previous fiction, of biographical evidence concerning his personal outlook at the time of writing, and of the subtextual suggestions of the narrative. Consider first that both of O'Brien's previous novels have shown a marked variation in style from the work which preceded it; The Hard Life,

in following this pattern, is not out of line. It has been called, in contrast to its predecessors, his 'realistic' novel; in it he would seem to have abandoned any wish to be experimental or innovative in his writing.⁸ This major feature is undoubtedly the key to an understanding of The Hard Life and of its author at this point. For his concern with his craft, his own technique and his readership is, in fact, no less in his mind in this book than in the others. It simply manifests itself in a different form, for which the author's experiences at the time offer an explanation.

The rejection by Longmans of The Third Policeman was just the first blow in O'Brien's increasing personal bitterness and general disillusionment.⁹ It was aggravated by the relative lack of success, strongly felt by O'Brien, of At Swim-Two-Birds. The manuscript of The Third Policeman was 'lost' and O'Brien gave up his novel-writing to concentrate on his job in local government and, increasingly, his journalism. Both of these became more and more punishing and unrewarding; his temperament suited neither the Civil Service hierarchy nor that of newspaper publishing.¹⁰ Twenty years and more after the rejection of his second novel, he wrote a new book, driven by some economic distresses and perhaps equally by a sense of frustration, and encouraged by the successful republication by Timothy O'Keeffe in London of At Swim-Two-Birds.¹¹ (Undoubtedly O'Keeffe's enthusiasm and encouragement are largely to be thanked for both The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive ever appearing at all). Considering all of this, it is surely arguable that in 1960 - 61 O'Brien decided to 'give them what they want', to write a novel 'that will sell'. Biographical reports confirm his

withdrawn and bitter turn of mind becoming noticeable at this time, and the increased cynicism of his journalism is marked.¹²

So the author of At Swim-Two-Birds sat down to write 'them' a 'realistic' novel of the kind that seemed to be wanted and rewarded.¹³ It was written very quickly indeed, in a matter of a few weeks. However, he could not be content to concentrate on making a praise-worthy novel within this realistic genre; he did not abandon his old inclination towards subtextual, almost private, argument. Ironically, he might have been more favourably judged now if he had. Beneath The Hard Life lies a rather unimaginative, inadequately followed through but nevertheless distinct representation of what he as artist is doing and thinking in the course of writing it, and the cynical opinions of the jaded novelist which motivated it are revealed. The characters and incidents of The Hard Life have a metaphorical significance delineating the division of the artist between his desire to remain faithful to the standards of his craft, and his need to write quite otherwise in order to sell his work to a public whose tastes in literature seem equivalent to the squalor of his characters's surroundings. This division, or more precisely, the division within O'Brien himself, for his arguments are always personally based, is represented by the two brothers, Manus and Finbarr. The significance of each is clearly marked in his character and actions: Manus devotes himself and his talents to catering absolutely to the market, Finbarr cherishes ideals and preserves standards of scholarship.

For the first part of the book, many details elaborate the allegorical significance of the brothers. Manus, the elder

brother of the narrator, panders for financial gain to the public's whims and desires, which are represented as somehow discreditable: they want to bolster their egos, to show off before others, or perhaps even make themselves a small profit at no personal cost.¹⁴ They want to pay very little for Manus's booklets, and very little does he charge. However, he need only give them valueless information, so long as it is couched in grandiose and preferably incomprehensible style. This is, of course, an image of the novelist, of O'Brien, 'writing down' to the small minds of his readers, as he sees them, in order to be able to sell his work. Believing that his reading public are of undemanding taste, refusing to put any effort into reading and appreciating more difficult, serious work, he gives them, in The Hard Life, something light - and beneath this superstructure he hides insults about them.

Many details contribute to this elaborate and extended image. While Finbarr's name, according to Mr Collopy, is that of a saint who died of starvation, the name 'Manus' is, rather inappropriately, 'an uplifting name' (p.16). This becomes doubly ironic, however, when it is realised that Collopy's Latin is very confused, and that in saying that 'Manus' means 'big', he is thinking of 'magnus' instead. If one is sufficiently curious, and pedantic, to check what the correct translation of Manus is (and one is simultaneously mocked by the satire of pedantry in the novel), one finds that O'Brien has been there also. The numerous applications of the Latin 'manus' include 'hand to hand combat', 'a grappling iron' and 'the work of an artist or craftsman'.¹⁵ The 'combat' and 'grappling iron' combine to suggest Manus's metaphorical role as the artist-businessman, especially in this

association with the idea of the 'work of the artist'. (There is also the additional suggestion that O'Brien is the real artist behind this particular creation ('the work of an artist'), the hand behind the character).

Manus's activities as swindler-scribbler are soon under way. The nature of his first major undertaking, a pamphlet teaching tight-rope walking, is probably more suggestive even than the pandering style in which it is couched. Manus's readers want to defy gravity on the high wire, and he is more than willing to gratify them. O'Brien, being a lover of puns, has taken the opportunity of exploiting one here, I believe. He is implying that his own readers want to defy 'gravity' in its other sense - that of seriousness, considered thought. The image which results is one of a kind of balancing trick performed by modern man, whereby he carefully treads the tightrope of shallow living, blind to realities and serious issues (as well as serious literature!), precariously treading a wire of materialism over some kind of abyss. This pun is furthered in the words of Manus's pamphlet itself by another, similar double-entendre:

The purpose of this grandiose apparatus, so far as homo sapiens is concerned, is the achievement of remaining in an upright posture, one most desirable in the case of a performer on the high wire who is aloft and far from the ground.

The Hard Life, p.41

The 'apparatus' referred to here is the ear; taken in a moral sense, O'Brien is suggesting that the ear, meaning acceptance and understanding of wise words, is designed to keep man 'upright', meaning in his right sense. The conclusion of the above passage is especially neat in its implications: modern man is simply

'performing', and on a very precarious stage at that.¹⁶

Following the domestic disturbance, and indeed threat of legal proceedings, consequent on his early enterprises, Manus makes up his mind to leave for London. He discusses his plans with Finbarr:

I am going to open the London University Academy. I'll teach everything by correspondence, solve all problems, answer all questions I'll be a limited company, of course. Already I have a solicitor working on the papers

The Hard Life, p.72

This is not only a powerful image of the writer becoming immersed in the commercial world, where alone certain 'success' awaits him; Manus's departure for England, reflecting the many Irish writers who have left their country for better chances of 'success' in England, is for this reason quite consonant with the underlying question of the writer's choice.

By the twelfth chapter of the novel, Manus is established in his London business:

About three weeks after the brother's flight, I received a letter from him ... The heading, in black, shining crusted letters was LONDON UNIVERSITY ACADEMY, 120 Tooley Street, London, S.W.2. Down along the left margin was a list of the matters in which the Academy offered tuition - Boxing, Foreign Languages, Botany, Poultry Farming, Journalism, Fretwork, Archeology, Swimming, Elocution, Dietetics, Treatment of High Blood Pressure, Ju-Jutsu, Political Science, Hypnotism, Astronomy, Medicine in the Home, Woodwork, Acrobatics and Wire-Walking, Public Speaking, Music, Care of the Teeth, Egyptology, and several other subjects the nature of which I did not understand properly

x

from their names. What corpus of study was alluded to, for instance, in *The Three Balls?* Or *Panpendarism?* Or the *Cultivation of Sours?*

The Hard Life, pp. 81 - 82

This description arrives in an envelope bearing the abbreviation L.U.A., for London University Academy, which permits Finbarr a small comment in his own scholarly fashion on these initials:

'(I was amused afterwards to notice in an Irish dictionary that lua means 'a kick'.)' (p.81) One recalls Beckett, who chose the same expression in Murphy to suggest his character's awareness of the buffets and retaliations of life:

Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common. But he felt his mind to be bodytight and did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap. He was satisfied that neither followed from the other. He neither thought a kick because he felt one nor felt a kick because he thought one. Perhaps the knowledge was related to the fact of the kick as two magnitudes to a third. Perhaps there was, outside space and time, a non-mental, non-physical Kick from all eternity, dimly revealed to Murphy in its correlated modes of consciousness and extension, the kick in intellectu and the kick in re.¹⁷

In Murphy's terminology, Manus is dealing the 'kick in re', while it is appropriate to recognise The Hard Life itself as O'Brien's 'kick in intellectu' against the situation in which he finds himself as an artist. There would seem, however, to be scant indication in the text here for such an extended interpretation

of L.U.A. Until, that is, one calls O'Brien's bluff and looks up 'lua' in the Irish dictionary. There is no mention of a kick. 'Lui', indeed, means 'I lie' (tell a lie), and 'lua' is given as 'mention, reference (to)', the proximity of which is appropriate to Irish tendencies of narrative imprecision. It is also suggests, however, a subtextual dialogue towards which the author is guarded but extremely committed.

The subjects of Manus's educational pamphlets, enumerated above, contribute, however, pieces of wit and irony of a less arguable nature to this subtextual dialogue. It is entirely in character that wit and wordplay should feature so prominently as tools in O'Brien's satire; they always played an enormous part in his preoccupations and writing. It is so here, in the case of the subject of one proposed pamphlet, described as 'Panpendarism'. This has no meaning in the dictionary and is surely a coinage from 'pen' and 'pander', the art of prostituting literary talents. There may also be a subsidiary irony in 'The Three Balls', suggesting the activities of the pawn shop in this connection, and in 'The Cultivation of Sours' a suggestion of moral and mental souring implied by the 'sours' cultivated in the leavening of dough (to sour, of course, to become embittered, morose).

Before Manus gets to these strengths of business acumen, however, he undertakes a smaller project from the Dublin home:

He happened to read of the discovery in an old English manor house of 1500 two-volume sets of a survey in translation of Miguel de Cervantes Saavaedra, his work and times. The volumes are very elegant, bound in leather and handsomely illustrated; the first contained an account of the life of Cervantes, the second extracts from his major works. These volumes were printed and published in Paris in 1813, with a consignment apparently shipped to England, stored and forgotten ... once again the brother seemed to know what he was about. Using the name of the Simplex Nature Press, he put advertisements into English newspapers recklessly praising the work as to content and format, and also making the public an astonishingly generous offer, viz., any person buying Volume I for 6s.6d. would also get Volume II for absolutely nothing. The offer, which was of limited duration, could not be repeated. No fewer than 2500 acceptances reached him, quite a few from colleges ... The deal showed a clear profit of about £121.

They were thick octavo volumes of real beauty in an old-fashioned way, and there were many clear pictures of the woodcut kind. If only as an adornment to bookshelves, they were surely good value for six and sixpence.

The Hard Life, pp. 54 - 55, 57

In this incident, O'Brien again lays stress on the corruption of the art of literature which 'panpendarism' fosters, renowned works of art being the objects of such profiteering. It must also be said, however, that the rampant success of Manus's venture and of the insult to Cervantes, expressed with the humour that lurks beneath the credulity of Finbarr, has the effect of turning the satire in more than one direction: Manus must be respected.

Other projects of the brother's are less specifically involved with the idea of literature, but nevertheless often have a bearing upon it. This is the case with the patent 'Gravid Water'.

While furthering the ostensible plot admirably, this substance can be said to be fundamentally allegorical. It hardly needs explaining that, while the subject is 'water' it purports to be 'gravid', or serious, weighty: an appropriate image for both Manus's writing and, by extension, modern writing. Not only this, but it turns out that this substance has a positively evil effect, dragging a man down (the image is made concrete in Collopy's weight) and finally effecting his downfall.¹⁸ O'Brien's last touch is to emphasise the poisonousness of this 'remedy' in Collopy's body, which shows immediate and inherent signs of decomposition (pp. 95 - 97):

This association within the satire between water and the vacuity of modern writing is picked up again after Collopy's death in the epitaph which Manus has had inscribed on his tombstone. Accretion after accretion of irony attaches to this epitaph as Manus explains it to Finbarr:

- I believe you are a bit of a literary man.
- Do you mean the prize I got for my piece about Cardinal Newman?
- Well, that and other things. You have heard of Keats, of course?
- Of course. Ode to a Grecian Urn. Ode to Autumn.
- Exactly. Do you know where he died?
- I don't. In his bed, I suppose?
- Like Collopy, he died in Rome and he is buried there. I saw his grave. Mick, give us a ball of malt and a bottle of stout. It is beautiful and very well kept.
- That is very interesting.
- He wrote his own epitaph. He had a very poor opinion of his standing as a poet and wrote a sort of jeer at himself on his tomb-stone. Of course, it may have been all cod, just looking for praise.

- What's this the phrase was?
- He wrote: Here lies one whose
name is writ on water. Very poetical,
ah?

- Yes, I remember it now.
- Wait till I show you. Drink up
that, for goodness' sake! I took a
photograph of Collopy's grave just
before I left. Wait till you see now.
He rummaged in his inside pocket and
produced his wallet and fished a photo-
graph out of it. He handed it to me
proudly. It showed a large plain
mortuary slab bearing this inscription:

COLLOPY
of Dublin
1848 - 1910
Here lies one whose name
is writ in water
R.I.P.

- Isn't it good, he chuckled. 'In
water' instead of 'on water'?

The Hard Life, pp. 120 - 121

The first irony, of course, is the inclusion of the name of Keats in this travesty of literature,¹⁹ and the contrast with Mr Collopy, whom one must believe to be one of the philistines of the modern public (witness his mistranslation of 'Manus', and his attitude to the Cervantes books). The epitaph itself, however, overtly recalls the water of Gravid Water and, in its unsubtle alteration, directs attention again to the idea of empty words, literature without worth, pandering to the philistines. It is all 'writ in water', such literature, not only transient, but a mere reflection (and of what an unworthy image, the emptiness of the world), rather than a true 'creation'. Such literature, if it can be so called, is as truly 'nothing' as the tracings of an idle finger in a stream.

Manus's activities, therefore, can be interpreted quite

consistently with the satire of the choice facing the modern writer, and it is so also with Finbarr. Finbarr, the narrator, is the younger brother, less wise to the ways of the world and still studiously doing his school homework. He chooses to stay on at school even when Manus scoffs at him and tells him that he will get no reward for it from the real world. Finbarr is an image of the serious and, it is inferred, naive artist, whose inclinations are towards quality and integrity; his reaction to all the news of Manus's exploits is tempered with reservations and some scruples. However, he is mockingly undercut throughout the novel, not allowed any of the credit which his apparent virtues might be supposed to merit. He shows no spirit, being tardy to support Manus, even in speaking up to Collopy. He appears the studious mouse by contrast with Manus's audacity and initiative. His very narration of the story is deeply coloured with this tincture; the serious artist is made to seem a ridiculous creature in order to satirically evoke the stupidity of ever attempting to write in depth for a reading public who fail to appreciate and anyway are not interested in reading the finer points with which the author may be concerned. This colouring perhaps also reflects O'Brien's contemptuous feelings towards himself and his own failure to be appreciated for his art. Because of this shading of the character of Finbarr, a truly 'fallible' narrator is created in The Hard Life in the fashion of an Austen heroine or Swift's Gulliver; the result in this case, however, is unfortunately that the whole novel makes so much the poorer reading. The undercutting of Finbarr confines him to a very staid style and somewhat dulled wit and humour, and we are left with

the reported doings of Manus, Collopy and Fahrt constituting the best part of its humour. Manus's narrative would have been a great deal more entertaining, but that would have upset the nature of the satire.

The undercutting of Finbarr begins much earlier in the narrative than the satirical portrayal of Manus. At once his interest in words, their sounds and synonyms, is revealed:

How long this situation - a sort
of interregnum, lacuna or hiatus -
lasted I cannot say, ...

by

The Hard Life, p.12

This kind of reference is to recur throughout the narrative, emphasising, along with his style, which is at times quite pedantic, Finbarr's literary pretensions. Indeed, sometimes Finbarr is so powerfully belittled as a writer, with his fastidious caution and grudging style, that it seems that the alternatives proposed by Manus and Finbarr are not the literary pander versus the artist, but two kinds of deviation from the artist: the pander and the plodder. Finbarr writes:

There is something misleading but not dishonest in this portrait of Mr Collopy. It cannot be truly my impression of him when I first saw him but rather a synthesis of all the thoughts and experiences I had of him over the years, a long look backwards. But I do remember clearly enough that my first glimpse of him was, so to speak, his absence ...

The Hard Life, p.15

Finbarr, moreover, has spontaneous thoughts of Wordsworth in the middle of a grim funeral, (p.49) and it is he who thinks of the volumes of Cervantes as 'an adornment for bookshelves'. (p.57). Nevertheless, he is portrayed as having, of the two of them, the

'literary' inclinations, both in being the narrator of the story and in the reference by Manus, quoted above, to his being 'a bit of a literary man'.

Finbarr's idealisation of a friend's sister, Penelope, focuses the reader's attention once more on literary concerns. As well as complementing the domesticated Annie as part of a rather satirical portrait of women,²⁰ Penelope, by her name and by O'Brien's deliberate, even plodding reference, is associated with Ulysses.

Penelope? I meditated on the name.
I remembered that Penelope was the
wife of Ulysses and no matter how
many libertines assailed her while
her good man was away at the wars,
she was ever faithful to him. She
would consider yielding to their
low and improper solicitations, she
said, as soon as she had her knitting
finished. Every night she would
unravel what bit of it she had done
during the day, so that the task was
never accomplished.

The Hard Life, p.74

O'Brien's Penelope not only causes the stolid Finbarr to be moved, rather fatuously and humorously, to wish to write sublime love-poetry, but must also recall both the ancient tale and the modern Ulysses to the reader's mind. The subject of literature is thus extended, and the part played in it by Joyce is quite significant. The image of the knitting (which is, after all, a complex series of knots in an imposed pattern), of unravelling and of re-knitting, suggests a satirical reference to Joyce, confirmed by the insinuation of the word 'cunning' which occurs a few lines later. The irony of the reference is clearly underlined by Finbarr's doting idealisation. There may be a certain sense

in which O'Brien himself is satirised in this passage, of course, as Finbarr stands in the place of O'Brien as the teller of this whole story; the satire of himself would reflect, therefore, on O'Brien's own original idealisation and emulation of Joyce when he, like Finbarr, first attempted a long narrative - an idealisation repudiated long since:

If I hear that word "Joyce" again,
I will surely froth at the gob!²¹

Moreover, if some satire of himself with regard to Joyce is implied here, its implications may be carried a step further. Finbarr's idealisation of and desire for Penelope, being coloured by his own pedantry and unadventurousness of spirit, can be seen as a desire among certain writers for the rather domesticated annexation of the Joycean style, or, for 'boiled-down' Joycean literature. O'Brien's awful vision at this point was perhaps of a nation of plodding Finbarrs (one remembers the Irish saint's name he is given) emulating Joyce in poor but dotting fashion. Indeed, a depiction of Dublin squalor and 'paralysis' after the manner of Joyce's Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man has been attempted by too many Irish writers. These, after all, are the most easily imitated of Joyce's works; the squalor of The Hard Life perhaps satirises the crude imitations. The novel's focus on Ulysses, here, however, suggests that this far more expansive exploration of Dublin life is deplorably though inevitably less popular because more intellectually demanding.²²

Having thus explored O'Brien's satirical use of Finbarr and Manus to this extent, it must now be admitted that the author fails to follow the implications through in any effective way.

This does not, as it mostly would, suggest that the interpretation of the characters as having such significance was ill-founded from the start. It is more as if O'Brien's attitude to The Hard Life was irresolute or capricious, and that he had no enthusiasm for maintaining any single clear form or idea. The realistic vehicle which he had sardonically adopted as a bitter complement to his 'very funny' book²³ fascinated him and gave him a feeling of greater freedom of expression than was consonant with the production of a hilarious book, however slight. The result was failure even in this, the failure even of the comedy, and certainly the failure of the literary satire, for it dies at the hands of the plot half way through the book. It would seem that the idea of the pun on gravity led to Gravid Water, and thus to all the later ramifications of the story, which absorb the final chapters to the exclusion of all but a few sparks of satirical matter. The plot has a certain quality which suggests the spontaneous fabrication of one plot out of another, rather than the controlled development of a series of incidents designed to a certain end. In the words of O'Brien, the plot had him 'well in hand'.²⁴

The reader is left, therefore, with only the three prefatorial remarks to the novel from which to gather clues as to the author's ultimate intention. Of these perhaps the most illuminating is the novel's dedication to Graham Greene:

I honorably present to Graham Greene,
whose own forms of gloom I admire,
this misterpiece.

The substitution of 'misterpiece' for 'masterpiece' confirms O'Brien's awareness of the book's slightness, while also acknowledging that this is no accident. He does not mean to dedicate

to Greene the book's quality, but rather its deliberate failure. The overt burden of the dedication is that O'Brien feels that he and Greene share a recognition of the general poverty of life in the widest sense. 'Misterpiece' rather clumsily announces that O'Brien's way, unlike Greene's, is by means of humour. However, the reference to Greene may be tinged with irony as it was Greene who, at Longman's, had been enthusiastic about At Swim-Two-Birds when it was first submitted for publication in 1938, and whose favourable review was included on the cover of the 1960 reprint. The dedication to Greene of the 'misterpiece' richly recalls and contrasts it with this earlier 'masterpiece', a contrast quite consonant with O'Brien's underlying theme. Furthermore, this initial reference to Greene may be intended to alert the reader to some well-known features of that writer relevant to an understanding of The Hard Life. Not the least of these is Greene's tendency to divide his writing into two distinct categories, novels and entertainments - an idea central to O'Brien's theme here. Moreover, one must read Greene on allegorical levels to achieve a full understanding of the novels, an exercise to which O'Brien may mean to direct his reader with this early reference to the English author.

The second prefatory remark made by O'Brien to The Hard Life is, similarly, along conventional lines:

All the persons in this book are
real and none is fictitious even
in part.

This, overtly, directs our attentions to the squalor which constitutes the immediate subject of the novel. However, it echoes, but with a clear reversal, the kindred statement printed

in At Swim-Two-Birds:

All the characters represented in this book, including the first person singular, are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead.

Thus the primary effect of this avowal in The Hard Life is to direct the reader's attention onto the novel as a novel in a succession from that first one. The intentional echo reminds the alert reader of the 'introversion' of At Swim-Two-Birds, and the theme in that novel of the role of the author. O'Brien is really as concerned with his own position as a writer in this latest novel as in his first work, where the theme was at least partially reflected in the plot. Just as, in At Swim-Two-Birds, the disavowal was spurious (many of the characters being taken, complete with conversation, direct from the real world), that prefacing The Hard Life must be taken perversely: the characters in the book are far more real than one might think, even given the 'real' slum-Dublin setting. They are not fictitious 'even in part', unlike those in At Swim-Two-Birds: they are entirely real to O'Brien.

