

## LITERATURE

### LIMBO: FROM *FINNEGANS WAKE* TO *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

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Gilbert Sorrentino dedicated his 1979 novel *Mulligan stew* to Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien), his “virtue hilaritas”. This dedication is followed by epigraphs from O’Brien and Joyce. The O’Brien’s epigraph is a quotation from his 1940 novel *The third policeman*. It is however O’Brien’s 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* that provided Sorrentino with a model for his *Mulligan stew* and Joyce’s presence hangs behind both novels: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Mulligan stew*.<sup>1</sup> Joyce is said to have admired *At Swim-Two-Birds* and allowed himself to be quoted in a blurb for its first edition. The 1967 Penguin edition used for this paper has a blurb quoting Joyce: “That’s a real writer, with the true comic spirit. A really funny book”. This is preceded by a blurb from Dylan Thomas: “Just the book to give your sister, if she’s a loud, dirty, boozy girl”. In fact, O’Brien’s novel could well be re-titled *A portrait of the novelist as a young man*. In comparison, however, to Stephen’s Daedalian flights in *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, the artistic education of its narrator is pedestrian and placid, contemplative, his epiphany reduced to the size of a pint. Like Joyce’s Stephen, he is a student of University College in Dublin, and when not otherwise engaged, also like the French writer Marcel Proust he spends most of his time in his bedroom where, lying mainly in bed, he daydreams his comic dialogical novel entitled *At Swim-Two-Birds*. “I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as

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<sup>1</sup> The second part of this article will deal with Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ relationship with Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan stew*.

many endings" (O'Brien 1967: 9). Accordingly, his innovative novel has three different