The ultimate prefatory remark to the novel, the quotation from Pascal, may very likely not be Pascal's at all,²⁵ although the following certainly is Pascal:

The last thing one discovers in writing
a book is what to put first.²⁶

Despite the relevance of this to At Swim-Two-Birds, however, O'Brien quotes the following:

Tout le trouble du monde vient de ce
qu'on ne sait pas rester seul dans
sa chambre.

Again, one recalls At Swim-Two-Birds and the solipsistic bed-habit

of the author-characters whose periods of remaining in their rooms alone results in fictional creation. One can easily feel that in the present context the 'quotation' refers to the 'trouble du monde', the deplorable trouble and disruption, which result from ever trying to put pen to paper at all, reflecting O'Brien's embittered feelings at the time.

This brings the argument round again to my earlier adjudication, that The Hard Life can fairly be called a work that is 'deliberately slight'. In writing about the futility of the art of writing it is only likely, indeed only 'realistic', that the resulting work should fall short of a high standard in art. One thinks in this context of the masterpieces of Beckett, and wonder how it came about that from this profound, only partly and cynically alleviated bleakness, he was able to produce such gems. Consider the words of Molloy:

you would do better, at least no worse,
to obliterate texts than to blacken
margins, to fill in the holes of words
till all is blank and flat and the whole
ghastly business looks like what it is,
senseless, speechless, issueless misery. 27

Whatever the answer to this may be, O'Brien's personal attitude is clear, expressed in the final action of the book, the culmination of the 'lavatorial theme' he attributed to the work in his letters to his publisher: 28

The slam of the door told me he
was gone. In a daze I lifted my own
glass and without knowing what I was
doing did exactly what the brother
did, drained the glass in one vast
swallow. Then I walked quickly but
did not run to the lavatory. There,
everything inside me came up in a
tidal surge of vomit.

It this final paragraph Manus and Finbarr are, momentarily, identified; O'Brien recognises the conclusion of his book, 'that will sell', and the bitter implications of his underlying satiric theme, with an upsurge of metaphorical bile.

We know that The Hard Life was written in a very short space of time and without undue difficulty. O'Brien wished to send it up thoroughly in its publication, as his letters to his publisher testify:

Material is yet to be supplied for back of cover. There is room for another portrait here, but whose? Plato, St. Augustine, or Groucho Marx? The accompanying letterpress can be solem humbug. 29

The above kind of comment suggests that the author feels no sort of possessiveness about the work of the sort that derives from pride of achievement, although it is also true that he thought it to the end a success. It appeared to him a 'very funny' book, a 'treatise on piss and vomit',³⁰ but only a 'misterpiece'. A comment of his own made the following year, 1962, leaves no doubt as to the status of The Hard Life:

I'm about to start on a real book, which I think should be finished by Christmas. 31

It was not ready by then, or for some time afterwards. It became his final piece of fiction, The Dalkey Archive.

Exasperated and denigratory in his feeling towards At Swim-Two-Birds, bitter with disappointment over the rejection of The Third Policeman, aware at bottom of the slightness of The Hard Life, O'Brien set himself in 1962 to write what he expected to be his outstanding work. His letters on the subject of this new novel, to his London publisher, contain many important personal comments on its progress, but the tenor of them all is that this was to be, at last, a 'real book', alive with the humour of 'jewelled ulcers'.³² Sadly, O'Brien's great hopes for The Dalkey Archive were not completely fulfilled: the work is badly organised, poorly executed and tarnished with lengthy passages which, though hard worked for their comedy, demonstrate a decline in the author's comic judgement. Yet despite its flaws, The Dalkey Archive is in a curious way a successful novel. Ultimately one feels that this work was intended to be a great work, and though falling short of this it nevertheless preserves a sense of comic stature endowed upon it by its author's original intentions.

Before giving an account of how this has been achieved in the novel, attention must be drawn to a biographical issue scarcely alluded to among critics of The Dalkey Archive, but which cannot but be regarded as of the most crucial importance to a just understanding of this work. This is the question of O'Brien's persistent, indeed chronic, state of ill-health during the very

four-year period in which he was writing The Dalkey Archive. We are fortunate enough to have excellent evidence of his troubles in O'Brien's own letters to O'Keefe, the publisher, and from these it is possible to deduce the effect ill-health may have had on the novel on which he was attempting to work. In this I owe a deep debt to the late Dr. J. Maxwell Gardiner, who has made for this study a most intuitive and thorough diagnosis of the nature and effects of O'Brien's illness, based entirely on the letters, yet to be put to critical use.³³ This, though not reproduced here, is in my possession, and, the relation of Dr. Gardiner's conclusions to The Dalkey Archive being of immediate relevance to this chapter, it merits immediate examination.

In order to introduce this issue by means of evidence other than O'Brien's letters to O'Keefe, of which details are given in Appendix III, I quote an account of O'Brien in late 1964 or early 1965, given by Jack White of The Irish Times:

Our last meeting was in his bungalow at Stillorgan, a year or so before he died. I had moved into television in 1961 and had more or less lost touch with him. James Plunkett, then a television producer, conceived the idea of getting Myles to write a series of dialogue sketches for that great comedian, Jimmy O'Dea ... It must have been from James Plunkett that I heard that Myles was in bed with a broken thumb, and I went out to see him.

He was sitting up in bed, with the hand bandaged. He spent most of the visit explaining how he was going to recover a vast sum in damages for his injury. He had spent a morning (I

think it was Christmas Eve) in Phil Byrne's at Galloping Green. He intended, he said, to spend the afternoon in bed working, and he looked around for some harmless beverage to relieve his thirst. His eye lit on a bottle of orange squash, so he bought it and took it home. All afternoon he sat in bed, working away, and refreshing himself from time to time with a swig of orange squash, until at last he finished the bottle. At this point he found it necessary to get out of bed; whereupon he fell flat on the floor and broke his thumb. It was obvious, he pointed out, that he had been poisoned by the orange squash. How could this happen? Because, in simple ignorance, he was drinking the stuff undiluted! He had studied the label, and there was no word of warning that water must be added. Obviously neat orange squash was toxic; the makers were guilty of negligence, and he was going to sue for such monumental damages that they would have to shut up shop for good. He was so entertained by his own effrontery that he kept bursting into sputters of laughter.³⁴

As this amusing account suggests, O'Brien was always reluctant to admit or specify the real nature of his complaint, in the same way as he guarded every other aspect of his privacy;³⁵ his references to illness in his letters are hardly more serious than the above. Whether he was truly ignorant of the real cause of his troubles, or whether he simply refused to put a name to them, be it to himself or to others, has not come to light. This, together with the diversity of his symptoms due to a variety of contributory ailments and the side-effects of the cancer, have made diagnosis of his state of health at this time a difficult and complex affair, but Dr. Gardiner's investigations produce the following conclusions. Firstly, that the falling attacks, similar to the above, from which he had been suffering since at least October 1963, were very likely due to one of two causes, hyper-

tension or uraemia, the latter frequently a complication of the former. In addition to the actual giddiness and falling, the hypertension would cause O'Brien to suffer headaches and pains in the head, which would undoubtedly give him much anxiety and disturb his concentration on his work, while the uraemia, which was diagnosed by the hospital after a falling attack as early as September 1963, would result specifically in lack of mental alertness, drowsiness and loss of clarity of thought. As Dr Gardiner remarks, this would be very likely to result in mental depression and a state of anxiety, an assumption which would seem to be confirmed by Jack White's subsequent account of O'Brien's outlook as it appeared to him at the time. He noticed in O'Brien attacks of resentment, outbursts of indiscriminate scorn and a complete absence of enthusiasm or praise for others.³⁶ Furthermore, O'Brien's 'mistake' regarding the orange squash is doubly humorous in that he was a regular and heavy drinker of whiskey; this undoubtedly had its own effect on his state of health. Dr Gardiner suggests the possibility of hepatitis, a condition which, affecting the cells of the brain, would cause a general malaise and similar troubles with concentration as have already been described in connection with uraemia. The hepatitis was also diagnosed by the hospital.

From September 1965 onwards O'Brien was regularly visiting the hospital to receive X-Ray treatment, indicating that cancer had definitely been diagnosed. In November of the same year he was given blood transfusions, which indicates severe degrees of anaemia, a condition which had no doubt been accumulating over a much longer period of time, causing O'Brien, again, to be prone

to general physical fatigue and depression of spirits. In April of the following year, of course, he died.

This meticulous diagnosis of the progress of O'Brien's illness, and the detailed examination of the everyday effects it would have had on him, enables one to understand the author's failure to eliminate certain confusions from The Dalkey Archive. Suffering from a frequent incapacity to marshal his thoughts, a general physical malaise and much anxiety with regard to his health, both of which would hamper his attempts to concentrate, and a besetting depression which might even discourage him from the attempt, O'Brien became increasingly less able to produce the perfection he desired of his 'real book'. Knowing this, the reader can trust that his intuition that The Dalkey Archive is confused is not at all unreasonable.

It has frequently been said by critics of The Dalkey Archive that O'Brien's major concern in it was with the Roman Catholic faith, giving a sense of its value and satirising its foibles; with this judgement there is no reason to quarrel. Anne Clissmann deals with the issue in some detail in her study of the novel,³⁷ and John Wain similarly argues O'Brien's deep Catholic concern:

The Dalkey Archive is, in fact, more thoroughly permeated with Catholicism, and Christianity generally, than The Hard Life ...

If I, with my Protestant background and lack of systematic religious beliefs,

find these passages funny, I should expect a Catholic to find them funnier still, unless he was entirely lacking in humour, in which case I should expect him to demand that the books should be put on the Index. In either event, the point is the same. This is Catholic writing, about Catholic matters, no less so than a full-scale attack like A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man or a full-scale affirmation like the novels of G. K. Chesterton.

In The Dalkey Archive, theological argument abounds, and there are even hints, as we shall see, of an over-arching Christian symbolism.³⁸

In response to such hints, both critics are concerned with the possible meaning of Mary's final utterance that she is pregnant, which suggests so conveniently the possibility of 'an over-arching Christian symbolism'. Incorporating this question, one of the most comprehensive arguments for the central religious theme of The Dalkey Archive is given by Anne Clissmann; the following is an edited excerpt from her conclusions:

Mick has been mistaken in believing his understanding of the situation to be complete. He has not had sufficient faith in miracles, and it is the idea of miracles, which prove the existence of a benevolent and watchful God, that provides the particular atmosphere of this book and attempts to answer the questions raised in O'Brien's other books. ... In The Dalkey Archive he presents a world where reality and the miraculous - the unexpected and the supernatural - can merge into one another at any moment O'Brien's answer is the simple one of faith. Believe that the real world is there because the eye of God is always on it, and believe that even if there does not seem to be an adequate logical explanation ... then cease to look for any explanation, and trust instead that, in God, there is one. This is O'Brien's solution

In The Dalkey Archive this interchange of reality and miracle, each, O'Brien thought, part of a more inclusive vision of reality (the one not sufficient without the other), is only possible within the confines of Dalkey, a place that is rather like the Garden of Eden ... the one place where the material and immaterial worlds are closely connected. It is only fitting, therefore, that such a place should be rich in miracles. As well as the supernatural occurrences which take place during the story, many references are made to other miracles in order to extend the scope of this aspect of the book.

... If The Third Policeman was about hell, The Dalkey Archive, to some extent, is about heaven, or at least about the world seen, not as chaotic, but as an 'organised creation'.

... 'I'm certain I'm going to have a baby'. ... This is the final mystery and, perhaps, the final miracle. Are we to search for an explanation of this statement in the events of the book, or are we to follow the dictates of the book and accept the presence of mystery and miracle without question? Is this the final culmination of the references to Mick's 'pious Mary' and the pun on Hackett's 'divine thought' when he mentions her? ... Has heaven recognised man's need and decided to provide a Messiah of its own choosing? O'Brien chooses to end his book on a comic question.³⁹

Anne Clissmann also deals, of course, with the satire of the Jesuits centering on Father Cobble, and with the use of James Joyce to invoke a religious satire on intellectual vanity. All this is clearly an adequate appraisal of The Dalkey Archive, whether one lays the emphasis on Catholic comedy, as Wain does, or on mystery and miracle and faith as does Anne Clissmann. It is certainly appropriate that, having dealt with human foibles in connection with art in At Swim-Two-Birds, and with science in The Third

Policeman, O'Brien should have turned to an examination of religion in The Dalkey Archive. It was, indeed, a subject on the fringe of which his writing had often touched, particularly in inference in The Third Policeman, and in argument in The Hard Life, and which was now ripe for a full appraisal. A re-consideration, for the purposes of re-writing, of the abandoned Third Policeman story would, in addition, have tended to suggest some such emphasis in the new work. However, one feels that The Dalkey Archive is not answered with this interpretation alone, despite the undeniable fact that the threads are quite visible which link the various elements of the plot to this religious theme. Indeed there are suggestions, sometimes clear statements, in O'Brien's letters to his publisher Timothy O'Keeffe, which indicate that The Dalkey Archive was not endowed with one single theme at all; rather that the religious theme outlined above might only have been the first to be conceived.

The suggestion which I wish to make, on the evidence of the invaluable correspondence with O'Keeffe, is that, as a result of the latter's polite but denigratory criticism of the humour of the first draft of the novel, which O'Brien forwarded to him, O'Brien made many changes in the work,⁴⁰ some minor, but others, as it would appear, quite substantial. I will quote fully from the letters so as to avoid any chance of misunderstanding.

O'Brien to O'Keeffe 21 September, 1962

You may remember Dunne's book, 'An Experiment with Time' and 'The Serial Universe', also the views of Einstein and others. The idea is that time is as a great flat motionless sea. Time does not pass; it is we who pass.

With this concept as basis, fantastic but coherent situations can easily be devised, and in effect the whole universe torn up in a monstrous comic debauch. Such obsessions as nuclear energy, space travel and landing men on the moon can be made to look as childish and insignificant as they probably are. Anything can be brought in, including the long-overdue rehabilitation of Judas Iscariot.

Two other characters will be Saint Augustine and James Joyce. Augustine is a wonderful man, if he ever existed. Probably the most abandoned young man of his day, immersed in thievery and graft and determined to get up on ever (sic) woman or girl he meets, he reaches a point of satiation and meekly turns to bestiality and buggery. (His Confessions are the dirtiest book on earth). When he had become saintly, he was a terrible blister in the side of organised Christianity because he angrily held (and he was one of the Fathers of the Church) that there was no such place as Purgatory.

But Joyce. I've had it in for that bugger for a long time and I think this is the time. A man says to me, 'What do you mean by "the late James Joyce"? You might as well say that Hitler is dead. Joyce is alive and living in retirement and possibly in disguise in Skerries, a small seaside place twenty miles north of Dublin. My search for him there, ultimately successful, brings us into the genre of 'The Quest for Corvo'. Our ludicrous conversation may be imagined but it ends with Joyce asking whether I could use my influence to get him into the Jesuits.

These rough glances at my project may seem to disclose a mass of portentous material that looks unmanageable. Not so. There is a pedestrian sub-theme that keeps the majestic major concept in order as in a vice. Undue length is the only risk I see.

This letter indicates the elements and ideas which were present in O'Brien's plan for The Dalkey Archive from the first, particularly the element of first person narrative, and his awareness of the difficulties, or necessities, of organisation. It was

written some four months after he announced the conception of the new work to O'Keefe. Anne Clissmann, whose research on the spot in Dublin was extensive, states that the sub-theme mentioned here was, at this stage, a satire of the Censorship of Publications Board.⁴¹ This clearly was omitted entirely from the final version. Although Clissmann fails to state the source of her information on this point, it would appear to indicate that at least a major upheaval in O'Brien's design for the novel, if not a major structural reorganisation, subsequently took place. This is borne out in later letters.

Those letters which date from the early years of O'Brien's two year wrestle with the novel do indeed lay emphasis on religion as the novel's central concern.

O'Brien to O'Keefe 4 November, 1962

I have not yet started on the new book so far as writing is concerned but have been doing plenty of research. There is no doubt that Saint Augustine was one of the greatest comics of the Christian era. He was preposterously conceited and, Bishop of Hippo, achieved astonishing feats in the sphere of hippocracy (sic). He was an African (Numidia) and what I have yet failed to be certain about is whether he was a nigger. I hope he was, or at least some class of a coon.

14 February, 1963

I'm into the third chapter of The Dalkey Archive and poor Saint Augustine is being buggered up in great style.

30 April, 1963

I'm most impressed by my own mastery of the comic content of sanctity. The sin syndrome is a bigger laugh even than Rabelais dreamt.

These comments reinforce the idea that O'Brien's intention is to produce an extensive, lively, rather risqué satire on religion. The St. Augustine element was obviously the subject of the first three or more chapters, and the central concerns were not only 'Augustinian' satire but also the 'sin syndrome'. This suggests a very different kind of religious comedy than that which we have in the final version. Altogether, the pattern of the novel as described so far is untraceable in the first chapters of the established version, although religion remains the main preoccupation.

Then, on 22 November, 1963, O'Brien received O'Keeffe's critical reaction to the chapters which he had sent to him for appraisal. Though polite, O'Keeffe's reaction was unfavourable, particularly in its suggestion that O'Brien's comedy 'against' religion was lacking in skill and taste:

There are great things in it, without doubt. At the risk of seeming impertinent, I shan't dwell on them but on things which strike me as being less than the best. The opening - on Killiney - is slightly sentimental. Page 7, the discussion of music, is uneasy. The joke about the 'lawnmower' and the reference to Teague as Leonardo stick out.

The Augustine interview may be cruder than you intend, and I think should be cut. Your jokes against religiosity are not quite so good as you may think they are: a phrase like a 'dummy mummy' is not up to your own high standards... The plot is rich and must be developed and fantasiticated but I think you ought to be careful with phrases like the one you put in Joyce's mouth - 'well, I have an interest in words as you know' - because they may be too obvious.

On balance, I think that you are definitely going in the right direction but that you ought to re-think the set dialogues and make the book move more than it does.

... You don't, as yet, make me want to dissolve into laughter and I think that unless you do you have not succeeded. 42

Although one recognises in the final version much of what O'Keefe wanted omitted, such is not the tenor of O'Brien's reply.

O'Brien to O'Keefe 15 November, 1963

Even you have quite misjudged the intent of the attempt. In its final shape I believe this will be an important and scalding book, and one that will not be ignored. The book is not meant to be a novel or anything of the kind but a study in derision, various writers with their styles, and sundry modes, attitudes and cults being the rats in the cage ...
... There is, for instance, no intention to jeer at God or religion; the idea is to roast the people who seriously do so, and also to chide the Church in certain of its aspects. I seem to be wholly at one with Vatican Council II. 43

O'Brien's explanation here of his intentions with regard to religion is clear, and the nature of the religious comedy in the final version of the book confirms that it must be accepted as quite genuine. His own prefatory dedication of the work to his Guardian Angel, 'impressing upon him that I'm only fooling and warning him to see to it that there is no misunderstanding when I go home', reinforces this. So also does his poor state of health at this time, only three years before his death. The statement concerning literary satire, however, is an unprecedented one, indicating the birth of the thematic complexity of The Dalkey Archive, and simultaneously of its problematic nature.

O'Brien only offered one more significant comment on the progress of the novel in his letters to O'Keefe over the next few months, before its publication in 1964.

O'Brien to O'Keefe 27 November, 1963

My ultimate plan is to excoriate the MS ruthlessly, cutting short here and rebuilding there, giving the book precision and occasionally the beauty of jewelled ulcers. It must above all be bitterly funny. The first person sing. must be made into a more awful toad than now ... I'm not happy at all about the treatment of Joyce: a very greater mess must be made of him (sic). Would one of his secret crosses be that he is an incurable bed-wetter?

All that is clear from this is that a huge operation was underway involving an extensive restructuring of the work. Clearly, however, the narrator was still in the first person even as late as November, 1963, so that Mick, in his final form, was a very late creation indeed. It would seem that the only subject to survive all reconstruction of the book was Joyce, and even the treatment of this old favourite clearly altered throughout the novel's gestation. Certainly very little 'is made' of him in the final work compared with O'Brien's avowed plans and perhaps earlier drafts too.

The question of Joyce is clearly central to The Dalkey Archive, having relation both to its religious theme and its newly avowed literary satire. It is important from the first, however, to reflect that if an obsession with Joyce, single-minded, virulent and personal as Anne Clissmann and others find it to be, had really been so dominant in O'Brien's mind as she and others likewise believe,⁴⁴ a man of his ability would undoubtedly, despite difficulties, have fulfilled his often-stated intention of elaborately insulting him. Instead, the final manuscript contains only a carefully controlled satire, tempered by what might be taken for a not denigratory literary appraisal:

- Anybody's reasons for wishing to know the man should be obvious enough, Mick said coldly. In my own case, the first reason is curiosity. I believe the picture of himself he has conveyed in his writings is fallacious. I believe he must be a far better man or a far worse. I think I have read all his works, though I admit I did not properly persevere with his play-writing. I consider his poetry meretricious and mannered. But I have an admiration for all his other work, for his dexterity and resource in handling language, for his precision, for his subtlety in conveying the image of Dublin and her people, for his accuracy in setting down speech authentically, and for his enormous humour.

The Dalkey Archive, p.103 ⁴⁵

Although there is irony in this passage by reason of Mick himself being satirised for his fantasies and pretentiousness, thus endowing it with a mild sense of derisiveness, this is a far cry from 'bed-wetting'. Nevertheless, the central idea behind the passage lies in the resonance of the phrase: 'I believe the picture of himself he has conveyed in his writings is fallacious'. The central satire of Joyce as the author of tracts for the Catholic Truth Society, wanting to become, not only a Jesuit priest, but Rector of Clongowes College, imputes to him a failure to escape his Jesuit background, despite the picture he gives in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and consequently an immense disingenuousness. With regard to the remainder of Mick's assessment of Joyce's work, the qualities applauded here are notable for their omissions; or rather, these represent the extent to which O'Brien himself can admire Joyce. Notably, these are features of style which are admirably executed in O'Brien's work also: dexterity and resource in handling language, subtlety in conveying the image

of Dublin and her people, accuracy in setting down speech authentically, and enormous humour. Mick omits from his assessment of Joyce other characteristics of which O'Brien disapproves: At Swim-Two-Birds, as early as 1939, implied his disapproval of Joyce's authorial omnipotence and inclination to depict the modern world in a less ordered and controlled fiction. In The Dalkey Archive he extends this early satire of Joyce into the religious area already noted, and into a more personal and literary sphere, criticising Joyce's intellectual complacency. Anne Clissmann has examined at length the way in which characters and incidents in The Dalkey Archive deliberately reflect those in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses: Mick and Hackett bathing in the sea at the beginning of the novel, for example, reflects the opening of Ulysses.⁴⁶ Perhaps the nearest O'Brien comes to an explicit denigration of Joyce's intellectual complacency is in this reference to Hackett, which occurs quite soon after the resonant opening scene:

Hackett's relations with the peculiar girl he mixed around with seemed perfunctory, like having a taste for marmalade at breakfast or meditatively paring fingernails in public-house silences.

The Dalkey Archive, p.55

The allusion to Joyce here is of course the famous image of paring the fingernails.⁴⁷ In as far as O'Brien's work, particularly At Swim-Two-Birds and the journalism, reverberate with the authorial presence, it must be concluded that he judged Joyce's artistic aloofness to be a form either of complacency or of hypocrisy, both calling for satire. This certainly recalls the tenor of At Swim-Two-Birds. Joyce's life of retirement in Skerries, his shirking

of responsibility in living there, is an extensive and almost malicious reflection of O'Brien's disapproval of Joyce's artistic withdrawal and authorial position as God-like motivator.

Joyce, then, was the first, main, and only recognisable literary figure to appear in the reconstruction of the narrative now intended to embody a literary satire according to O'Brien's letter to O'Keeffe. It would seem curious that O'Brien did not employ, as he had done in At Swim-Two-Birds, the device of using for his own satiric purpose the ideas, characters, even words of other writers, by which means he might have elaborated a thorough 'study in derision' of writers' foibles. However, nothing of the kind is to be found in The Dalkey Archive, at least in a form adequate to this proposed design. Only in one aspect of the presentation of Joyce (an aspect which becomes something of a motif reflected in other characters) can it be felt that a certain range of writers, and in particular a distinct attitude prevalent among them, is being ridiculed. I refer to the historical Irish tendency to 'messianism' which became something of a stock idea among a certain generation of Irish writers. It is discussed at length by Herbert Howarth in his highly informative study, The Irish Writers, 1880 - 1940,⁴⁸ but it can be summarised as involving the dual tendency to prophesy or preach of the coming of a Saviour figure and, alternatively, to propose oneself as that Saviour.

O'Brien's satiric portrayal of Joyce puts him firmly in the latter category, obsessed with a personal involvement in religious affairs which is directly contrary to his avowed outlook :

Joyce's fingers were at his glass of Martini, playing absently. His mind was at grips with another matter.

- I must be candid here, and careful. You might say that I have more than one good motive for wishing to become a Jesuit Father. I wish to reform, first the Society, and then through the Society the Church. Error has crept in corrupt beliefs ... certain shameless superstitions ... rash presumptions which have no sanction within the word of the Scriptures ...

The Dalkey Archive, p.180

The argument goes on and it becomes clear that Joyce regards himself as having a mission to show up and put right beliefs which he regards as erroneous at the very heart of the Catholic Church; that is, a messianic mission. (The final deduction on Father Cobble's part that Joyce's place is in mending the Fathers' underclothes is the high point of O'Brien's satire of Joyce's intellectual pride).

Apart from its strictly religious direction, however, the messianic tendency attributed to Joyce here does have a certain foundation in Joyce's artistic beliefs. Howarth effectively discusses Joyce's serious purpose, in Dubliners, of reforming the Irish by means of portraying their deformities, while in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, of course, the final pages specifically claim for Stephen a messianic mission:

I go to encounter for the millionth time
the reality of experience and to forge
in the smithy of my soul the uncreated
conscience of my race.

(p.252)

The work itself being highly autobiographical, the messianic role would seem to belong to Joyce, who is behind Stephen. Even in Ulysses Joyce has the position, again in Stephen, of a kind of Messiah figure, that of the master artist, the 'God behind the

creation'. Thus messianism and the writer are purposefully linked in O'Brien's comic Joyce; that the satire is not meant to be confined to Joyce, however, is suggested by the numerous other characters within the novel in whom the messianic idea is also reflected.

The motif of 'messianism' is, in fact, initially embodied in De Selby,⁴⁹ who, represented ironically as a man of learning and intelligence,⁵⁰ claims that he has a personal mission, entrusted to him by God Himself, to 'save the world' by means of destroying it. A more explicit messianic role could hardly have been devised:

- Call me a theologian or a physicist as you will, he said at last rather earnestly, but I am serious and truthful. My discoveries concerning the nature of time were in fact quite accidental. The objective of my research was altogether different. My aim was utterly unconnected with the essence of time.

- Indeed? Hackett said rather coarsely as he coarsely munched. And what was the main aim?

- To destroy the whole world. They stared at him. Hackett made a slight noise but De Selby's face was set, impassive, grim.

- Well, well, Mick stammered.

- It merits destruction. Its history and prehistory, even its present, is a foul record of pestilence, famine, war, devastation and misery so terrible and multifarious that its depth and horror are unknown to any one man. Rottenness is universally endemic, disease is paramount. The human race is finally debauched and aborted.

- Mr De Selby, Hackett said with a want of gravity, would it be rude to ask just how you will destroy the world? You did not make it.

- Even you, Mr Hackett, have destroyed things you did not make. I do not care a farthing about who made the world or what the great intention was, laudable or horrible. The creation is loathsome and abominable, and total extinction could not be worse.

They paused in their talk from these two sacred conferences to a general survey of De Selby's ghastly plan for world catastrophe. Mick asked him did he not find the known world of the common man, lit up and shot through with the magic of the preternatural world to which he had access, far too absorbing and wonderful an organized creation to be destroyed summarily and utterly? He grew stern at the mention of such themes. No, this globe only was in question and the destruction he planned was a prescribed doom, terrible but ineluctable, and a duty before God so far as he personally was concerned. The whole world was corrupt, human society an insufferable abomination. ... The Almighty had led De Selby to the D.M.P. substance so that the Supreme Truth could be protected finally and irrevocably from all the Churches of today.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 18 - 19, 74 - 75

Thus 'messianism' in De Selby is made both comic and rather terrible simultaneously. His claim to have discussed the structure of heaven with John the Baptist, moreover, increases the messianic semblance of his plans by the inference that they were created with God's personal position and wishes in mind; it also brings into focus the other aspect of 'messianism', the prophetic attitude:

- I feel, he announced, that you are entitled to some personal explanation concerning myself. It would be quite wrong to regard me as a christophobe.

- Me too, Hackett chirped impudently.

- The early books of the Bible I accepted as myth, but durable myth contrived genuinely for man's guidance. I also accepted as fact the story of the awesome encounter between God and the rebel Lucifer. But I was undecided for many years as to the outcome of that encounter. I had little to corroborate the revelation that God had triumphed and banished Lucifer to hell forever. For if - I repeat if - the decision had gone the other way and God had been vanquished, who but Lucifer would be

certain to put about the other and opposite story?

- But why should he? Mick asked incredulously.

- The better to snare and damn mankind, De Selby answered.

- Well now, Hackett remarked, that secret would take some keeping.

- However, De Selby continued, perplexed, I was quite mistaken in that speculation. I've since found that things are as set forth in the Bible, at least to the extent that heaven is intact.

- Hackett gave a low whistle, perhaps in derision.

- How could you be sure, he asked. You have not been temporarily out of this world, have you, Mr De Selby?

- Not exactly. But I have had a long talk with John the Baptist. A most understanding man, do you know, you'd swear he was a Jesuit.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 22 - 23

The introduction of John the Baptist, here and elsewhere in the novel, creates a certain arguable link with the 'literary messianism' of Irish writers. In Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, for example, Cranley is conceived as a Baptist figure. In his position as fore-runner and proclaimer of the Messiah, John the Baptist was an appropriate symbol for those writers whose adopted task was the celebration of the coming of a Saviour for Ireland, or, alternatively, the writing of material the effect of which would be, similarly, the uniting of Ireland in a common bond. George Moore is, perhaps, a particularly outstanding example of the latter category of writer; his comic, autobiographical trilogy Hail and Farewell (1911 - 14) was specifically presented as a 'sacred book', a comic criticism of Irish life, having a Wagnerian frame of reference⁵¹ culminating, in Vale, in Moore's virtually announcing himself as Parnell's son⁵² and the Saviour of Ireland. It is impossible to know what O'Brien's attitude to this work

might have been. Moore was, in effect, making an attempt not dissimilar to O'Brien's own: the satire of Irish weaknesses within a comic medium. It can be sensed, however, that Moore himself is teased and satirised in Hail and Farewell, just as one senses that O'Brien does not escape criticism and ridicule from his own pen. As this confirms, rejection, ridicule and lack of recognition are ever the lot of a would-be Messiah figure, and this is Moore's final position. Whether or not Moore was in O'Brien's mind in his 'messianism' satire, there is no textual indication that any such particular interpretation would be justified.

One is left, therefore, with an amusing satirical motif of a very general application; despite its relevance to literary figures they are unspecified. Nevertheless, the satire of Messiah figures in The Dalkey Archive remains very entertaining, often in the form of conversations in which the self-appointed Messiah figure indulges in obfuscating and sometimes vapid intellectual gambles deliberately designed to impress and dumb-found:

- Work it out for yourself, De Selby replied pleasantly. Divergences, incompatibilities, irreconcilables are everywhere. Poor Descartes! He tried to reduce all goings-on in the natural world to a code of mechanics, kinetic but not dynamic. All motion of objects was circular, he denied a vacuum was possible and affirmed that weight existed irrespective of gravity. Cogito ergo sum? He might as well have written inepsias scripsi ergo sum and prove the same point, as he thought.

The Dalkey Archive, p.15

The Latin tag is fully intended to resonate. Naturally it is Joyce, however, who exemplifies such obstruse argument, taken to a ridiculous extreme, emphasising the motivation behind 'literary messianism' to be intellectual pride:

- Straightforward attention to the word of God, Joyce rejoined, will confound all Satanic quibble. Do you know the Hebrew language?

- I'm afraid I do not.

- Ah, too few people do. The word ruach is most important. It means a breath or a blowing. Spiritus we call it in Latin. The Greek word is pneuma. You see the train of meaning we have here? All these words mean life. Life, and breath of life. God's breath in man.

- Do these words mean the same thing?

- No. The Hebrew ruach denoted only the Divine Being, anterior to man. Later it came to mean the inflammation, so to speak, of created man by the breath of God.

- I find that not very clear.

- Well ... one needs experience in trying to grasp celestial concepts through earthly words. This word ruach latterly means, not the immanent energy of God but His transcendent energy in imparting the divine content to men.

- You mean that man is part-God?

- Even the ancient pre-Christian Greeks used pneuma to denote the limitless and all-powerful personality of God, and man's bodily senses are due to the immanence of that pneuma. God wills that man have a transfusion of His pneuma.

- Well ... I don't suppose anybody would question that. What you call pneuma is what distinguishes man from the brute?

- As you will, but it is wrong to say that man's possession, charismatically, of ruach or pneuma makes him part-God. God is of two Persons, the Father and the Son. They subsist in hypostasis. That is quite clear from mention of both Divine Persons in the New Testament. What I particularly call your attention to is the Holy Spirit - the Holy Ghost, to use the more common title.

- And what about the Holy Spirit?
- The Holy Spirit was the invention of the more reckless of the early Fathers. We have here a confusion of thought and language. Those poor ignorant men associated pneuma with what they called the working of the Holy Spirit, whereas it is merely an exudation of God the Father. It is an activity of the existing God, and it is a woeful and shameful error to identify in it a hypostatic Third Person. Abominable nonsense!

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 180 - 181

'Straightforward attention', the phrase with which this tirade begins, alerts the reader to the strongly ironic element which undercuts Joyce's dominating position. 'I find that not very clear', says Mick, as indeed was intended by his interlocutor. The whole passage, which continues for a number of pages from the above, presents messianic writers as setting themselves unworthily upon an intellectual pedestal, whereas really they are vapid, conceited and unconstructive. Furthermore, Joyce is presented as exemplifying this, and to be, in addition, a hypocrite who has made no escape from religion even in his writing. It is no coincidence, either, that his subject here is 'Life, and breath of life': it is O'Brien's suggestion that, in more than one sense, this is just what is absent in Joyce. The whole episode finally succumbs to the ridiculous with Mick's enthusiastic rejoinder:

- Mr Joyce, he said, I have another unusual experience which seems to have involved this pneuma also.
- Oh, I don't wonder. It's a big subject. We call it pneumatology.
- Yes. I know a Sergeant Fottrell, also of Dalkey. He has an involved theory about the danger of riding bicycles, even if they are fitted with pneumatic tyres.

The Dalkey Archive, p.183

Rather as if the disease is catching, De Selby's and Joyce's 'messianism' becomes transmitted to Mick, in whom it takes the form of a truly Christ-like attempt to protect the world from destruction by evil powers, namely De Selby. Hackett first alludes to Mick's growing messianic tendencies when he hears of Mick's plan to steal the destructive substance D.M.P.:

- You magnify what are mere impressions and you give yourself a status of grandeur. You know what happened to one Redeemer of humanity. Do you want to be another?

The Dalkey Archive, p.69

Mick's plan to steal the D.M.P. from De Selby's house is not, however, the limit of his 'messianism': it develops increasingly clearly and elaborately as the novel moves on. There comes a time when he has to sit down and work out all his 'responsibilities': his fantasies completely carry away his reason as his own importance in the destiny of the world impresses itself upon him:

7. Was he losing sight of the increase and significance of his own personal majesty? Well, it seemed that he had been, probably out of the force of habit of his own lowly way of life theretofore. Nobody, possibly not even Mary, seemed to think that he mattered very much. But his present situation was that he was on the point of rescuing everybody from obliteration, somewhat as it was claimed that Jesus had redeemed all mankind. Was he not himself a god-figure of some sort?

8. Did not the Saint Augustine apparition mean that all was not well in heaven? Had there been some sublime slip-up? If he now carried out successfully his plan to rescue all God's creatures, was there not a sort of concomitant obligation on him to try at least to save the Almighty as well as his terrestrial brood from all his corrupt Churches - Catholic, Greek,

Mohammedan, Buddhist, Hindu and the innumerable manifestations of the witch doctorate?

9. Was it his long-term duty to overturn the whole Jesuit Order, with all its clowns of the like of Father Cobble, or persuade the Holy Father to overturn it once again? - or was it his duty to overturn the Holy Father himself?

The Dalkey Archive, p.119

Mick's elaborate seriousness in these deliberations make this perhaps the most humorous of O'Brien's portraits of 'messianism'. Although De Selby, Joyce and Mick most clearly portray the 'messianism' which is simultaneously part of the novel's religious and its literary satire, however, 'messianism' can also be seen to affect two of the less prominent characters. Hackett, when somewhat drunk, inveighs against the injustice done to Judas Iscariot (one is reminded of Finn's complaint against story-tellers⁵³), declaring his messianic intention to put right the wrong by having the Bible re-written in Iscariot's favour (pp. 65 - 67). And Sergeant Fottrell's theft of local bicycles in an attempt to preserve their owners from the dangers of 'bicyclosis' is also a manifestation of 'messianism', while his malapropisms could, perhaps, be said to be consonant with a literary satire.

These unspecified reflections of 'literary messianism' are really all that can be detected, apart from the satire of Joyce, of course, of a literary satire superimposed upon the religious satire. Only, perhaps, in the wrong or empty use of words in some passages might there be any other ridicule of styles, but since this is not specifically linked to writer-characters or to any consistent literary theme, it fails to be effective as literary satire, only contributing, where not particularly humorous, to the

general sense of failure of the novel. O'Brien's attempt to redirect ideas already formed by the initial religious satire towards a new, literary theme resulted in the impoverishment of the overall thematic structure of the work. The multiplicity of The Dalkey Archive and its failure to attain a true unity can be attributed entirely to the duality in the author's mind as to what should be its real concern, and of course, to his state of health, already described, which would cause him to experience severe problems in the marshalling of his thoughts. The religious feelings of the author, his characteristic verve and determination, are strong enough to retain a hold on the novel, but the literary satire he imputes to it fails, especially with regard to the extensive claims he made for it, and the work is marred on account of its ill-prepared addition.

However, though the flaws in the work are serious, the novel, as I mentioned at the outset, has paradoxically the sense of a successful piece. This may in part be due to the levity and verve which it derives from its comedy, and the structure of the novel, which is that of an unfolding of complications and partial solutions which in turn introduce further complications. It also surely derives from the author's intention that it was to be the work by which his name would be made, thus leading him to write imposingly and with confidence. Nevertheless one is led to feel that the value of the work is not entirely in its narrative touch or the progression of its plot, nor even in its satires, but in its sense of signifying something larger than one readily perceives. If this sense does not lie in its overt themes, one must search in another direction.

It is a curious compulsion in the reader or critic which leads him to regard an author's last work as also his last word, and therefore to seek in it some statement of the development of his ideas. It is particularly erroneous to approach The Dalkey Archive in this way, in as far as its author was not prepared for this to be his last work, and indeed had plans in hand for a successor before he died. Nevertheless, the quality in The Dalkey Archive which one could call its special power, that which prompts the reader of O'Brien to return to it despite its flaws, lies less in its intrinsic merits than in its being of significance as the culmination of certain important aspects of the novels, and consequently embodying evidence of the development of the author's general outlook. It has already been seen that the ideas of fantasy and reality have, in various ways, informed these novels; it is to the culmination of these themes in particular that I refer in connection with this last work.

Ironically, it was The Dalkey Archive of all O'Brien's novels which was specifically called a 'fantasy' by critics when it was reviewed. This was as mistaken as calling it 'science fiction',⁵⁴ for by comparison with At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman this novel is rooted in reality despite the fantastic incidents which occur in it, and the occasional quasi-fantastic

character, such as Saint Augustine, who is introduced. The transition which has taken place between The Third Policeman and The Dalkey Archive is greater than might be supposed in view of the characters and ideas they appear to have in common. In fact, the differences between even these are quite substantial; for a detailed exploration of the minutiae of the alterations the reader can refer to Anne Clissmann's introduction.⁵⁵ Most significantly, however, the terrain of The Dalkey Archive, which is to say the nature of the very narrative, is quite the reverse of that of its predecessor. O'Brien is clearly not merely rewriting The Third Policeman, but restructuring it. For, whereas the earlier de Selby was in a curious way the source for the creation of the fantastic domaine of The Third Policeman, in this novel De Selby plots to overthrow the world, the domaine of the novel, by fantastic means. Therefore, whereas the domaine of The Third Policeman was a fantasy domaine, obedient to all the characteristics of fantasy as far as they can be defined, the domaine of The Dalkey Archive, and therefore the texture of the novel itself, is not fantastic but realistic.

What has essentially changed in The Dalkey Archive is that the use of fantasy as a medium has diminished, and the author has concentrated on fantasy as satiric content. Although the satire of fantasy (delusion) has always been a major concern of O'Brien's, his method, in the earlier works, was the reflection of this in a fantastic medium. While still concerned with the relationship between fantasy and reality in human affairs, O'Brien's mature emphasis came increasingly to be on reality. This is in greater contrast to The Third Policeman than At Swim-Two-Birds;

perhaps O'Brien learned from what he felt to be the cause of the former's rejection. Whatever the reason, one can sense a greater seriousness in the author of The Dalkey Archive, in the clear spiritual emphasis in the novel, and in the fantasy being denied to both author and reader and left only to the monopoly of the characters.⁵⁶

Before examining The Dalkey Archive closely, it will be useful to summarise the development of the fantasy/reality theme through the earlier novels. Of At Swim-Two-Birds one might say, for example, that O'Brien was concerned with what may be termed 'fictional' realities, or the distortion of reality by the fabricating imagination. The Third Policeman is based entirely on the conception of intellectual self-delusion or hallucination; again a distortion of reality as we know it by, this time, the intellectual processes of the mind. Finally, physical realities are the subject of The Hard Life; though this is a stylistic volte-face compared with the others, its main fictional concern is still with the contrast between fantasy and reality. It can be seen, I believe, as an attempt, twenty years later, to reapproach the theme: Finbarr is in need of a lesson from Manus on developing a realistic outlook, while the artist, it is implied, is unrealistic if he hopes for appreciation from the world.

This much is immediately apparent. Looking a little more deeply it seems, in At Swim-Two-Birds, in the O'Brienesque device which permits characters to 'write' episodes for their

authors by which those authors are manipulated, that 'real' life is in danger of having less reality than fictional, or imaginary life. The characters of Trellis's 'moral book' turn the tables on him, and, by means of the fictional talent of Trellis's son Orlick, are able to bring him almost to death's door in the fantasy terrain of the book. Similarly, in The Third Policeman, the fantasy 'life' led by the Protagonist, including all the characters and adventures which constitute the plot of the novel, and the fantasy terrain which he fabricates, are 'real' despite their essentially hallucinatory nature. In both these novels it is imputed that this travesty of reality is the result of an imbalance of mind. There are even signs of a development or exacerbation of the imbalance from At Swim-Two-Birds to The Third Policeman: an exhilarated fusion of myth and reality in At Swim-Two-Birds becomes a dreadful confusion of myth and reality in The Third Policeman.

From even this simplified recapitulation it can be seen that O'Brien's concern with the issue of man's relationship with reality was far deeper than, for example, its use as a perpetual comic motif. The idea of the necessity of man's knowing his position in the world and seeing it aright, and his habitual failure to do so, became less the tool of the comedy than the comedy the tool of the theme. Indeed, the narrative texture (fantasy and comedy) initially provided almost all the means O'Brien required to express man's failure to achieve a proper relationship with reality, for in fantasy particularly there are two important unknowns: time and place. In At Swim-Two-Birds, for example, characters as diverse as Finn, the Pooka, a Dublin

student and an assortment of fictional cowhands coexist in a timeless terrain in which no consecutive geography persists. As if to emphasise this, O'Brien has Sweeny fall from a tree in Glen Bolcain into a fantasy forest where a very mixed collection of characters are on their way to a game of poker and a contest for the soul of an infant. Because time and place, the most reassuring elements of recognisable reality, are so disrupted, this kind of fantasy makes an excellent paradigm for the action of a mind divorced from a true perspective of reality. In The Third Policeman, similarly, no recognisable order of time or place governs the purgatorial domaine. Quite apart from its being a post-mortem existence, it is a disruption of reality in that time appears to go backwards, Eternity is down the road on the left (time and place actually get confused, not simply disrupted, in this novel), and the whole domaine is simultaneously round the corner from the real pub and in a different dimension.

Thus in the very fabric of both these novels is rooted the idea of a failure of the individual to make a proper connection with reality. There is, however, no attempt at first to give this any specific moral or philosophical direction. In At Swim-Two-Birds suggestions of an inadequate human morality are covertly made in remarks by the narrator's uncle, in the description of Trellis's 'moral book', and in the clearly impure social morality displayed at the Furriskey tea-party. These are not stressed, however, but allowed to blend unemphasised into the tumult of the comedy. A little more emphasis is made on morality in The Third Policeman, which opens with a murder, and which hinges on the lack of real spiritual values of the Protagonist which keeps

him tied to the affairs of the world even when these are no longer relevant to him. It is this small change in emphasis, though hardly more explicit than in its predecessor, which signals the change that is more clearly demonstrated in The Dalkey Archive; in this last work, I believe, it is implied that not only a true balance of mind, but also a recognition of the spiritual values inherent in this life, are necessary for a man to achieve a proper relationship with reality.

It is in making this implication of the lost manuscript of The Third Policeman more explicit, and thus fully developing and completing the theme, that the value and deeper function of The Dalkey Archive lies. It is perhaps the most curious paradox in the question of The Dalkey Archive's derivation from The Third Policeman that, while both lack something of the wildness of the comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds and The Hard Life (both of which seem to have something of a self-celebratory note in the purposeful chaos of their humour), this absence of ebullience in The Third Policeman comes as a result of the dark quality of its fantasy, while in The Dalkey Archive it is the result of the essentially realistic basis of its narrative domain - that is, the effective absence of fantasy. In both novels, however, the more sober note is also partly due to their both having an underlying spiritual significance, however unspecified. By 'spiritual significance' I do not mean either theological argument or constructive religious satire, in this case. I mean the sense the reader has of a possible alternative to the intellectual vanity, messianism and false piety which are satirised in the narrative; that is, simple faith, or a recognition of a spiritual dimension (not

produced by DMP) in human life. The failure to make this recognition, or to achieve anything approaching this kind of understanding, has consistently been the lot of O'Brien's characters. Consequently, in this respect the novels can be seen as a single line of development, with The Dalkey Archive as the fulfilment of the potentialities of a theme which was otherwise still in need of completion. Of course, O'Brien's comedy was so well executed in the earlier books that completion was not felt to be wanting. Only with the change in the nature of some aspects of this comedy does the theme become more pressing. Humour of situation and repartee remain buoyant, and it is true that hallucination and delusion are mentioned by some of the characters in explanation of the bizarre occurrences they experience, and even that Saint Augustine is magically conjured up into an underwater cavern where he speaks of goings-on in the after-world. Nevertheless, no consistent fantasy domaine is established, nor would it seem that anything of the kind has been attempted. In the case of Saint Augustine, the reader is never tempted to feel himself totally involved in the episode, but rather remains outside it, in his armchair as it were, looking rather objectively and satirically upon the incident. O'Brien goes to great pains to ensure this. Saint Augustine speaks with a pronounced Dublin

accent, and in addition discourses most disrespectfully with De Selby about various other saints, his unhallowed youth and the ubiquitous mother of whom he is still in dread. Not only this, but Mick and Hackett are present at the interview, ensuring that the country Irish setting upon which the novel as a whole relies for its solid connection with a sense of reality is brought to bear even in this least likely of scenes. Indeed, this real Irish setting is more pervasive than it may at first appear: not only Dalkey and Skerries, but pubs in both places, local people conversing in characteristic ways, even small details like Mick and Hackett having jobs so typical of young men of their kind and nationality (p.12), all contribute to a very effective normalising of a narrative the events of which are verging on the fantastic, such that a fundamental basis in reality is created.

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that The Dalkey Archive is a realistic novel in the most narrow sense of the word, for it clearly is not a representation of normal life, still less exempt from any fictional artifice, shaping, or comic or ironic structure. Regarding the latter, the reverse is actually true, as will be seen. The 'realism' to which I refer here is rather a mode of writing which has the effect of evoking, or evoking a comparison with, the known world and the known complexity of individuals. This kind of writing can be and often is subordinate to, indeed dependent upon, irony and comedy to bring about its strong sense of applicability to the real. This is the nature of the 'realism' of The Dalkey Archive, while the narrative connection with fantasy, hallucination and self-delusion suggests

the aspect of the real world towards which the irony is directed.

Irony is a satiric weapon which O'Brien has not previously had to employ to a very great extent in connection with the theme of fantasy and reality, since in the earlier novels his use of a fantasy structure has sufficed to embody his satire. He does use it with great dexterity, however, in the many incidental satires in which he has indulged, such as those of the police, the Gaelic League, the Jesuits and many others, and of course in his journalism and An Beal Bocht.⁵⁷ With the abandonment of the fantasy technique in The Dalkey Archive, irony became a most effective tool for enforcing on the reader's mind not only the satirical relevance of the narrative to the real world, but also the way in which this relevance is to be apprehended. O'Brien uses irony to greatest effect during the opening paragraphs of the novel, when the tonal texture of the writing is complex and illuminating:

Dalkey is a little town maybe twelve miles south of Dublin, on the shore. It is an unlikely town, huddled, quiet, pretending to be asleep. Its streets are narrow, not quite self-evident as streets and with meetings which seem accidental. Small shops look closed but are open. Dalkey looks like an humble settlement which must, a traveller feels, be next door to some place of the first importance and distinction. And it is - vestibule of a heavenly conspection.

Behold it. Ascend a shaded, dull, lane-like way, per iter, as it were, tenebricosum, and see it burst upon you as if a curtain had been miraculously whisked away. Yes, the Vico Road.

Good Lord!

The road itself curves gently upward and over a low wall to the left by the footpath enchantment is spread - rocky grassland falling fast away to reach a toy-like railway far below, with beyond

it the immeasurable immanent sea, quietly moving slowly in the immense expanse of Killiney Bay. High in the sky which joins it at a seam far from precise, a caravan of light cloud labours silently to the east.

And to the right? Monstrous arrogance: a mighty shoulder of granite climbing ever away, its overcoat of furze and bracken embedded with stern ranks of pine, spruce, fir and horse-chestnut, with further on fine clusters of slim, meticulous eucalyptus - the whole a dazzle of mildly moving leaves, a farrago of light, colour, haze and copious air, a wonder that is quite vert, verdant, vertical, verticillate, vertiginous, in the shade of branches even vespertine. Heavens, has something escaped from the lexicon of Sergeant Fottrell?

But why this name Vico Road? Is there to be recalled in this magnificence a certain philosopher's pattern of man's lot on earth - thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos? Hardly. And is this to be compared with the Bay of Naples? That is not to be thought of, for in Naples there must be heat and hardness belabouring desiccated Italians - no soft Irish skies, no little breezes that feel almost coloured.

At a great distance ahead and up, one could see a remote little obelisk surmounting some steps where one can sit and contemplate all this scene: the sea, the peninsula of Howth across the bay and distantly, to the right, the dim outline of the Wicklow mountains, blue or grey. Was the monument erected to honour the Creator of all this splendour? No. Perhaps in remembrance of a fine Irish person He once made - Johannes Scotus Erigena, perhaps, or possibly Parnell? No indeed: Queen Victoria.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 7 - 8

What is initially striking about this opening section is the paradox which seems to hang enigmatically over the town of Dalkey. Alongside the typical sleepiness and humdrum nature of the place as it is described, there is a suggestion of its nebulosity, of a quiet unreality which pervades it. It is, for example, only

'maybe' twelve miles south of Dublin, it is 'unlikely', 'pretending' to sleep, its streets 'not quite self-evident' and 'accidental'. This is indeed a fit place for Sergeant Fottrell, for De Selby, for Mrs Laverty, for Mick, all of whom fail to discipline the extravagances of their minds and to recognise reality from hallucination or delusion. Yet this is not the beginning of the portrayal of fantasy terrain, as one can tell from the very moment of the mention of the 'heavenly conspection'. The irony which is here established, and the declamatory style, the allusions and the syntax, together make it clear that neither the suggestion of unreality nor the irony itself are directed against inoffensive Dalkey, the real town, but at the posture of fantasy which shrouds it here. That is, against the human failure to relate to reality satirised in the fictional inhabitants of Dalkey, and particularly their failure to maintain what might be called a 'true' spiritual conspection. Indeed, the frequent repetition of the words 'little' and 'small' in the initial paragraph describing Dalkey ultimately give the impression of not a physical, but a spiritual smallness.

Subsequently, when the ironic tone is established in the second paragraph, O'Brien intimates where a certain amount of responsibility lies for this poverty by means of allusions to those who should be responsible for the enlightenment of the people, the Irish writers. The Latin, per iter tenebricosum, comes of course from Catullus, alluding to a faceçious passage mourning the death of his mistress's sparrow:

Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
Illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.

(Now he is treading that dark road
to the place from which they say
no one has ever returned)⁵⁸

This is indeed an appropriate beginning to a satire avowedly directed against literary men, the plot of which deals with a return from the after-life, and of which the theme is concerned with the proper recognition by man of spiritual values.

Catullus's dark road admirably reflects, also, the road into Dalkey taken both by the characters, Mick and Hackett, and by the reader, whose experience is of a journey into wilful confusion.

By contrast, a 'curtain' is 'miraculously whisked away', an expression which inevitably reminds the reader of expressions much used by W. B. Yeats, with reference to The Trembling of the Veil and other discourse to do with his attempts to reveal or revelations of the secret spiritual dimension. O'Brien's irony here suggests that Yeats's perceptions along these lines had much in common with the fantasies of De Selby. And then, O'Brien continues, there was Joyce:

Yes, the Vico Road.
Good Lord!

The influence of Vico upon Joyce is well known, and very deftly alluded to in this reference, and in a later paragraph where further mention is made of Vico's cyclical theory.⁵⁹ As regards Vico, the rejection here of his theory of history, 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis, chaos', suggests to the reader of O'Brien that what is rejected is the implied order, since in fact chaos predominates in the O'Brien world-view. In addition, though,

as the presentation of Joyce shows, O'Brien clearly does not feel that Joyce's example in the sphere of spiritual matters is truly one to foster understanding among others.

Astonishingly, having made a concentrated ironic attack of this kind in only a few lines, O'Brien then effects a complete volte-face and abandons the ironic note entirely. There follows a picturesque description in almost lyrical tones. Although the word 'enchantment' recalls Yeats and AE, this does not seem to be its purpose in this context; rather, the expression is as poetically used as the subsequent ones, like 'grassland falling fast away' and 'the immeasurable immanent sea'. This latter phrase in particular establishes a quality of the perpetual and the fundamental not inconsistent with the idea of a spiritual dimension within the mundane; by contrast with Dalkey, the sea, the sky and the mountains suggest a timeless solidity informed by spiritual value. These, together with the outcrop of granite, the peninsula of Howth and the Wicklow mountains, continue to have this effect, while towards the end of the section the ironic tone reappears, culminating in the reference to Queen Victoria. The latter irony leaves no doubt that O'Brien means this satire to be specifically directed towards his own people, and their tendency as he has observed it to show an absence of sense and perspective. Moreover, the lyrical element which contrasts with this is also specifically Irish in its reference, and together they show O'Brien's meaning: the Irish have a deeply spiritual nature, but this is too often misdirected into unthinking piety (the religious satire of the novel), credulity and self-delusion (the fantasies

satirised in the characters) and sentimentality (suggested in the inclinations of the lyrical passages here).⁶⁰

It is clear that the purpose of this introduction to The Dalkey Archive is to intimate the particular concerns which are to follow (it would not really be just to say 'worked out') in the rest of the work. An intermittently ironic tone is subsequently maintained, but it is very subdued and fails to impose itself upon the reader as stringently as in the first pages. The lyrical tone, too, is not put to such effective use again, except in one place. This is in a passage which originated in The Third Policeman, and which was clearly of such importance to O'Brien that he incorporated it in a very similar form in this work also. It occurs immediately after Sergeant Fottrell has explained to Mick the intricacies of his Atomic Theory:

Here the sergeant produced his pipe, a thing he did very rarely in public, and in silence commenced the laborious business of filling and ramming it from his battered tin of very dark tobacco. Mick began to muse and think of country places he had known in his younger days. He thought of one place he had been fond of.

Brown bogs and black bogs were neatly arranged on each side of the road with rectangular boxes carved out of them here and there, each with a filling of yellow-brown brown-yellow water. Far away near the sky tiny people were stooped at their turf-work, cutting out precisely-shaped sods with their patent spades and building them into a tall memorial the height of a horse and cart. Sounds came from them, delivered to his ears without charge by the west wind, sounds

of laughing and whistling and bits of verses from the old bog-songs. Nearer, a house stood attended by three trees and surrounded by the happiness of a coterie of fowls, all of them picking and rooting and disputing loudly in the unrelenting manufacture of their eggs. The house was quiet in itself and silent but a canopy of lazy smoke had been erected over the chimney to indicate that people were within engaged on tasks. Ahead of him went the road, running swiftly across the flat land and pausing slightly to climb slowly up a hill that was waiting for it in a place where there was tall grass, grey boulders and rank stunted trees. The whole overhead was occupied by the sky, translucent, impenetrable, ineffable and incomparable, with a fine island of cloud anchored in the calm two yards to the right of Mr Jarvis's outhouse.

The scene was real and incontrovertible but at variance with the talk of the sergeant. Was it not monstrous to allege that the little people winning turf far away were partly bicycles?

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 82 - 83

One is struck initially, of course, by the contrast which this passage makes with the nonsensical talk which immediately precedes it; this is reinforced by the final paragraph quoted above, in which the dichotomy between real and unreal is plainly stated. The lyrical description itself, however, is cleverly arranged so as to reaffirm many of the ideas of the opening pages, and to suggest further the immanence of the spiritual in the real.

On the most immediate level, the passage is striking for its representation of traditional Irishness, the people cutting turf for their fires from the bogland. Implicit in this scene, of course, is the implication of a fundamental relationship with reality which has been an Irish inheritance for many

generations: poverty, hardship, but a true relationship with the soil. O'Brien is able to stress this point by situating his little people (little because of the perspective, although there are spiritual connotations also) near the sky, which has already been seen to represent the immanence of spiritual reality within earthly reality. To ensure that the implications of this are not missed, O'Brien returns to the sky, calling it 'translucent, impenetrable, ineffable, incomparable', while Mr Jarvis's outhouse is nevertheless very close to it, thus again implying the proximity of earthly and spiritual reality. In fact, the very syntax of the central paragraph emphasises this, for inanimate objects within the scene seem to have a certain animation, as if possessed of spiritual life: the west wind delivers sounds without charge, trees attend a house, the road struggles with a steep hill. The whole scene is alive with elemental reality absent from the activities of the characters of the novel. The contrast is pointed conclusively by means of the likening of the pile of turf to a 'memorial', which recalls the obelisk of the first page; that memorial was out of place with the Irishness and realness of its location, while this is in harmony with both.

As The Dalkey Archive dabbles in the fantastic rather than living in it, and presents irony and lyrical tones only at key points, one comes to realise that the novel relies to a degree on humour, both for the expression of its author's meaning and for its continuity with his earlier works. The satirical note, of course, has an obvious place in the complex of techniques which constitute O'Brien's comedy, but simple

humour plays a very great part indeed in the composition of The Dalkey Archive. Thus, somewhat problematically, while the comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds, even of The Hard Life, was wilder and more intrinsically funny than that of The Dalkey Archive, yet in this last novel more is expected of it: comedy has become a strategic part of the structure and effect of the work. Perhaps the most important point, however, is that there is a great disparity between the humour of The Dalkey Archive in its final form and the comedy which its author proposed for it initially. Quite clearly the novel's humour was to lie in the basic concept of Dunne's theory of time:

You may remember Dunne's book, 'An Experiment with Time' and 'The Serial Universe', also the views of Einstein and others. The idea is that Time is as a great flat motionless sea. Time does not pass; it is we who pass. With this concept as basis, fantastic but coherent situations can easily be devised, and in effect the whole universe torn up in a monstrous comic debauch.⁶¹

Much of this statement is confusing: although Dunne's theory does conform somewhat to that of Einstein, the idea that 'time does not pass, it is we who pass' is not really Dunne's view at all, but rather that of Weyl, whose belief was that 'events do not happen, we come across them'. Not only this, but the final version of The Dalkey Archive hardly approaches any of these ideas with consistency; nor can it really be described as 'a monstrous comic debauch'. Although Saint Augustine clearly exists in a temporal dimension greater than fourth-dimension Time which De Selby, Mick and Hackett can enter by means of DMP, this is not taken to any considered, ironic conclusion as would

have been possible with a Dunnian background: De Selby's plan to annihilate mankind would, if set in motion, merely have precipitated everyone into an eternal fifth-dimension Time, thus solving nothing regarding the evil of the world. Thus, while the novel depends on the humour of its plot, and the plot in turn draws on Dunne, O'Brien's failure to develop the Dunne implications more specifically is curious.

It is particularly in contrast to Denis Johnston's A Bride for the Unicorn, which is also based on Dunne. The central character, John Foss, has an early intimation of immortality after fourth-dimension Time death in a mystic, ecstatic encounter with a Masked Lady at the beginning of the play. When this Lady disappears he is left to wander through life, marriage, war, always longing to find the Lady again and coming to fear that death will prevent him. Ultimately he discovers, with the reappearance of the Lady, that she is herself Death, and simultaneously the eternity in another dimension which supercedes fourth-dimension Time extinction; he dies happily. However, during the period between the Masked Lady's disappearance and her reappearance, the audience is constantly reminded of the Dunne time system and its attendant immortality, which Johnston means us to apprehend as a source of meaning in this life. This is effected by the intermittent presence of a Bust, the 'Ultimate Observer' of Dunne, and also by musical motifs. Moreover, Egbert, outstanding among John Foss's companions, not only seems to be somehow apart from the normal Time scheme of things in his attitude to death and to the futile processes of life, but also voices the positive value of Dunne's time theory to rally John

when life appears meaningless to him:

John: Why must all things end so soon?

Egbert: Why must love end? Didn't a girl ask you that once, and didn't you give her an answer? Well, the answer is the same.

John: 'Not for ever,' I told her, 'that would not be love. The magic of happiness is that it has beginning and ending'.

Egbert: When we are born we sign a bond with Time that some day we must honour. But was the bargain worth it?

John: Why yes - it has been well worth everything, if only I may stay for one thing more. If only I may see the face that granted me that brief half minute of true immortality.

(The PLAYER who has appeared at the piano now starts softly to play).

Egbert: When the singer has sung, are his notes dead? Whatever has been, will be, while Time remains. You would not wish to sprawl through endless space. Why then be bothered that we terminate in Time? Should I be distressed because above my head is none of me except - perhaps a pleasant smell of brilliantine?

John: I hear music. What is it?

Egbert: Music? Maybe our lives are nothing but a tune played by somebody upon a piano.

John: Then we would certainly be immortal.

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Of additional interest to the reader of The Third Policeman and The Dalkey Archive is Egbert's apparent obsession with bicycles:

Egbert: And have you been successful?

Albert: Well, after all my dear chap,
I am Prime Minister.

Egbert: But can you ride a bicycle?⁶³

The recurrent reference to the bicycle here in connection with time cycles and the question of spiritual immortality is clearly resonant of O'Brien's bicyclosis in his Dunne-based books, and may suggest a connection between Johnston and O'Brien. It is possible that O'Brien saw or read A Bride for the Unicorn (it was first performed in Dublin in 1933 and published in 1935) and from it drew some knowledge of Dunne or associated ideas, although Denis Johnston himself can throw no light on the matter personally.⁶⁴ O'Brien's use of Dunne in The Third Policeman some years later, however, is very different in tendency from that of both Johnston and Priestley. As I have suggested, O'Brien uses Dunne's philosophy primarily as a system, a form, rather than for the positive implication of satisfactory immortality to be derived from it. It can hardly be said, after all, that the Protagonist's immortality is 'satisfactory'. It is rather as if something of Ouspensky's time theory⁶⁵ governs the Protagonist, who, unable to make right choices according to reason and humility, is unable to escape from a hellish eternal repetition of evil. Whereas Johnston shows a man discovering the escape from such meaninglessness, O'Brien chooses to show a man trapped within it. He fails to move beyond the mental limitations of his fourth-dimension Time knowledge, fails to overcome his understanding of death as a final boundary and to perceive, as Foss finally perceives, a wider spiritual horizon. Whereas in Dunne 'nothing dies',⁶⁶ O'Brien's Protagonist, who refuses to accept the

necessity of death in fourth-dimension Time, perpetually suffers diminutive deaths as a result, and must continue to do so unendingly, prohibited from attaining release into the greater perspective of the next dimension. Limited by this fear of death as an end, the Protagonist refuses to 'grow up', to develop (he buries himself in de Selby). He shelters from life as if trying to avoid the approach of death. Johnston in fact provides an excellent description of O'Brien's Protagonist, unknowingly of course, while offering an explanation of the theme of A Bride for the Unicorn:

... the theme, as succinctly as I can put it, is this: every man believes that he is afraid of death. That is not so: if he were really afraid of death he would refuse to grow up or develop in any direction. He would remain a Peter Pan all his life. For the more vital we are and the more vitally we live, the more inevitable we make our death.⁶⁷

O'Brien's Protagonist is just such a chilling 'Peter Pan'.

Different though O'Brien's interpretation of Dunne is in The Third Policeman when compared with the Denis Johnston play, The Dalkey Archive appears to be even further removed, not only from the positive theory of immortality as a key to value but even from Dunne's theory itself. The limited extent of Dunne's presence in the novel has already been seen. As for interpretation, it may seem that the spiritual potential of fifth-dimension Time inherent in Dunne's philosophy is being undermined in the audacious comedy of the Saint Augustine episode, especially since De Selby's plan to destroy mankind is opposed only by the fatuous messianism of Mick and Hackett. This would, however, be

quite contrary to O'Brien's direction so far, in which, though the Church has been subjected to some ridicule, man's need to understand and relate to a spiritual reality greater than himself has been implicit. The Dalkey Archive in fact, uses Dunne's ideas only as if they were remembered dimly by the novelist after a lapse of some years, as may indeed have been the case. Although the humour of the novel is centrally located in the basic idea of an access to the after-life (the DMP and Saint Augustine), its effect is quite severely limited. While parts are extremely funny, the humour has no ironic or intellectual depth such as can be felt in O'Brien's first two novels and which is essential if humour is to be really successful. If one returns to the author's early plan for The Dalkey Archive, one has to qualify his claims for it. 'Anything can be brought in': in fact, not nearly as much is 'brought in' as in any of his previous novels. 'A monstrous comic debauch': perhaps, but what finally was 'debauched' in the novel? Not, in any effective way, the follies of the modern world, such as he originally outlined.

What perhaps is ultimately 'debauched', in the sense of disparaged rather than over-indulged, is everything O'Brien has formerly done or attempted to do as an author. Even his own previous attempts to satirise the unreason of the mind, his theme of man's need to establish a proper relationship with reality, are undercut by the emptiness of this novel, its failure to develop an effective theme, to attempt complexity of any sort. Above all, they are undercut by the failure of the work to be the extravagant comic debauch that it was intended to be. The sporadic insertion of 'religious symbolism' in the

'mother' and 'Mary' ideas, the predominance of purely or finally vacuous argument, the lack of forceful structuring in the novel, the inept literary satire and the many other problematic features suggest, perhaps, that The Dalkey Archive is in fact the culmination of the developing idea of O'Brien as author. The possibility that the jaded author of The Hard Life might have become inhibitingly embittered is not inconsonant with the following description of O'Brien at this time:

He was difficult company in those later years. The resentment that always lay close below the surface seemed to rise up and find expression in outbursts of scorn that no longer distinguished between the humbug and genuine. Too much contempt had soured his palate. He rarely revealed himself in enthusiasm or praise.⁶⁸

Although this remains a possibility, it does not account for the enduring sense that The Dalkey Archive has something important to offer. Partly this is answered by the idea of spiritual significance offered by certain areas of the work. Partly, however, it must be attributed to an inherent quality of all successful fiction: that, no matter what the content, it abides by its own rules. Whatever the cause, the unpolished, fatuous, disunited nature of The Dalkey Archive is central to its appeal. Despite the temptation to regard O'Brien as embittered and now unable to write as he once had done, it must not be overlooked that the novel's untidiness, lack of structure, lack of comic brilliance above all, gives the unreason, vanity, vacuity and intellectual clumsiness of his Dalkians perfect stylistic expression. It is surely this appropriate effect which carries the reader contentedly through the clumsiness of

the humour, the tediousness of the theological discussion, and the novel's other difficulties. This being so, it is true that The Dalkey Archive, though not rightly called a rewritten The Third Policeman, is nevertheless still concerned with man's failure to relate with sense and reason to reality, and may with some justice be looked upon as the end of the oeuvre, O'Brien's last word.

Notes to Chapter Five

1. Anne Clissmann, Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975, p.271. (See also pp. 272 - 276).
2. The Hard Life, London, 1961, p.22. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1916, (Penguin edition, 1960), pp. 50 - 51.

All page references to The Hard Life are taken from the Picador edition of 1976. References to the novel in these notes may be made with the abbreviation HL.

3. Anne Clissmann, (op. cit.), pp. 271 - 272.
4. Danielle Jacquin, 'Never Apply Your Front Brakes First or Flann O'Brien and the Theme of the Fall', The Irish Novel in our Time, ed. Rafroidi and Harmon, Lille, 1976, pp. 187 - 197.
5. Ibid., p.189.
6. Ibid., p.190.
7. Ibid., p.192.
8. O'Brien's innovative inclinations in his fiction are discussed in a recent article by Rudiger Imhof, 'Two Meta-novelists: Sternesque Elements in the

Novels by Flann O'Brien, 'Anglo-Irish Studies', IV, 1979, pp. 59 - 90.

Imhof's purpose in this article is to make an extended comparison between O'Brien and Sterne, calling them both 'meta-novelists': both are comic-experimental, and overtly concerned with the question of novel form. He draws parallels between the two writers in the following four aspects:

(1) they make implicit and explicit commentary on the nature of the novel and the possibilities of fiction-writing, (2) they use devices which lay bare the methods of fiction-writing, (3) their narrative strategies and stylistic idiosyncracies are similar, as is (4) their subject matter.

9. See the Introduction for greater biographical detail of this period.
10. Both John Garvin and Jack White, commenting severally on O'Brien's civil service career and journalism, remark upon the strain on O'Brien caused by the combination of these two full-time pursuits.
(Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe, London, 1973, Chapters IV and V.)
11. A selection of passages from O'Brien's letters to O'Keeffe are reproduced in the Appendices. These do not include, however, the earlier letters relating to O'Keeffe's offer to reprint At Swim-Two-Birds; these letters and their sequels show that this

republication of the first novel was a success, and refer to several translations of the work into foreign languages. See also the letter dated 28 May, 1962 in the Appendix.

12. John Garvin, 'Sweetscented Manuscripts', Myles, (op.cit.), pp. 59 - 60. Jack White, 'Myles, Flann and Brian', Myles, (op.cit.), pp. 73 - 76. Kevin O'Nolan, preface to The Best of Myles, 1968, (Picador, 1977).
13. Throughout this chapter I use the word 'realism' with a rather distorted meaning, reluctantly having to adhere to the term in the absence of a more appropriate one. This stems largely from the word having already been used in connection with The Hard Life and bearing some of the connotations which the novel demands. M.H. Abrams's definition of realism helps to clarify my cautious use of the term. According to this definition, realistic fiction attempts:

to present an accurate imitation of life as it is. The realist sets out to write a fiction which will give the illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader ... The realist, in other words, is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene ... A thoroughgoing realism involves not only a selection of subject matter but, more importantly, a special literary manner as well: the subject is represented or 'rendered', in such a way as to give the reader the illusion of actual experience. ... It is well, however, to reserve the term 'realist' for writers who render a subject seriously, and as though it were a direct reflection of

the casual order of experience ...

(A Glossary of Literary Terms , pp.140 - 141).

It can be seen that in a superficial way The Hard Life conforms to this definition, and especially in comparison with either At Swim-Two-Birds or The Third Policeman. For this reason the term is useful in this discussion. However, it is impossible to convey with the term 'realism' alone the two major ways in which it is invalid in this context. Firstly, there is a strong fantastic element in The Hard Life, introduced, as it were, within the realism:

Collopy's immense increase in weight, his zany interview with the Pope, and his final end, for example. Secondly, the realism in the overt content of the novel, while it is the reason for my retaining the term in this discussion, is undercut by the subtextual satire which I suggest lies beneath the plot.

With these reservations declared, I must persist reluctantly to make use of the term 'realism'.

14. HL, p.39.
15. Langenscheidt's Shorter Latin Dictionary, 1966.
16. In this case, Mlle. Jacquin's theory of man's 'position' in O'Brien's novels can, I think, take on an additional moral significance for this novel alone in the way in which I have described.

17. Samuel Beckett, Murphy, 1938 (Picador edition, 1973),
p.64.
18. It might, alternatively, be argued that it is the 'gravid'
quality of the water which brings about Collopy's
downfall, or in other words, the seriousness in
literature may be detrimental; this would, of
course, contradict the argument so far. However,
since in the novel O'Brien's concealed meaning is
satirical, it is also both grave and disruptive.
19. O'Brien's use of Keats in his writing began with the
introduction of the poet into the texture of
extracts and references to authors in AS2B. The
relevant passage in AS2B is, of course:

Who are my future cronies, where
are our mad carousals? What neat
repass 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 mad pursuit? What
pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

(p.22)

This clearly evokes the Ode on a Grecian Urn, of
which the two lines which conclude the first stanza
are almost exactly echoed:

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Keats is not actually mentioned in this AS2B context,
however; the allusion is left for the reader to
pick up alone. In the columns of 'Cruiskeen Lawn',
however, Keats, together with the translator of
Homer, Chapman, feature largely and over a period

of years. See The Best of Myles, ed. Kevin O'Nolan, 1968, (Picador, 1977), pp. 180 - 200.

20. O'Brien has generally very little to do with women in his fiction. One senses from the portraits of women in this work that his attitude was somewhat satirical: Annie, Mrs Crotty, Penelope and the women of the Committee and the 'clinical hydrometer' (pp. 59 - 60, 80).
21. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 25 November, 1961.
22. The trap which O'Brien sets the reader of The Hard Life is to read only at the level of the squalor, the plot, the echoes of Dubliners; not to be aware of the other level of meaning in which the satire lies is to be among those who place the lighter works above Ulysses. Interestingly, Anne Clissmann only goes so far as to say:
- The book is an attempt to sum up the atmosphere of Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist, with sly digs on the way at Ulysses.
- (Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975, p.273)
23. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 7 June, 1961.
- See the Appendices, where the relevant passage is reproduced in context.
24. The phrase is from AS2B, p.99, where the student narrator is telling the gathering at Michael Byrne's about the character in his current novel, Trellis:

You're writing a novel of course?
said Byrne.

He is, said Brinsley, and the plot
has him well in hand.

Trellis's dominion over his characters,
I explained, is impaired by his addiction
to sleep. There is a moral in that.

The 'moral', of course, is the danger of the
ungoverned imagination which is O'Brien's theme in
AS2B, of which, ironically, the unsuspecting narrator
is in fact a victim. Doubly ironic, is it, therefore,
that O'Brien would now seem, through a lack of
concentration and concern, to be guilty of something
akin to the same vice.

25. Note the following quotations from O'Brien's letters to
O'Keefe with regard to the publication of The Hard
Life:

Re: the cover design for the book:
'Material is yet to be supplied for
back of cover. There is room for
another portrait here, but whose?
Plato, St. Augustine, or Groucho Marx?
The accompanying letterpress can be
solemn humbug'.

11 August, 1961

'I feel that any biographical material
should be omitted, particularly the
disclosure that Flann O'Brien is a
pseudonym. There is no point in it if
the real name is also given. Incidentally,
if a pen-name is admissable, why not a
pen-face?'

19 August, 1961

'As regards the back of the cover, the
reviews etc could be accommodated on an
inner flap. The back could carry a
picture of a head (anybody's - Martin
Luther's?) with the slogan 'Thomas
Aquinas would have liked this book,
for he wrote ...' and here would follow
a piece of bullshit written by me (with
occasional Latin glosses). This would

amuse the sophisticates, impress the ignoramuses, and drive the Jesuits frantic with anger'.

19 August, 1961

26. Pascal, Pensées, I, 19.
27. Samuel Beckett, Molloy, Paris, 1950, (Calder edition of the Trilogy, 1959), p.13.
28. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 25 November, 1961.
29. Ibid., 11 August, 1961.
30. Ibid., 6 November, 1961.
31. Ibid., 28 May, 1962.
32. Copies of letters from Brian O'Nolan to the publisher Timothy O'Keefe were kindly made available for my inspection. Selected passages from this correspondence were noted by myself on this occasion and are reproduced in Appendix III. The phrases quoted here ('real book' and 'jewelled ulcers') are from O'Brien's letters of 28 May, 1962 and 27 November, 1963.
33. Dr Gardiner, my father, has, over a period of many years in general practice, industrial medicine and other medical areas earned an outstanding reputation as a diagnostician.

34. 'Myles, Flann and Brian', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, ed. Timothy O'Keefe, London, 1973, pp. 74 - 75.
35. Anne Clissmann gives an amusing account of O'Nolan's habit of giving false autobiographical details to inquirers. (Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975, pp. 1 - 4).
36. 'Myles, Flann and Brian', (op. cit.), p.75.
37. Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, (op.cit.), pp. 301 - 306, 312 - 315, 319 - 323.
38. John Wain, 'To Write for My Own Race - The Fiction of Flann O'Brien', Encounter, 29, No. 1, (July 1967), pp. 85, 84.
39. Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, (op.cit.), pp. 319 - 323.
40. As becomes clear from a reading of the early chapters of the final version, O'Brien maintained many of the quips and jokes to which O'Keefe particularly objected in his letter of November, 1963.
41. Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, (op. cit.), pp. 292 - 293.
42. Ibid., pp. 294 - 295.

43. Vatican Council 11. Held in 1962 - 5, this Council was assembled with the main purpose of the adaptation of the methods of the Roman Catholic Church to modern requirements. It made no dogmatic definitions, but achieved extensive liturgical reforms and a declaration of the episcopate's collegiality with the Pope in governing the Church. Above all, it brought the Roman Catholic Church into the mainstream of ecumenism, from which it had always held rigidly aloof. It also provided a forum for the airing of a strong current of discontent among 'progressives' with regard to many aspects of ecclesiastical discipline. Its consequences were expected to be far-reaching.
44. Anne Clissmann, Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, (op.cit.), pp. 106 - 115, 220 - 225, 272 - 276, and especially 306 - 314. See also Lorna Sage, 'Flann O'Brien', Two Decades of Irish Writing, ed. Douglas Dunn, Cheshire, 1975, pp. 197 - 206, and J. C. C. Mays, 'Brian O'Nolan, Literalist of the Imagination', Myles. Portraits of Flann O'Brien, (op. cit.), pp. 107 - 108.
45. Flann O'Brien, The Dalkey Archive, London, 1964. All page references to this work will refer to the Picador paperback edition of 1976, and future references to the novel may make use of the abbreviation DA.
46. Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, (op. cit.), pp. 306 - 316.

47. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1916, Penguin paperback edition, 1960 (1974), p.215.
- The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.
48. Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers 1880 - 1940. Literature under Parnell's star, London, 1958, Chapter 1: 'A Myth and a Movement'.
49. Though derived from de Selby of The Third Policeman, this character's name is spelled with a capital 'D':
De Selby.
50. DA, p.134:
- 'His name is De Selby. He is not a literary man so far as I know and it is not easy at all to define his sphere or spheres. He is a mathematical physicist, a chemist, an authority on dynamics ... For all his intellect he is a courteous and hospitable man'.
51. See Howarth, (op.cit.), discussing Germany and Wagner in relation to Ireland, Chapter 1. In brief, Yeats saw that Wagner had represented and consolidated the unification of Germany by making his art out of the early German epics and, in Siegfried, creating an heroic embodiment of the spirit of Germany. Yeats wished to achieve the same thing for Ireland in Cuchulain, and advised Irish writers to work with a similar ideal in view.

52. Howarth's study (op.cit.), begins with and centres on Parnell as a modern archetype of the Irish messianic figure. Not only did his aloofness and strength of character set Parnell up as a hero, he was also 'killed' at the hands of the Irish, thus making from his already charismatic figure a legendary martyred Saviour. His death pulled to a focus the Irish tendency to look for a Messiah who would relieve their oppression.

53. AS2B, pp. 19 - 20.

54. In a letter to O'Keefe quoted by Allan McClelland of the Hull Truck Theatre Company in connection with his adaptation of The Dalkey Archive for the stage, 1978 (I have not been able to trace the exact date of the letter), O'Brien says the following of the novel:

Generally I'm satisfied with the quality of the material to date, though I've a horrible fear that some stupid critic - and which of them is not? - will praise me as a master of science fiction.

Adrian Mitchell, 'The Bicycle', New Statesman, 4 December, 1964, p.893, calls The Dalkey Archive: 'science fiction with a brogue'. Similarly, the cover-writer for the Picador edition, 1976, asks whether the novel is science fiction or life in Ireland; and Peter Tremayne, Irish Masters of Fantasy, Dublin, 1979, speaks of the work as being regarded 'almost as Science Fiction'.

55. Anne Clissmann, Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to his Writings, Dublin, 1975, pp. 296 - 300.
56. By saying that The Dalkey Archive gives the impression of greater seriousness in the author I do not wish to imply that it is the 'darker' work. The Third Policeman, while being undoubtedly the more sombre novel in its implications, is nevertheless a work into which much concentrated literary effort has been put. By contrast, The Dalkey Archive is less well-written, O'Brien being, I believe, by this time primarily the satirist and only secondarily the literary artist.
57. Brian O'Nolan, letter to O'Keefe, 27 February, 1960.
- An Beal Bocht is described as:
- an enormous jeer at the Gaelic morons here with their bicycle clips and handball medals, but in language and style it was an ironical copy of a really fine autobiographical book written by a man from the Great Blasket island off Kerry (long dead and island now uninhabited) and translated into English under the title of The Islandman by the late Robin Flower of the British Museum.
58. Catallus, Carmina, iii.
59. 'Of course, I don't take Vico's speculations literally; I use his cycles as a trellis.'
- James Joyce to Padraic Colum, quoted in Our Friend James Joyce, Mary and Padraic Colum, London, 1959, p. 123, and by J. C. C. Mays, 'Brian O'Nolan:

Literalist of the Imagination', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, London, 1973, p.106. See Mays' interesting use of the quotation in connection with O'Brien.

60. This kind of irony, directed in such a way as to show that, while the Irish have a feeling for nature, a traditionally Gaelic sense of the spirituality immanent in the natural world is absent and frequently replaced by little more than sentimentality, is characteristic also of George Moore in Hail and Farewell and The Lake.
61. Brian O'Nolan, letter to Timothy O'Keefe, 21 September, 1962.
62. Denis Johnston, A Bride for the Unicorn, London (Jonathan Cape), 1935, p.290.
63. Ibid., p.290.
64. I refer to a personal conversation with Mr Johnston over the telephone on the subject of Dunne, October, 1981.
65. P. D. Ouspensky, A New Model of the Universe. Ouspensky enjoyed a vogue in the early thirties. He put forward a theory of time as cyclical, a time of modified recurrence which could only be altered as a result of individual choices.

66. Nothing Dies is the title of Dunne's third volume in which the ideas of An Experiment with Time and The Serial Universe are summarised. (1940).

67. Quoted in Harold Ferrar, Denis Johnston's Irish Theatre, Dolmen Press, 1973. (A Bride for the Unicorn section, note 12).

68. Jack White, 'Myles, Flann and Brian', Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe, London, 1973, p.75.

Chapter Six

O'Brien, Beckett and Cartesian satire

"a whole nation anticipating the absurd"

The Spectator

It has been with the utmost difficulty that I have so far contrived to discuss O'Brien's novels without any considerable reference to his contemporary and fellow Irishman, Samuel Beckett, whose work clearly bears such an intimate relationship with that of O'Brien that in justice to them both a comparison is demanded. That this is so important as to be extensive warrants my dedication to it of an entire chapter, in anticipation of which many previous opportunities for remarks concerning Beckett have been reluctantly passed up.

The quotation above, made in The Spectator,¹ had reference to O'Brien's Gaelic satire An Beal Bocht; it is also valuably and appropriately applied to the four English novels. In particular, The Third Policeman is a remarkable example of writing which reflects this kind of outlook, and it has a striking kinship with Beckett's Watt; in this case O'Brien's world anticipating Beckett's absurd. To a lesser but still significant extent, however, At Swim-Two-Birds, The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive also bear and are illuminated by a comparison with Beckett's writing, often with quite surprising results. This is so largely because of the curious pattern of publication of O'Brien's and Beckett's work, the dates at which each piece was published sometimes demolishing what appeared to be a derivative relationship or suggesting that the work which appeared to be the source for a

certain idea could not have been so. For instance, Whoroscope, Proust, and More Pricks than Kicks pre-date At Swim-Two-Birds completely, both in date of composition and of publication. Moreover, there is an interesting relationship between Murphy and At Swim-Two-Birds, the latter preceding Murphy in conception but post-dating it in finalisation and publication. This is further complicated by the speculation that Murphy was in fact written in 1936, and the conjecture that Beckett may have been in Dublin at intervals over this period; he was certainly known to O'Brien's group of friends.² It is therefore intriguing to surmise upon the possible interaction of the two works, but impossible to be conclusive. Furthermore, the relationship between The Third Policeman and Watt is remarkable for its very impossibility: The Third Policeman was offered for publication some two years before Beckett began work on Watt, but was refused; Watt was completed in a further two years but not finally published until 1953, eleven years later, but still seven years before the eventual publication, posthumously, of The Third Policeman. If one accepts that O'Brien 'lost' the manuscript of the latter faithfully, even if deliberately, and did not alter it between its rejection and his death, as I think is most likely to be the case, then one can but fall back upon William Golding's remark, made to me in another such connection, that the similarities in the works can only be explained by 'some aspect of a Jungian sequentiality'.³

An inspection of their dates of creation and publication further brings to light, what must be obvious to any student of Beckett, that the Trilogy of novels, (Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable) was written and published after At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, and therefore could have had no influence on the latter, while The Hard Life and The Dalkey Archive were both written after the Trilogy had been published for some years in both English and French, but appear to take a very different direction. Thus, while a juxtaposition of Beckett and O'Brien is very illuminating and points up a significant relationship between them, this is, for once, not a case of O'Brien reflecting, recalling or re-rendering the other author. All that can be said in this connection is that O'Brien began with a knowledge of three works, Whoroscope, Proust and More Pricks than Kicks, to possibly initiate him along the same path as Beckett, if he so chose.

Before embarking on a detailed comparison of the two authors, it is as well to begin with a more general appraisal of their position by returning to the idea of the absurd. Looking at Beckett as a writer of literature of the absurd is only one way of approaching him, but it remains one of the most popular ways and in this case a very helpful one. His novels, upon which my study here will concentrate, are in part a reaction against an earlier tradition of certainties, in particular, 'the assumptions that man is a rational creature who lives in an at least partially intelligible universe, that he is part of an orderly social structure, and that he is capable of heroism and

dignity even in defeat'⁴. When one considers Watt, for example, one must acknowledge that the fictional universe presented within it permits none of these clauses; rather, that it expresses the tendency to view

each man as an isolated being who is cast ignominiously into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value, or meaning, and to represent man's life as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd.⁵

Not only is this an adequate description of Watt, but it also applies rather appropriately to The Third Policeman, even to the extent of implying a circular motion, interminable in its significance, which is the structural shape of both that novel and the experience described within it. The Protagonist is isolated in an alien universe, whether this be death, Purgatory, or a paradigm of life itself, in which values and human meaning cannot be located, nor intelligibility, dignity or rationality described within it. Moreover, At Swim-Two-Birds too has something of this colouration, though this remains less defined and explicit than in its successor. One of the main features of At Swim-Two-Birds is the irrationality of man, and, by extension, of his universe; and consequently there is nowhere within it any suggestion of the dignity or heroism of man. What order there might be is disrupted throughout, the Furriskey tea-party and the operatic endeavours of the narrator's uncle and his friends demonstrating the paucity of human social order, while the narrator's literary enterprise, which should have

represented order and structure, is massively disrupted. The fantastic nature of the novel's domaine effectively symbolises a largely unintelligible, alien 'universe', while simultaneously the grotesque comedy of At Swim-Two-Birds, seen for example in the torments of Sweeny and Trellis, emphasises, as it does in Beckett, the literally 'absurd' nature of the world of the novel. In the humour generally there is a considerable element of parody undermining every assumption of normality.

Having thus observed general grounds for juxtaposition of the two authors, one is led to particulars, for even in small details Beckett and O'Brien share many concerns. One is initially struck, of course, by the use both make, in their early works particularly, of solipsism, the retirement into the domaine of the mind. Both, of course, are interested primarily in what happens within the human mind when it breaks its ties with reality. Beckett goes so far as to believe this is the only possible concern of the modern author:

The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumferential phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy. 6

O'Brien, of course, is considerably prone to satirical forays of a highly 'extra-circumferential' nature, but also shares Beckett's concern with the exclusively mental life in the structure and domaine of his early books. In Beckett's later novels (the Trilogy) and plays (Endgame, Happy Days) the characters ultimately live entirely within their skulls, prisoners of the self, cut off from

human society, and indeed from their own bodies. In these cases, the self is literally the only object that can truly be known, whereas in the earlier works, of both Beckett and O'Brien, the self is the only domaine which the characters want to know; we are only in the first stages of the withdrawal. In Murphy, the central character wants only to relate to his inner self, where he detects areas of blissful emptiness in which he delights to lose himself when he can; failing that, to relate to the emptiness of mind of the schizophrenic Mr Endon, as it were vicariously, envying the padded cells of the patient's environment as emblems of his inner mind. The narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds similarly withdraws for preference from the physical life, reclining on his bed in order to be able to retire into his mind:

I put the letter with care into a pocket at my right buttock and went to the tender trestle of my bed, arranging my back upon it in an indolent horizontal attitude. I closed my eyes, hurting slightly my right stye, and retired into the kingdom of my mind. For a time there was complete darkness and an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.13

Even the description of thus relaxing the body in order to come alive in the mind is extremely similar in Murphy:

He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word. 7

Between these two novels, however, there is a significant difference which, even this early in their author's development, indicates the diverging paths which the two writers are going to take in later years. Murphy retires into a mind in which the single greatest feature is emptiness:

There were the three zones, light, half light, dark, each with its speciality.

In the first were the forms with parallel, a radiant abstract of the dog's life, the elements of physical experience available for a new arrangement. Here the pleasure was reprisal, the pleasure of reversing the physical experience. Here the kick that the physical Murphy received, the mental Murphy gave. It was the same kick, but corrected as to direction. ... Here the whole physical fiasco became a howling success.

In the second were the forms without parallel. Here the pleasure was contemplation. This system had no other mode in which to be out of joint and therefore did not need to be put right in this

In both these zones of his private world Murphy felt sovereign and free, in the one to requite himself, in the other to move as he pleased from one unparalleled beatitude to another. There was no rival initiative.

The third, the dark, was a flux of forms, a perpetual coming together and falling asunder of forms. The light contained the docile elements of a new manifold, the world of the body broken up into the pieces of a toy; the half light, states of peace. But the dark neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change. Here there was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line.

Matrix of surds. 8

The student narrator of At Swim-Two-Birds, on the other hand, retires into his own mind specifically to call up fictional images of the most robust kind. However, Murphy seldom achieves ultimate beatitude, his vain attempts to do so demonstrating rather the inability of the self to relate to the outside world than its inability to achieve inner peace. This, of course, is very much the situation in At Swim-Two-Birds also. In both central characters, the mind is seeking an escape from real life, but in both, equally, it succeeds only in 'escaping' to increased multiplicity and disturbance in some way. This happens very clearly in the case of O'Brien's student narrator, but that it happens in Beckett too is more clearly seen in the case of Malone Dies, where, almost totally cut off from the body, Malone seeks consolation in the mental domaine but is rewarded by frenetic amplitude of elaboration, rather than peace and relief.

In both authors, this withdrawal of the characters into the mind in search of some kind of ease, often figured as an attempt to contact a more profound reality (especially in Beckett), is always a means, not of access to the real, but of divorce from the outside 'reality'. Indeed, as a result of his increasing preoccupation with his inner self, the character loses all fundamental knowledge of the 'outer' reality; ultimately, it ceases to exist. O'Brien gives this a most powerful expression in The Third Policeman, only to be matched and excelled in Beckett in the later novels and the plays. The Protagonist has become, in The Third Policeman, the god-like creator of a new world, fabricated entirely out of, and also within, the self in which he is imprisoned. So greatly is the Protagonist at the mercy of his solipsism that

he experiences the sense of almost being 'lived' by extraneous forces. Situation after situation develops in which the Protagonist is either threatened or made to suffer acute anguish, while still in a domain of his own creation: his characters, such as the policemen, seem to be creating and manoeuvring his own nightmare and constituting forces over which he has no control. There is precedent for this, of course, in Freud's theory of the Id, and in an Irish context in Yeats's 'Daimons'. This kind of situation is also entirely part of the Beckett cosmos, especially in the Trilogy. In Beckett, the mind is 'lived' or compelled either by memory or by the next author in the sequence, or by a dreadful compulsion to create new people or ideas no matter how tormenting; again, Malone is a good example of this, and Molloy also, neither of whom is free from such torment within his own mind. As a result, in all these novels, although the central character is seen to create the world of the novel, he remains sceptical towards it, either aware of its independently active nature, or unable to deduce its nature at all.

While Beckett and O'Brien share certain concerns, therefore, especially in this matter of solipsism, there is alongside these a divergence to be noticed, a seed which will develop later and sunder their outlook, which was initially so in accord. This difference lies in the basic tendency of Beckett's writing to consider a kind of withdrawal, or contraction, while O'Brien's concern with mental realms has more of the nature of projection and expansion. The latter is a kind of Wordsworthian projection of the self into a world quickened by

the imagination. In another respect it is a projection in the sense of an animation of the activities of the imagination, of one's inner selves, or the projection of images of them as a kind of uncontrolled self-expression. Whereas in his later works Beckett withdraws the mind of the character into a more barren existence and ultimately to nothingness, where nothingness is reality, O'Brien's characters withdraw into a fertile existence of the subconscious that is not barren, not empty, but vivified with projections of the self. For this reason his use of Dunne is very appropriate, figuring a regression of the self, which must always be in a state of regress as a result of the fact of self-consciousness. Thus, in At Swim-Two-Birds, the student narrator writes of Trellis, Trellis writes of Orlick, O'Brien writes of all these; or, put as another regress, Orlick is created by Trellis, who in turn is created by the narrator, who in turn is created by O'Brien - and it is not unreasonable then to ask, who created O'Brien? The 'Ultimate Author'? Thus the mental world of the narrator is not barren at all, but fertile in projections of the self, in a frequently nightmarish sense.

Beckett, however, is also, despite his representation of the barren and residual, concerned with the regress of the self, and even presents it in the same metaphor of the author creating characters, although in his case he structures the regress over all his early novels, from Mercier and Camier to The Unnameable, rather than separately within each. It gradually becomes clear as the novels are read in their chronological order, that each succeeding character, always an author figure of some sort, is responsible, perhaps, for the creation of the

earlier characters. Thus Watt comes into the world of Mercier and Camier on the grounds of common authorship, and they recall Murphy; the Unnameable reflects on how it is to be a fictional character, and implies that he perhaps 'wrote' previous characters in the Trilogy. Again, however, the authors' different tendencies towards diminution and amplification show themselves in this respect. In Beckett, the Unnameable is the third term of Beckett's regress, and it is a negligible third term, whereas in O'Brien, Orlick is the third term, and Orlick revolts. Thus the regress in At Swim-Two-Birds starts to go the other way, Orlick writing Trellis, causing even more havoc and amplitude than before. O'Brien's is a world of increasing chaos, while Beckett's finally becomes so constricted as to make the dilemma of the self a limited one of personality and despair.

On this question of the 'author' in the work of Beckett and O'Brien, I wish briefly to digress. Both writers' portrayal of solipsism focuses on the situation of an author writing a novel, a man writing or telling things straight out of his head. In Beckett, death is encroaching upon this character's endeavours in many cases; in O'Brien too there is often some kind of threat either of mental imbalance or of death (in The Third Policeman the whole may be considered to be actually within the death realm). In both writers the author characters 'create' in a reclining posture, or otherwise such that the body is out of consideration, like the student narrator, Trellis and Byrne, and the bed-ridden characters of the Trilogy. Akin to this, sleep is ever present to the author-character, as a way of obliterating the torments of the world, as when Byrne discusses the real rôle

of sleep in At Swim-Two-Birds (p.98) or, in The Third Policeman, when sleep seems to be requisite to the Protagonist to succour his threatened mental domaine. Above all, Beckett and O'Brien both go to great pains, O'Brien in At Swim-Two-Birds, Beckett in Mercier and Camier and the novels of the Trilogy, to expose their work as explicitly a work of fiction, and to expose its unreliability and untrustworthiness also. In Mercier and Camier, for instance, Beckett uses devices reminiscent of (though in fact five years subsequent to) At Swim-Two-Birds, such as resumés after every few chapters which become increasingly involved and absurd, the intrusion of the authorial voice in the text, and the introduction of characters from other novels or intrusive mention of them. As in At Swim-Two-Birds there is a deliberate aim to ridicule and abandon the traditional novel form and content. What appears to be an acceptable, recognisable novel terrain is undercut, menaced, disrupted, and finally shown to be, not a fictional world in the accepted sense, but the author's mental landscape, and that not at all a conventional one. The fantasy of the Unknown Domaine section of At Swim-Two-Birds in a similar way suggests the elusive geography of an authorial mental landscape. Thus both authors felt themselves compelled to undercut their own current activity, the writing of fiction. More resonantly, the portrayal of the world as the product of an unbalanced creative mind is actually suggested in both.

The fact that both writers present characters who are themselves 'writers' of various kinds and by various means expose their work as a fictional construct, leads not only to the

creative mind being undercut but also to doubts being cast on the substantiality of the individual. Any character met in such a work has not even the illusion of fictional autonomy, not even those who, like Orlick Trellis, seem to manipulate events around them. We are always aware that Orlick's 'reality' is circumscribed by his puppeteer, Dermot Trellis, or the narrator, or, ultimately, O'Brien. It is the situation which has been mentioned before in another context, in which Michael Robartes, in Yeats's poem, believed himself to be independent from the man in the tower, Yeats himself. It is well expressed in Carroll's Through the Looking Glass:

'He's dreaming now,' said Tweedle-dee: 'and what do you think he's dreaming about?'

Alice said 'Nobody can guess that'.

'Why, about you!' Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. 'And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?'

'Where I am now, of course', said Alice.

'Not you!' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!'

'If that there King was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out - bang! - just like a candle!'

'I shouldn't!' Alice exclaimed indignantly. 'Besides, if I'm only a sort of thing in his dream, what are you, I should like to know?'

'Ditto,' said Tweedledum.

'Ditto, ditto!' cried Tweedledee.

He shouted this so loud that Alice could not help saying, 'Hush! you'll be waking him, I'm afraid, if you make so much noise'.

'Well, it's no use your talking about waking him,' said Tweedledum, 'when you're only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you're not real.'

'I am real!' said Alice, and began to cry. 9

Alice wants to cry because, in herself, she feels herself to be autonomous and real; so likewise do all the characters in At Swim-Two-Birds, but the burning of the manuscripts proves that, for some of them at least, this is not so. We are not told what might happen to Dermot Trellis if the narrator, in his new state of mind brought about by passing his exams, were to burn the manuscripts concerning him, but we know that he, too, would cease to exist. Due to the nature of the regress, it is natural to extend the issue to throw a shadow also on the reality of the student narrator, and inevitably this extends even to the actual author, O'Brien. Thus the authorial regress of At Swim-Two-Birds implies a regress of the reality of the self. This absurdist implication is much more pronounced, of course, in Beckett, although O'Brien's work initiates it. Godot, for instance, only exists in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon (and perhaps the Boy), and fades when his image fades from their minds. Malone only exists, in any real sense, in his own mind, as does Molloy similarly. As each Beckett play follows the last this becomes more and more exacerbated, and, as Happy Days is followed by Not I, a physical existence becomes explicitly less and less tangible, and the urgency to maintain it in mind more so. A failure to maintain the image of the self in the mind would, it is urgently felt, lead to the extinction of the character. If the King awoke, Alice would cease to exist.

As a result of these shared ideas, O'Brien's characters in the first novels show the same compulsion to reassure themselves of their own existence as do Beckett's; what Beckett and O'Brien undoubtedly have in common, whatever their differences,

is an acknowledgement of the inherent instability of man and a recognition of his need to assert his reality even when his connection with it is at its least tangible. This shows itself primarily in the characters' 'narrative compulsion', that is, their need to talk, and their need to be heard and remembered. In Beckett this need to talk comes out of and also expresses an emptiness of meaning:

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.¹⁰

Though this refers to his own predicament as artist, it applies also to that of his characters. These, including Winnie of Happy Days, Malone, Molloy, Vladimir and Estragon and others, find silences, particularly their own, intolerable, and have to talk on no matter if what they say is complete nonsense, kept alive by the hope that they are heard. Often they tell themselves stories to fill in the silence when small talk fails to persist. The narrative compulsion of O'Brien's characters frequently takes the form of the projection of imaginary characters (one is reminded of Malone), an often tumultuous or involved flow of talk, and, again, the telling of a story. Into this flow there sometimes enter unnamed voices, voices offering information not rationalised by the mind to whose talk they contribute, suggesting the imperfect rationality of that mind, and by extension of the whole of mankind. While, in Beckett, Watt particularly suffers from these voices, the

Protagonist in The Third Policeman suddenly hears the voice he calls Joe, and in At Swim-Two-Birds one can find the seeds of the device in the multiplicity of voices interacting in counterpart form, as it were, in the fashion already distinguished under the name 'pub oratory'.

This goes some way towards illuminating another significant divergence between the writing of Beckett and that of O'Brien, which increases with time. In Beckett's characters the narrative compulsion is an expression of the need to maintain a hold on very existence. It is akin to two other such needs, the need to be perceived, and the need to understand. The latter is best expressed in Watt, who is troubled with an intellect which must always create a rational - or quasi-rational - explanation for any phenomenon upon which it seizes, and which cannot rest until this is achieved. Hugh Kenner expresses this well as the intellect's

irremedial itch to think explicable
worlds into existence, stumbling
through corridors of exquisite
absurdity toward some talismanic
formula with which it can be
temporarily at rest. 11

In Watt also is Beckett's statement of the self's need to be perceived, which finds fictional embodiment in other characters subsequently. Watt concludes that Mr. Knott needs his various attendants because he requires to be perceived by them in order that he himself should continue to exist. Of course, another way to achieve this witnessing is to project the self, to divide it or otherwise ensure that one is always aware of oneself in the manner in which others are aware of one. Thus there is a

plurality of the self, in the manner of a regress, and this is worked out in Malone Dies and Molloy. In O'Brien there are, of course, similar ideas behind the narrative. In The Third Policeman, the Protagonist needs to be perceived in order to be convinced of his own existence, and so he creates the policemen and the other characters to provide constant interaction and activity. In At Swim-Two-Birds, too, the projection of the self (the many characters which make up the narrator's 'fictional activities'), though it represents primarily the boundless and dangerous life of the rioting mind, also carries overtones of the need for self-assertion. Regarding the compulsion to understand that which challenges the reasoning mind, moreover, the Protagonist of The Third Policeman outstrips Watt in his attempts to reduce his world to intellectually assimilated phenomena. Indeed, in O'Brien the need to relate positively to reality, however distorted the attempt, is always extravagant by contrast with Beckett's fiction. Thus it is rather differently that both writers use the narrative of the first person, and show the mind's struggle with meaning and incomprehension. It follows, furthermore, that their appreciation of the phenomena known as 'reality' is significantly different.

This difference consists, not in their understanding that there is a human problem in relating to 'reality', but in their attitude towards this problem. O'Brien, as has already been said, seems to propose that a proper relationship with reality, especially spiritual reality, should be sought for, though it is man's shortcoming that he fails to do so effectively. Beckett, however, depicts the declining vitality of the self, an absence of confidence in there being either the

spiritual power in man with which to work the attempt, or indeed a greater spiritual reality accessible to him. Therefore, where O'Brien shows the failure of the individual to connect with reality, Beckett mostly shows the individual after the severance to which this leads; after Watt there is no question of making the attempt and no good grounds on which to suppose that there even is an effective transcendent order of things to which one can relate. Below is the equivalent in Watt of the powerful sea and sky images of the opening of The Dalkey Archive:

if there were two things that Watt loathed, one was the earth, and the other was the sky. 12

Just occasionally, however, Beckett's early characters evince a bewildered concern for other human beings, albeit reluctantly. Watt, for example, suffers this as he

contemplated with wonder ... the ample recession of the plain, its flow so free and simple to the mountains, the crumpled umbers of its verge. 13

If one recalls the passage in O'Brien depicting a rural scene in which the transcendental can be felt (the people cutting turves), it is only briefly, for no transcendental ideas are conveyed for long here - only Watt's consuming curiosity about the figure he sees in this scene, and the care he feels for it for a while, despite himself. The figure halts, turns and vanishes, and the light which this incident let through into Watt's dark world is blinkered again.

However, though the light is accessible in O'Brien and inaccessible in Beckett, the darkness they perceive has much

in common. It is the darkness, above all, of a universe of imperfect rationality, and it is given the same image in both: the word improperly enunciated and improperly heard. This is the significance of the words, or rather sounds, which are emitted from MacCruiskeen's mangle, of which the Protagonist and policeman alike strain to decipher the meaning.¹⁴ Similarly in Molloy we learn that Molloy has difficulty in making out the sense of words that are spoken to him, and Moran describes hearing of Molloy thus:

What I heard, in my soul I suppose,
where the acoustics are so bad, was
a first syllable, Mol, very clear,
followed almost at once by a second,
very thick, as though gobbled by the
first, and which might have been oy
as it might have been ose, or one,
or even oc.¹⁵

In this irrational universe it is clearly futile to attempt to be rational, and such an attempt is always comic. Thus, in Waiting For Godot, rationality is worse than useless and simultaneously ridicules those who attempt it, as when Vladimir and Estragon discuss the tree near which they are waiting for Godot:

E. You're sure it was here?
V. What?
E. That we were to wait.
V. He said by the tree. ..
Do you see any others?
E. What is it?
V. I don't know. A willow.
E. Where are the leaves?
V. It must be dead.
E. No more weeping.
V. Or perhaps it's not the season.
E. Looks to me more like a bush.
V. A shrub.
E. A bush.
V. A -. What are you insinuating?
That we've come to the wrong
place?¹⁶

The Protagonist of The Third Policeman experiences similarly the comic futility of reasoning when he is confronted with the policemen and their strange domaine, until at last he abandons the processes of empirical discovery as inappropriate. The policemen, he finds, appear to talk sense, and must be believed; thus it is that the characters of Beckett and O'Brien's work are frequently logicians, but crazy; their logic, as Professor Kenner expresses it, 'mimes the possibility of order'. Neary and Wylie's talk in Murphy, the dialogues of Shanahan and the Pooka (when the latter is tormenting Trellis) in At Swim-Two-Birds, are all of this kind, though in O'Brien not always reaching the pitch of the Sergeant's remark that a man who does not have a name does not exist, no matter how real his trousers look.¹⁷

It is no surprise after this that madness is a feature which, though not stressed in either author, nevertheless occurs as a repeated idea throughout the works of both. In Beckett, Murphy's relationship with the lunatics is perhaps the most explicit use of the idea of madness to be found in either author, stressing the unreason of the world and of the mind. In O'Brien, however, the motif, though not so structurally prominent, is more extensive, especially in At Swim-Two-Birds, where many references are made to madness, most particularly in King Sweeny's dementia, of course, but also in the narrator's realm and in the Conclusion, in which it is the dominant note:

The eyes of the mad king upon the
branch are upturned, whiter eyeballs
in a white face, upturned in fear
and supplication. His mind is but
a shell. Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis
mad? It is extremely hard to say.
Was he a victim of hard-to-explain

hallucinations? Nobody knows
The more one studies the problem,
the more fascinated one becomes and
incidentally the more one postulates
a cerebral norm. The accepted
principles of Behaviourism do not
seem to give much assistance.
Neither does heredity help.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.217

In O'Brien, however, madness is particularly an emblem or result of the ungoverned mind, be it the imagination of the student narrator, the fabricating mind of the Protagonist of The Third Policeman, or the intellect of the De Selby of The Dalkey Archive. Occasionally, as in Malone Dies, this is also true of Beckett; the ungoverned imagination can be despotic and violent. However, the more profound, more literally absurdist implications which madness gathers in Beckett it fails to gather to the same extent in O'Brien.

It was mentioned at the opening of this chapter that, according to the sequence in which Beckett's and O'Brien's novels were published, it would have been possible for O'Brien to have read Beckett's very early work before publishing At Swim-Two-Birds. The poetry volume Whoroscope and the 'critical' work on Proust are particularly interesting in this respect. This is not to suggest that there was necessarily a direct connection between either of these and O'Brien's writing, simply that they have certain themes and ideas in common.

In Whoroscope, for example, the Irish-Cartesian hero (the significance of Descartes will shortly be examined) suffers

from a perpetual obsession with eggs, and is characterised by chronic unsociability and a distinct lack of identity. All of these things recall both At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman, which display similar features, albeit in various forms. Obsession characterises O'Brien's 'ungoverned minds' in both works, such as Trellis with his green books and de Selby and the Protagonist with any amount of phenomena from water to a black box, not forgetting Sergeant Pluck and his bicycles. Unsociability is likewise a feature of O'Brien's solipsists as it is of Beckett's, and in both cases the result is in some way a failure to maintain or recognise one's own identity. The narrator in At Swim-Two-Birds fortunately recovers his sense of identity at the end of the book, after having suffered greatly in the dimension of the mind through the lack of it; while the problem of loss of identity is particularly clearly evoked in The Third Policeman in the entire narrative adventure of the wandering Protagonist, who is unable to remember his name or how he arrived where he finds himself. All that he retains of himself is a mind full of obsession and vain knowledge, without having any real soul onto which he can project it; he consequently cannot achieve any kind of rest or resolution.¹⁸

So it can be seen that, while the two authors treat their material very differently, they have many basic concerns in common. With regard to Beckett's Proust, however, there is a case for surmising that a more immediate effect on O'Brien can be imputed to some parts of it. For instance, in this work Beckett makes the following comment:

the immediate joys and sorrows of the body and the intelligence are so many superfoetations ... (because) ... the only world that has reality and significance (is) the world of our own latent consciousness. 19

This immediately recalls a philosophy of de Selby's, in which he dismisses as negligible all such human conditions:

In the Layman's Atlas he deals explicitly with bereavement, old age, love, sin, death and the other saliences of existence. It is true that he allows them only some six lines but this is due to his devastating assertion that they are all 'unnecessary'.

The Third Policeman, p.81

Again as a source for de Selby's ideas, the following is interesting, still from Proust:

(since he who attains his desire is no longer the same individual as he who previously desired it ...) the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, ... consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire.

20

Not only does this idea lie behind the Protagonist's predicament, but it may be less fanciful than it seems, remembering O'Brien's profound fondness for puns, to recall here de Selby's assertion that water (ablution) is essential to human happiness. Finally, is not the following remark from the same work a suggestive paradigm of the action of The Third Policeman?

we are not merely weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.

21

Again, there is no evidence to support the claim of a direct relationship between any of this material; I merely bring it to

the reader's notice as an interesting juxtaposition. However, the suggestion prompted by the comparison with Beckett that O'Brien's second novel might be thematically related to some philosophy other than that of Dunne, be it Proust, Descartes, or some other, is reasonable enough to merit further enquiry.

By way of introduction to this, it cannot but be noticed that both Beckett and O'Brien are remarkable in their treatment of the human body in their work. Of Beckett little need be said of this outstanding feature, the majority of his characters being decrepit, old, crippled, immobile or in varying stages of physical decay. Equilibrium in an upright position is never achieved with ease and often with much peculiarity of posture by the later characters especially, if they stand at all. O'Brien too is concerned with the human body throughout his work, often as the appendage of the irrational mind into which the narrative probes, with the result that the body too is in some way satirically treated. In At Swim-Two-Birds the most conspicuous treatment of the body occurs in the dreadful sufferings of the mad King Sweeny, whose injuries, sustained in mad flight, fearful falls from the various trees in Erin, and other adventures, are lamentable and rendered in vivid detail:

In that glen it was hard for Sweeny to endure the pain of his bed there on the top of a tall ivy-grown hawthorn in the glen, every twist that he would turn sending showers of hawy thorns into his flesh, tearing and rending and piercing him and pricking his blood-red skin. He thereupon changed beds to the resting of another tree where there were tangles of thick fine-thorned briars and a solitary branch of blackthorn growing up through the

core of the brambles. He settled and roosted on its slender perch till it bowed beneath him and bent till it slammed him to the ground, not one inch of him from toe to crown that was not red-prickled and blood-gashed, the skin to his body being ragged and flapping and thorned, the tattered cloak of his perished skin.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.67

This kind of torment is, of course, recalled and somewhat exacerbated in the torturing of Trellis by the Pooka, which occurs later in the narrative, in which the injuries inflicted upon Trellis are considerably more shocking:

It is my intention, said the Pooka in the ear of Trellis, to remain resting here on the stonework of this window; as for you, to see you regain the security of your bedroom (littered as it is by a coat of lime), that would indeed be a graceful concession to my eccentric dawning-day desires.

Easily accomplished, said Trellis, as he crawled in his crimson robe to the interior of his fine room, but give me time, for a leg that is in halves is a slow pilgrim and my shoulder is out of joint.

When he had crawled onto the floor, the ceiling fell upon his head, hurting him severely and causing the weaker parts of his skull to cave in. And he would have remained there till this, buried and for dead beneath the lime-clouded fall, had not the Pooka given him a quantity of supernatural strength on loan for five minutes, enabling him to raise a ton of plaster with the beam of his back and extricate himself until he achieved a lime-white hurling through the window and dropped with a crap on the cobbles of the street again, and the half of the blood that was previously in him now around him and on his outside.

At Swim-Two-Birds, p.179

In addition to these violent manifestations of the disordered human body, there are others, less emphasised, in the narrative. The narrator is frequently flea-ridden, for example, as a result of his bed-habit, and the same can be said of Trellis, whose infestation and decrepitude, due to his more pronounced bed-habit, are more severe. At the Furriskey tea-party the characters discuss various illnesses and disorders, and many of the characters, down to Mr Corcoran of the operatic society, display some kind of malformation or complain of some ailment. In The Third Policeman our first sight of Sergeant Pluck reveals him examining his teeth and complaining that all disorders come from them, and one-legged men seem to abound in this strange world. But it is in The Hard Life that the greatest emphasis is put on physical disorder, especially in the person of Mr Collopy, although Mrs Crotty is also ill and dies early in the book, Father Fahrt has a touch of psoriasis, and ailments are mentioned as a recurring motif throughout the narrative. This emphasis, and the 'Fall theme' that is to be traced throughout O'Brien's work, particularly in The Hard Life, has been well documented by Danielle Jacquin,²² but its relationship to a similar theme in Beckett's work was not emphasised. The similarity, for instance, of Mr Collopy's dilemma with that of Mrs Rooney in All That Fall, together with the very significance of Beckett's title here, cannot be overlooked. The scene in which Mr Collopy is helped up the stairs to the railway station on his visit to the Pope, and that more hilarious because sexually resonant one in which Mrs Rooney receives similar assistance, are so alike as to suggest a remarkable coincidence:

I posted a porter at each shoulder to grip him by the armpits while Mr Hanafin and I took charge of a leg apiece, rather as if they were the shafts of a cart. Clearly the porters were deeply shocked at the weight they had to deal with at the rear, but we assailed the stairs, trying to keep the passenger as horizontal as possible, and found the passage easy enough

The Hard Life, p.102

Mr Slocum (in position behind her):

Now, Mrs Rooney, how shall we do this?

Mrs Rooney: As if I were a bale, Mr

Slocum, don't be afraid. (Pause.

Sounds of effort) That's the way!

(Effort) Lower! (Effort) Wait!

(Pause) No, don't let go! (Pause)

Suppose I do get up, will I ever get down?

Mr Slocum: (breathing hard) You'll get down,

Mrs Rooney, you'll get down. We may

not get you up, but I warrant you

we'll get you down.

He resumes his efforts. Sound of these.

Mrs Rooney: Oh! Lower! Don't be

afraid! We're past the age when

... Oh! (Giggles) Oh glory!

Up! Up! Ah! ... I'm in! (Panting

of Mr Slocum) ..

All That Fall was, of course, written some three years before The Hard Life and published almost at once. However, even though it may seem from a general similarity of features that O'Brien may have been aware of All That Fall when writing The Hard Life, the two writers' treatment of the fact of the body overall shows that their use of it was stimulated by a similar attitude towards it. The helplessness of the human animal, for example, is stressed in both Beckett and O'Brien, as is the absurdity (in the sense of the clown rather than the metaphysician) of both

the body and, by extension, the whole man. In Beckett this absurdity is probably also intended to carry a more profound application to man's lot than in O'Brien, as it is also true to say that Beckett's grotesque treatment of the body obtrudes from the beginning, while in O'Brien's first novels this grotesque note only occasionally dominates the general tone of the fantastic and the magical by which it is enveloped. This development in O'Brien, from the portrayal of the body as absurd in a fantastic situation within a text concerned with the eccentricities of the mind, to its portrayal in The Hard Life as more grotesque and an emblem of human frailty and mortality, the image of the dying animal, is in keeping not only with a certain hardening of outlook which the author seems to have undergone in the intervening years, but also with the example of Beckett as it was available at the various stages of O'Brien's development. That is, from Murphy one may receive a greater impression of mental concerns than of the condition of the physical body, which Murphy rather chose to escape from and ignore; At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman also have this emphasis. However, from the Trilogy and Waiting for Godot one gathers a more startling impression of the decrepitude of the body, which is reflected in The Hard Life.

In these latter works particularly, Beckett's treatment of the human body is very much along the Cartesian line of the body as machine, except that this is a machine that is faulty and liable to damage and decay; indeed, Beckett's universe of solipsism and the dualism of mind and body is a deliberately Cartesian one. This has been pointed out in some detail by Professor Kenner,²³

and has become well known. As a result it may at first be felt that Beckett's concern with various philosophers and their ideas detailed and documented by critics often to the exclusion of such factors as his humour and wit, constitutes the greatest distinction between his work and O'Brien's, and certainly it is less incumbent upon the reader of O'Brien to be aware of such concerns while involved in the narrative, the comedy of which is often so powerful as to seem to deliberately cloud serious concern. Nevertheless, there is a startling consanguinity between many of Beckett's philosophical concerns and kindred elements in O'Brien. It has already been mentioned, for example, that both writers make use of the idea of the regress of the individual, in the motif of the author figure creating an author figure, who in turn creates an author figure, and so on. This has been seen in O'Brien to be reflected in many smaller emblems, such as the chest within the chest (The Third Policeman), the tale within the tale (At Swim-Two-Birds), and other examples. In Beckett, too, Belaqua dreams of Belaqua dreaming over a life spent dreaming, (Dante and The Lobster). Connected with this manifestation of the regress, both Beckett and O'Brien structure their work on a cyclical basis, in the manner of a Viconian structure: The Third Policeman, of course, has this cyclical nature, but so also does Waiting for Godot. Time moves cyclically, involving a pattern of repetitions, of which, however, the characters within the work are unaware, for they suffer from a failure of memory. The difference lies mostly in the fact that, while in The Third Policeman the cycle brings the Protagonist back to a situation basically one of stasis, the Beckett cycle invariable involves

some small change which incorporates degeneration. It is also possible that Beckett's casual reference, in Murphy, to a point in Euclid²⁴ may have given rise to the Euclidian Fairy in At Swim-Two-Birds.²⁵ In all these minor philosophical manifestations, therefore, Beckett and O'Brien show a kindred interest. However, while Beckett's major use of Descartes is now accepted, O'Brien's has passed altogether unacknowledged.

The novels of O'Brien which are particularly concerned with the philosophy of Descartes are The Third Policeman and The Dalkey Archive, and their concern is, as one would expect, a satirical one. Whether O'Brien's satirical target was Beckett or Descartes himself is not possible to discern, nor is the distinction important to the satire. In The Third Policeman, with which I deal first, Cartesian philosophy is treated as a form of irrationality and failure of sense, the satirical target also of the earlier At Swim-Two-Birds, and it is handled with a lightness of touch which deftly characterises it as another human vagary. Alongside this, however, the darker note already remarked upon as singularising this novel testifies to O'Brien's belief that the Cartesian outlook ultimately denies humanity and identity to man, and also that wholeness of being which is necessary to achieve man's proper connection with a transcendental aspect of his existence.

Beckett's relationship to the philosophy of Descartes has been amply and admirably explored by Professor Kenner,²⁶ and

while I mean that his findings should be borne in mind during this examination of O'Brien, I do not intend to repeat them here. Suffice to say that Beckett's major characters are Cartesian figures whose solipsism and decrepitude derive from Cartesian principles, which Beckett finds the most appropriate description of modern man (all idea of the transcendental in clear form being absent in Beckett's novels). O'Brien, on the other hand, treats Descartes satirically, by means of a very literal form of satire, after rendering the most bald statements of his philosophy ridiculous, rather than considering these in the modifying context of the philosophy as a whole.

One must begin by observing that The Third Policeman would seem to be built upon the most familiar Cartesian fundamentals. Firstly, one can recognise the Protagonist as a Cartesian figure whose existence in the realm of the novel earlier described as 'hallucinatory' is dependent upon the cogito. 'I think, therefore I am' alone accounts for his continued existence after the explosion. Because he thinks, and stubbornly refuses to accept death in his mind, he continues to 'exist' - the satire of course, taking this expression literally and to its extreme extension. Secondly, as has been shown, the Protagonist subliminally repels any intimations of his own death which might penetrate his hallucination, and this too is Cartesian

satire. Descartes's description of an evil demon employing all his powers to mislead him has been satirically applied, not, as in Descartes, to illusions external to the mind, but to unwelcome ideas within it. Descartes's argument was that:

Madmen sometimes have hallucinations, so it is possible that I may be in like case ... there might be an evil demon, no less cunning and deceitful than powerful, employing all his industry in misleading me. If there be such a demon, it may be that all the things I see are only illusions of which he makes use as traps for my credulity.²⁷

O'Brien has made an ironic reversal here, of course, since the Protagonist chases the hallucination and rejects intimations of the truth as 'illusions'. In short, in the Protagonist's realm reality has been dismissed as illusion and illusion accepted as reality as a result of the satirical distortion of Cartesian principles.

This is so not only in terms of the 'existence' of the Protagonist, but also in the nature of his continuous traumatic confrontations throughout the novel. His process of discovery at every new development involves a crazy application of the principle of Cartesian doubt. This is most clearly expressed when he accompanies the Sergeant into the countryside in search of Gilhaney's bicycle, and is told of the problem of 'bicyclosis'. When he has to decide whether or not to believe this amazing theory, his decision is that:

The scene was real and incontrovertible, and at variance with the talk of the Sergeant, but I knew that the Sergeant was talking the truth and if it was a question of taking my choice, it was possible

that I would have to forego the reality of all the simple things my eyes were looking at.

The Third Policeman, p.75

Here is a Cartesian choice exemplified: the Protagonist chooses to believe that the evidence of his senses is untrustworthy, and believes instead in the eccentricities of his own mind, regardless of a true orientation based on sense. How ironically the satire distorts the Cartesian idea that: 'knowledge of external things must be by the mind, not by the senses ...'.²⁸ Again, the fear which gave rise to this referred to the dubiousity of physical manifestations; the 'demonic traps' into which the credulous Protagonist falls are no longer those of the world of physical existence, but entirely those of the hallucinating mind, the true evidence of the existent world being disregarded. O'Brien has taken the Cartesian idea that not even knowledge gained from mind and senses jointly can be trusted,²⁹ and set about demonstrating its absurdity.

Guided only by this warped Cartesian doubt, the Protagonist particularly agonises over the chests, spear and soundless musical instrument which are presented to him by MacCruiskeen, in which he is asked to believe, but for which there is minimal and problematic evidence. His problem as a Cartesian is whether these should be classified as sensuously or mentally detectable, whether or not they have a primarily physical existence which may be dismissed as illusory. In one respect, of course, the outcome is inevitable: he must accept them; as the creator of every incident in the hallucination, all he encounters is in fact a mental phenomenon which therefore

cannot be 'illusory' in Cartesian terms. However, the chests, spear and musical box must also be accepted on account of the perverse logic of the satire, for while the objects hardly present themselves to the senses at all, they instil a deep impression of themselves on the mind (the Protagonist experiences something akin to fear), and so 'must' exist.

Moreover, one must not overlook Descartes's idea that all things that are conceived very clearly and distinctly are true. Naturally this has a more specialised application within the context of the philosophy of which it forms a part; O'Brien's satire being of a literal kind, however, whatever the Protagonist imagines very vividly he regards as true. Indeed, in this Cartesian realm, it is true. In a broad sense, this accounts for the whole hallucination, but the lift to Eternity is a good specific example, being an idea which appeals vividly to the Protagonist and from which he cannot be discouraged:

(Joe) If he said that eternity was up the lane and left it at that, I would not kick so hard. But when we are told that we are coming back from there in a lift - well, I begin to think he is confusing night-clubs with heaven. A lift!

(Protagonist) Surely, I argued, if we concede that eternity is up the lane, the question of the lift is a minor matter. That is a case for swallowing a horse and cart and straining at a flea.

No. I bar the lift. I know enough about the next world to be sure that you don't get there and come back out of it in a lift. Besides, we must be near the place now and I don't see any elevator-shaft running up into the clouds.

Gilhaney had no handlebars on him, I pointed out.

Unless the word 'lift' has a special meaning. Like 'drop' when you are talking about a scaffold. I suppose a smash under the chin with a heavy spade could be called a 'lift'. If that is the case you can be certain about eternity and have the whole of it yourself and welcome.

I still think there is an electric lift.

The Third Policeman, p.109

The 'clear and distinct' criteria also accounts for the presence and formative power of de Selby's theories in The Third Policeman: his ludicrous assertions are made positively and distinctly, and are therefore not only accepted by the Cartesian Protagonist, but have a real place in the Cartesian realm, often being the basis of its development.³⁰ Moreover, at least one of de Selby's theories, his theory of motion as a series of rests, is specifically Cartesian in its implications:

The illusion of progression he attributes to the inability of the human brain - 'as at present developed' - to appreciate the reality of these separate 'rests', preferring to group many millions of them together and calling the result motion ...

(In a footnote de Selby is said to have described old cinematograph films) as having 'a strong repetitive element' and as being 'tedious'. Apparently he had examined them patiently picture by picture and imagined that they would be screened in the same way, failing at that time to grasp the principle of the cinematograph.

The Third Policeman, pp. 45, 45n

This would seem to correspond very closely to the theory of Geulincx, a disciple of Descartes, who postulated that the mind does not move the body, and therefore was forced to regard bodily motion as a series of supernatural interventions adjusting

the limbs through minute interim positions, like stills in motion photography, coincidental with the motions of the mind.³¹

In broad terms, 'I think, therefore I am' has become transformed into 'I think it, therefore it is', in the satire of The Third Policeman. This is why the Cartesian Protagonist dare not permit any doubt to enter his mind regarding his hallucinatory adventures: when it does, his very existence is threatened, because whatever he does not perceive with his mind might be illusory, and that includes himself. 'I exist while I think and only then', says Descartes. Hence the narrative compulsion which propels the Protagonist (and Beckett's characters similarly) from hallucination to hallucination.

In fact, however, there is no justification in Cartesian philosophy to assume that one exists, even though thought itself exists. Russell points out:

Descartes's indubitable facts are his own thoughts - using 'thought' in the widest possible sense. 'I think' is his ultimate premiss. Here the word 'I' is really illegitimate; he ought to state his ultimate premiss in the form 'there are thoughts'. The word 'I' is grammatically convenient, but does not describe a datum He nowhere proves that thoughts need a thinker, nor is there reason to believe this except in a grammatical sense.

32

While thinking would seem to necessitate existence, it really implies only the existence of thought, not of the person thinking. This, as might be expected, is the flaw on which O'Brien's satire of Descartes turns, and it does so on the final introduction of the enigmatic third policeman of the title, Fox.

Having escaped from the police barracks on Sergeant Pluck's bicycle, the Protagonist arrives at old Mathers' house and is interviewed by Fox in his intermural office. Fox is surprised to see him:

'I do not understand your unexpected corporality after the morning on the scaffold'.

'I escaped,' I stammered.

He gave me long searching glances.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

Was I sure? Suddenly I felt horribly ill as if the spinning of the world in the firmament had come against my stomach for the first time, turning it all to bitter curd. My limbs weakened and hung about me helplessly. Each eye fluttered like a bird's wing in its socket and my head throbbed, swelling out like a bladder at every surge of blood.

The Third Policeman, p.158

Clearly the critical question 'Are you sure?' which chills the Protagonist's heart undermines his existence by suggesting just what Russell suggests - that the existence of thought does not necessitate the existence of the individual. The manifestation of his own person is the one manifestation which the Cartesian fails to regard with sufficient scepticism, and in the case of the Protagonist it is the one which is the central and most 'manifest' illusion. Thus, while thought has indeed been active (it has been the exclusive content of the novel), it will be revealed that the Protagonist himself has not. The conclusion of the novel takes the form it does because the Cartesian fails to recognise this ultimately self-annihilating truth.

There remains one fantastic element of the novel which requires explanation, not only by reason of its misleading

appearance, but also because it carries a positive idea central to O'Brien's thought. For whereas MacCruiskeen's chests are an elaborate fantasy on a distortion of a Cartesian idea, Sergeant Pluck's obsession, 'bicyclosis', carries an implication of O'Brien's positive thesis of the proper relation of man to reality.

Rather than being the lunatic pinnacle in a parody of apparent sense, as it at first appears, the idea of bicyclosis paradoxically represents sense in a sea of nonsense. Because of its satiric context in the mad domaine it appears lunatic: so must sense often appear when nonsense is the norm.

Bicyclosis, broken down and distinct from Sergeant Pluck's malapropistic description of it, is a reversal of the Cartesian duality of mind and body which stands behind the rest of the text. While the bicycle represents the mechanical nature of the body indeed, as in Beckett, here it is no longer divorced from the mind: such is surely the implication of the basic feature of bicyclosis - the interpenetration of man and bicycle, mind and matter. Though couched in obsessive and ridiculous jargon and other fantastic paraphernalia, bicyclosis remains the obverse of the unreason and hallucination through which the narrative travels. That bicyclosis is made ridiculous by the satirist is not incongruous with its containing the germs of sense, for the balance of the individual is likely to appear ridiculous in a world from which balance and congruity are absent. Also O'Brien is careful to satirise the excessive swing to the senses which is as unhealthy as solipsism, in the man who becomes one hundred per cent bicycle (and is unable to keep his balance). The

bicyclocosis element is a useful and malleable tool for the satirist. If it takes the creation of the amazing bicyclocosis to express the absurd, unreasoning attitude modern man brings to bear upon issues of humanity and identity, to reflect the neglect into which a care for reason, normality and reality has fallen, both among men and among writers, O'Brien is prepared to express it in that form, just as he had taken Descartes, the philosopher behind the Age of Reason, as the basis of his satire of irrationality.

It has already been remarked that The Dalkey Archive shows, in fact very little debt to The Third Policeman as a supposed source text, such features as it shares with the earlier work being used in a very new way and for a revised purpose. A notable exception to this is the concept of bicyclocosis, which reappears in The Dalkey Archive in a very similar form to that which it took in The Third Policeman. This is an indication of the single thematic idea to be developed in The Third Policeman and continued in The Dalkey Archive: the Cartesian satire. Although it has ceased to be a prime motivating idea in The Dalkey Archive, replaced by a more forthright treatment of the theme of the proper orientation of man, there are sufficiently marked traces of it to indicate its importance to the author. Bicyclocosis is an immediate example, and the connection between the theological discussion of 'pneuma' by Joyce and Mick and its specific identification with the bicyclocosis issue³³ cannot be

overlooked. But perhaps most conclusive is the lengthy argument about Descartes held among the characters in this more than usually discursive work.

The main reference to Descartes in The Dalkey Archive appears significantly early, in the second chapter or section of the book.

Work it out for yourself, De Selby replied pleasantly. Divergences, incompatibilities, irreconcilables are everywhere. Poor Descartes! He tried to reduce all goings-on in the natural world to a code of mechanics, kinetic but not dynamic. All motion of objects was circular, he denied a vacuum was possible and affirmed that weight existed irrespective of gravity. Cogito ergo sum? He might as well have written inepsias scripsi ergo sum and prove the same point, as he thought.

That man's work, Mick interjected, may have been mistaken in some conclusions but was guided by his absolute belief in Almighty God.

True indeed. I personally don't discount the existence of a supreme supra mundum power but I sometimes doubted if it is benign. Where are we with this mess of Cartesian methodology and Biblical myth-making. Eve, the snake and the apple. Good Lord!

You men, he said, should read all the works of Descartes, having first thoroughly learnt Latin. He is an excellent example of blind faith corrupting the intellect. He knew Galileo, of course, accepted the latter's support of the Copernican theory that the earth moves round the sun and had in fact been busy on a treatise affirming this. But when he heard that the Inquisition had condemned Galileo as a heretic, he hastily put away his manuscript. In our modern slang he was yellow. And his death was perfectly ridiculous. To ensure a crust for himself, he agreed to call on Queen Christina of Sweden three times a week

at five in the morning to teach her philosophy. Five in the morning in that climate! It killed him, of course. Know what age he was?

Hackett had just lit a cigarette without offering one to anybody.

I feel Descartes' head was a little bit loose, he remarked ponderously, not so much for his profusion of erroneous ideas but for the folly of a man of eighty-two thus getting up at such an unearthly hour and him near the North Pole.

He was fifty-four, De Selby said evenly.

Well by damn, Mick blurted, he was a remarkable man however crazy his scientific beliefs.

There's a French term I heard which might describe him, Hackett said.

Idiot-savant.

De Selby produced a solitary cigarette of his own and lit it. How had he inferred that Mick did not smoke?

At worst, he said in a tone one might call oracular, Descartes was a solipsist. Another weakness of his was a liking for the Jesuits.

The Dalkey Archive, pp. 15 - 16

De Selby's summary of Descartes here is initially a piece of unconcealed satire referring slightly to a number of generalised Cartesian ideas. The reader thus alerted, however, de Selby increasingly takes on the aspect of a Cartesian idiot-savant himself, his intellect corrupted to an extent even greater than those around him by something akin to blind faith. While the reader is clearly not meant to take De Selby's derision of Descartes as O'Brien's at this point, the association of the two idiots-savant as the novel progresses, especially with regard to the attitude of each to God, must have a satirical effect. Mick and Hackett's comments in the above passage begin the undermining of the real Descartes with the conflicting and

irrational attribution of sense and folly alternately to his ideas and his human vulnerability. O'Brien's own voice only really appears in the final paragraph above, where he frivolously introduces his old favourites, solipsism and the Jesuits.

The above introduction and discussion of Descartes does not assume any greater prominence than the many other discussions which occur in the course of the narrative, such as those concerning Judas and Jonas. That it merits examination above the others is confirmed by the special role taken in the novel by Saint Augustine. This character's own reference to Descartes during his talk with De Selby in the cavern indicates to the reader the relevance of this ancient.

Descartes was a recitalist, or formulist, of what he took, often mistakenly, to be true knowledge. He himself established nothing new, nor even a system of pursuing knowledge that was novel. You are fond of quoting his Cogito Ergo Sum. Read my works. He stole that. See my dialogue with Evodius in De Libero Arbitrio, or the Question of Free Choice. Descartes spent far too much time in bed subject to the persistent hallucination that he was thinking. You are not free from a similar disorder.

The Dalkey Archive, p.40

Descartes has always been applauded for the originality of his thinking, but in Saint Augustine there is to be found the germ of the same idea as lies behind the cogito:

In his Soliloquia he says: 'You, who wish to know, do you know you are? I know it. Whence are you? I know not. Do you feel yourself single or multiple? I know not. Do you feel yourself moved? I know not. Do you know that you think? I do'. 34

O'Brien's use of Saint Augustine, therefore, is curious if no connection with the ideas of Descartes were intended. Moreover, Saint Augustine's reference here to Descartes's bed-habit relates this satire not only to O'Brien's earlier works, but also recalls Beckett's Cartesian characters whose bed-habit has already been described. However, the most prominent and developed idea put forward by Saint Augustine in The Dalkey Archive is not about Descartes specifically, but about Time; even this leads ultimately back to the Cartesian satire.

Throughout his interview with De Selby, Saint Augustine passes comments concerning the nature of time, recurrent but too fragmentary to merit quotation; his comments, however, are reasonably accurate reflections of the real Saint Augustine's original beliefs, summarised here:

Neither past nor future, he says, but only the present, really is; the present is only a moment, and time can only be measured while it is passing. Nevertheless, there really is time past and future. We seem here to be led into contradictions. The only way Augustine can find to avoid these contradictions is to say that past and future can only be thought of as present: 'past' must be identified with memory, and 'future' with expectation, memory and expectation being both present facts. There are, he says, three times: 'a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future'. 'The present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight; and the present of things future is expectation'.

... But the gist of the solution he suggests is that time is subjective: time is in the human mind, which expects, considers and remembers.³⁵

It is in this subjectivism that Saint Augustine's ideas resemble Descartes's cogito. O'Brien has used this, in conjunction with the time theories of Dunne, and created De Selby's ability to suspend the passage of time and achieve access to the eternal present - by means of which he is able to speak with Augustine. For the purposes of the satire, however, O'Brien has taken this further, and had De Selby discover, during his experiments with time, an ability to destroy the world, thus making the important connection between Augustine and human catastrophe. By involving Saint Augustine therefore so prominently in the satire of The Dalkey Archive, he is laying the satiric emphasis less on Descartes than on the basic postulates of subjectivism, which he perceives to be at the root of the human folly and irrationality with which he is concerned.

Having thus observed the use to which O'Brien put the philosophy of Descartes in contrast with that made of it by Beckett, despite many points the two writers have in common, one is brought to a fuller appreciation of their real divergence in outlook. While both conducted a profound exploration of Descartes and solipsism, of the self, the mind and subjectivism, each writer ultimately brought his work to a conclusion diametrically opposed to that of the other. Of the two, of course, Beckett's is the more extreme view, but one must remember the far greater time-span over which his work has developed. It would now seem, however, that he locates man entirely in the

realm of the subjective, and finds in solipsism of the most extreme kind the only true expression of man. In this, he has taken Cartesian thinking to its utmost and beyond, and given it embodiment in his work.

O'Brien, on the other hand, explored the same territory, but failed to find a satisfactory answer in absolute subjectivism; in fact, he saw in it a positive danger, and all his novels develop this idea. He would seem to have taken Descartes and solipsism, either direct or from Beckett, and subjected them to satire. Where he was concerned to postulate an alternative, it was one which suggested balance - balance between mind and world, subjective and empirical, such as might permit of a state of true orientation in which the individual could achieve knowledge of himself in relation to the world, to ultimate reality, and perhaps to a larger spiritual dimension.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature which O'Brien and Beckett have in common, however, is their comedy, which in the early novels of both may have seemed alike: minute physical detail for comic effect in Murphy and At Swim-Two-Birds; also the play with formal language in these works; footnotes, references to the manuscript and other evidence of the hand of the author in At Swim-Two-Birds and Watt; the unreliability of the written word, often tricking the reader or playing with his credulity; even a shared eccentricity of punctuation. Two things in particular stand out, however. Firstly, that both chose to locate their comment upon man's condition in some kind of comic design. Secondly, the different directions in which his development took each man within his own particular comedy:

Beckett to an emptying, an ultimate spareness, O'Brien to prolific humour never dominated by bleakness.

The comparison does serve to emphasise, however, O'Brien's place in a particularly Irish tradition of comedy. It is a comedy which can be used to serve a serious or even bleak outlook, or to underline a human warmth deriving its mildness from tolerance and understanding. Whichever its emphasis, and in no Irish writer could it possibly be limited to one or the other exclusively, its keynote is complexity. In O'Brien's case linguistic complexity reflects tonal complexity, providing a wealthy reserve of new interest and ideas for the reader in its many facets. Its most important underlying quality, however, and the one which perhaps appears most typically Irish, is the fact that it is based in the personality of the author; in O'Brien especially his moods, his weaknesses, his personal likes and dislikes are all accessible in his humour. When, therefore, he applies this comic approach to the serious human issue of self-orientation in a world of realities and falsehoods, the result is a deeply personal yet universal revelation of the human condition.

Notes to Chapter Six

1. Peter Ackroyd, 'In Flight Three Novels', review of The Poor Mouth, The Spectator, 1 December, 1973, Vol. 231, No. 7588, p.705.
2. Niall Sheridan, 'Brian, Flann and Myles, Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan, London, 1973, p.39.
Sheridan writes:

Sam Beckett, whom we knew personally, had opened new horizons with Murphy.
3. Mr. Golding's letter, dated 11 November, 1979, was written in response to my enquiry as to whether he had been aware of The Third Policeman prior to its loss and before writing Pincher Martin. He writes:

There is really no accounting for the coincidence if it is sufficiently striking - a thing only you can judge. Possibly some aspect of a Jungian sequentiality has been at work.
4. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 1957, (Third Edition, 1971,) p.86.

5. Ibid., p.86.
6. Samuel Beckett, Proust, quoted in Charles Peake, 'The Labours of Poetical Excavation', Beckett the Shape Changer, ed. Katharine Worth, London and Boston, 1975, p.41.
7. Samuel Beckett, Murphy, London, 1938, (Picador Edition, 1973), p.6.
8. Ibid., pp. 65 - 66.
9. Lewis Carroll. 'Through the Looking Glass', London, 1872, (Penguin combined volume, 1965), pp. 244 - 245.
10. Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, 'Three Dialogues', Transition Forty-nine, No. 5, 1949, pp. 97 - 103.
11. Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study, London, 1962, pp. 59 - 60.
12. Samuel Beckett, Watt, Paris 1953; London 1963; (Calder & Boyars edition, 1970), p.34.
13. Ibid., p.223.
14. TP, pp. 93 - 94.
15. Samuel Beckett, Molloy, Paris 1950; London 1955; (John Calder edition of the Trilogy, 1959), p.113.
16. Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, London, 1956, (Second edition, 1965), p.14.

17. TP, p.54.
18. Also in Whoroscope, Beckett retells the story of Descartes and Queen Christina of Sweden which O'Brien uses in The Dalkey Archive, p.16.
19. Samuel Beckett, Proust, quoted in Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study, (op. cit.), p.42.
20. Ibid., p.42.
21. Ibid., p.42.
22. Danielle Jacquin, 'Never Apply Your Front Brake First, or Flann O'Brien and the Theme of the Fall', The Irish Novel in Our Time, ed. Rafroidi and Harmon, Lille, 1976, pp. 187 - 197.
23. Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study, (op. cit.), pp. 117 - 132.
24. Samuel Beckett, Murphy, (op. cit.), p.66.

Here he was not free, but a mote
in the dark of absolute freedom.
He did not move, he was a point
in the ceaseless, unconditioned
generation and passing away of
line.
25. AS2B, p.146.

I am like a point in Euclid,
explained the Good Fairy, position
but no magnitude, you know. I bet
you five pounds you could not put
your finger on me.
26. Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study, (op. cit.) pp. 80 -
90, 117 - 132.

27. Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy,
London, 1946 (Unwin, 1980), p.547.
28. Ibid., p.549.
29. Ibid., p.550.
30. This has been discussed at some length in Chapter Six.
31. Bertrand Russell, (op. cit.), pp. 545, 551 and Hugh
Kenner, (op. cit.), pp. 83 - 84.
32. Bertrand Russell, (op. cit.), p.550.
33. DA, p.183.
34. Bertrand Russell, (op. cit.), p.353.
35. Augustine, Confessions, Book XI, Chap. XX and XXviii,
quoted by Bertrand Russell, (op. cit.), p.352.

APPENDIX ONE

Letters from Brian O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keefe, 1960 - 1965, viewed
20 February, 1980, by kind permission of Mr. O'Keefe

The following are excerpts taken from the photocopies of O'Brien's correspondence with his publisher, Timothy O'Keefe, in the form either of summaries made by myself or quotations taken intact from the letters. In making this selection I was governed by a desire to learn particularly of his literary interests and preoccupations and his reports of his health.

27 February, 1960:

Remarks that Niall Montgomery is 'a shrewd and penetrating commentator on Joyce' though his manner is facetious.

Also, regarding the translation of (O'Brien's) Irish writing, he said it was not worth translating as mostly 'tied up with the pseudo-Gaelic mystique'.

Also, that An Beal Bocht is 'an enormous jeer at the Gaelic morons here with their bicycle clips and handball medals, but in language and style it was an ironical copy of a really fine autobiographical book written by a man from the Great Blasket island off Kerry (long dead and island now uninhabited) and translated into English under the title of The Islandman by the late Robin Flower of the British Museum'.

10 April, 1960:

Remarks he had been ill for weeks, doctors say it was 'flu with bronchial complications, he says it was Elephantitis Graecorum, a fancy name for leprosy.

27 April, 1961:

Reports illness.

7 June, 1961:

Reports has undergone appendicectomy.

Also, on The Hard Life: 'What must be realised, as it will ultimately be established by sales, that The Hard Life is a very important book and very funny. Its apparently pedestrian style is delusive. Anybody who doubts this will have to go to confession to Father Kurt Fahrt, S.J..'

8 August, 1961:

'I have smashed my right fore-arm and cannot sleep, eat, shave, ride a bus or sign my name'.

11 August, 1961:

Regarding the cover design for The Hard Life: 'Material is yet to be supplied for back of cover. There is room for another portrait here, but whose? Plato, St Augustine, or Groucho Marx? The accompanying letterpress can be solemn humbug'.

19 August, 1961:

Regarding The Hard Life: 'I feel that any biographical material should be omitted, particularly the disclosure that Flann O'Brien is a pseudonym. There is no point in it if the real name is also given. Incidentally, if a pen-name is admissable why not a pen-face?'

Also: 'As regards the back of the cover, the reviews etc could be accommodated on an inner flap. The back could carry picture of a head (anybody's - Martin Luther's?) with the slogan "Thomas Aquinas would have liked this book, for he wrote" and here would follow a piece of bullshit written by me (with occasional Latin glosses). This would amuse the sophisticates, impress the ignoramuses, and drive the Jesuits frantic with anger'.

6 November, 1961:

Describes The Hard Life as 'a treatise on piss and vomit'.

Also says he fears that The Hard Life will be banned in Ireland (describes the Censorship Board); but, he says, 'Anyway, it's the British and Commonwealth market that matters'.

25 November, 1961:

'Just about the time the book (The Hard Life) was published, I was brought down with some unspeakable dose, for convenience called influenza, but involving not only high temperature and general malaise but also cramps and fearful bouts of nose-bleeding - a sort of crisis of homosexual child-bearing. I'm still fairly shook'.

Also: 'I have some limited experience of TV; the BBC did a short play of mine about a year ago, but not very well. I have plenty of experience of sound broadcasting'.

Also, of The Hard Life, that it has a ' .. major implied theme about lavatories'.

And in a postscript: 'If I hear that word "Joyce" again I will surely froth at the gob!'

28 May, 1962:

On receipt of a copy of the German translation of At Swim-Two-Birds: 'Years ago I included German as one of the subjects for a University degree, spent several long holidays in Germany between 1934 and '38, learned to speak the language properly and became a sort of Nazi. But all that

erudition has been unaccountably blighted by the weeds and brambles of the years'.

Also: 'I'm about to start on a real book, which I think should be finished by Christmas'.

6 June, 1962:

Reports having been involved in a car crash, unconscious for twenty-four hours, told first he had a fractured skull, and the next day that it was concussion.

21 September, 1962:

'You may remember Dunne's book (sic), 'An Experiment with Time' and 'The Serial Universe', also the views of Einstein and others. The idea is that time is as a great flat motionless sea. Time does not pass; it is we who pass. With this concept as basis, fantastic but coherent situations can easily be devised, and in effect the whole universe torn up in a monstrous comic debauch. Such obsessions as nuclear energy, space travel and landing men on the moon can be made to look as childish and insignificant as they probably are. Anything can be brought in, including the long-overdue rehabilitation of Judas Iscariot.

'Two other characters will be Saint Augustine and James Joyce. Augustine is a wonderful man, if he ever existed. Probably the most abandoned young man of his day, immersed in thievery and graft and determined to get up on ever (sic) woman or girl he meets, he reaches a point of satiation and meekly turns to bestiality and buggery. (His Confessions are the dirtiest book on earth). When he had become saintly, he was a terrible blister in the side of organised Christianity because he angrily held (and he was one of the Fathers of the Church) that there was no such place as Purgatory.

'But Joyce. I've had it in for that bugger for a long time and I think this is the time. A man says to me, 'What do you mean by, the late James Joyce? You might as well say that Hitler is dead. Joyce is alive and living in retirement and possibly in disguise in Skerries, a small seaside place twenty miles north of Dublin'. My search for him there, ultimately successful, brings us into the genre of 'The Quest for Corvo'. Our ludicrous conversation may be imagined but it ends with Joyce asking whether I could use my influence to get him into the Jesuits.

'These rough glances at my project may seem to disclose a mass of portentous material that looks unmanageable. Not so. There is a pedestrian sub-theme that keeps the majestic major concept in order as in a vice. Undue length is the only risk I see'.

Also: '(Brendan) Behan is a friend of mine but that does not blind me to the fact that he is a lout and sometimes something worse. I'm not surprised to hear of a libel action'.

3 October, 1962:

'The piece from TLS is amusing but where do these people get the M. na G. name? (I think there is an Injun writer or witch-doctor named Gopali)'.

4 November, 1962:

'I have not yet started on the new book (The Dalkey Archive) so far as writing is concerned but have been doing plenty of research. There is no doubt that Saint Augustine was one of the greatest comics of the Christian era. He was preposterously conceited and, Bishop of Hippo, achieved astonishing feats in the sphere of hippocracy (sic). He was an

African (Numidia) and what I have yet failed to be certain about is whether he was a nigger. I hope he was, or at least some class of a coon'.

7 February, 1963:

Reports he slipped on an icy road and sprained his wrist.

14 February, 1963:

'All his (Behan's) stuff is inexcusably slipshod'.

Also: 'I'm into the third chapter of The Dalkey Archive and poor Saint Augustine is being buggered up in great style'.

30 April, 1963:

Reports having Asian 'flu.

Also: 'I am most impressed by my own mastery of the comic content of sanctity. The sin syndrome is a bigger laugh even than Rabelais dreamt'.

3 June, 1963:

Reports having seen a specialist about supposed 'flu, particularly a badly swollen throat. Specialist advised surgical investigation of throat. O'Nolan comments:

'What, cancer? I told this fellow that if I was in better shape I would attend to his throat, i.e. take him by it. I resolved the quandary by going to a decent chemist, who correctly diagnosed a certain infection and supplied the proper liquid medicine. I resume work tomorrow'.

25 September, 1963:

Reports having collapsed, the previous week, and having been taken to hospital. 'I was anointed, as some of the medical experts thought it was a massive coronary and that I was a goner. Subsequently I seemed to recover somewhat and disliked this hospital so much that I left and went home. But blood and other tests have now established that I have uraemia and nephritis, and I've no choice but to go into another hospital'. (He went into St Michael's, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin).

15 November, 1963:

Of The Dalkey Archive: 'Even you have quite misjudged the intent of the attempt. In its final shape I believe this will be an important and scalding book, and one that will not be ignored. The book is not meant to be a novel or anything of the kind but a

study in derision, various writers with their styles, and sundry modes, attitudes and cults being the rats in the cage There is, for instance, no intention to jeer at God or religion; the idea is to roast the people who seriously do so, and also to chide the Church in certain of its aspects. I seem to be wholly at one with Vatican Council 11'.

Also: 'In October I went to bed early to excruciate myself by reading Time. I leant out of bed to stub a cigarette and then it happened. At midnight my wife found me unconscious on the floor. I was rushed to hospital and, by then comatose, wondered why the damned doctor treating me wasn't wearing a white coat. He wasn't a doctor at all but a priest giving the Last Rites. I seemed to hear mention of 'a massive coronary'. Later, in another hospital, I found myself under treatment by a (genuinely) distinguished physician. He took nearly all the blood I had out of me to have it analysed and could find absolutely nothing wrong with my heart or any other organ. I got home eventually, apparently OK but a bit shaky. I took a bus townwards to buy urgently a 4d. stamp. Getting

off the bus at the homeward stop it happened again. I woke in hospital with my right leg (near ankle) in smithereens. I'm now at home in bed, totally crippled.

Of one thing I'm certain: this is Saint Augustine getting his own back'.

27 November, 1963:

Of The Dalkey Archive: 'My ultimate plan is to excoriate the MS ruthlessly, cutting short here and rebuilding there, giving the book precision and occasionally the beauty of jewelled ulcers. It must above all be bitterly funny. The first person sing. must be made into a more awful toad than now. I know some of the writing is deplorable for a man of my pretences, and I'm not happy at all about the treatment of Joyce: a very greater mess must be made of him. Would one of his secret crosses be that he is an incurable bed-wetter?'

Also: 'I have a sub-plot' (No further detail).

22 January, 1964:

Of his previous treatment of Joyce: 'The stuff about Joyce is withering in its ineptitude'.

15 October, 1964:

Reports having suffered food-poisoning
from salmon.

9 March, 1964:

Reports the Irish Times asked him back.
He accepted - with conditions. Felt
relieved of financial worry; but all this
written in off-hand, careless, cynical
tone. Now working on the Sago Saga.

26 May, 1965:

Reports that at the beginning of May he
had consulted a specialist in connection
with 'a persistent excruciating pain in
my left ear and that region'.

2 September, 1965:

In hospital after 'serious and non-stop
pain in the left ear/throat region, vaguely
diagnosed by experts as "neuralgia", cause
unknown'. Then three weeks before this
letter the gland in the back of his neck
began acting up. Glands surgically examined.
Given 'therapeutic' X-Ray treatment.

15 October, 1965:

Reports having been 'seriously injured by
reckless ray "therapy" in another hospital.

* * * * *

22 November, 1965:

Letter to Cecil Scott, in which O'Nolan reports, about the 'neuralgia', feeling a certain 'knottiness' in the neck region. Suffers an overdose of deep X-Ray treatment and has to have blood transfusions.

Brian O'Nolan died 1 April, 1966.

APPENDIX TWO

Summary of Cartesian principles appropriate to the discussion of
O'Brien's Cartesian Satire.

Taken from Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy,
London, 1946 (Unwin, 1980), pp. 542 - 551.

He regarded the bodies of men and animals as machines; animals he regarded as automata, governed entirely by the laws of physics, and devoid of feeling or consciousness. Men are different: they have a soul

.. Descartes begins by explaining the method of 'Cartesian doubt', as it has come to be called. In order to have a firm basis for his philosophy, he resolves to make himself doubt everything that he can manage to doubt. ... He begins with scepticism in regard to the senses. Can I doubt, he says, that I am sitting here by the fire in a dressing-gown? Yes, for sometimes I have dreamt that I was here when in fact I was naked in bed ... Moreover madmen sometimes have hallucinations, so it is possible that I may be in like case. ... It may be that God causes me to make mistakes... perhaps it is wrong, even in imagination, to attribute such unkindness to God, but there might be an evil demon, no less cunning and deceitful than powerful, employing all his industry in misleading me. If there be such a demon, it may be that all the things I see are only illusions of which he makes use as traps for my credulity.

There remains, however, something that I cannot doubt: no demon, however cunning, could deceive me if I did not exist. I may have no body: this might be an illusion. But thought is different. 'While I wanted to think everything false, it must necessarily be that I who thought was something; and remarking that this truth, I think, therefore I am, was so solid and so certain that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of upsetting it, I judged that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy that I sought.'

'I think, therefore I am' makes mind more certain than matter, and my mind (for me) more

certain than the minds of others. There is thus, in all philosophy derived from Descartes, a tendency to subjectivism, and to regarding matter as something only knowable, if at all, by inference from what is known of mind.

Having now secured a firm foundation, Descartes sets to work to rebuild the edifice of knowledge. The I that has been proved to exist has been inferred from the fact that I think, therefore I exist while I think, and only then. If I ceased to think, there would be no evidence of my existence. I am a thing that thinks, a substance of which the whole nature or essence consists in thinking, and which needs no place or material thing for its existence. The soul, therefore, is wholly distinct from the body and easier to know than the body; it would be what it is even if there were no body.

Descartes next asks himself, why is the cogito so evident? He concludes that it is only because it is clear and distinct. He therefore adopts as a general rule the principle: All things that we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are true. ...

Knowledge of external things must be by the mind, not by the senses.... Moreover there are sometimes two different ideas of the same external object, e.g. the sun as it appears to the senses and the sun in which the astronomers believe. These cannot both be like the sun, and reason shows that the one which comes directly from experience must be the less like it of the two the Cartesian system presents two parallel but independent worlds, that of mind and that of matter, each of which can be studied without reference to the other.

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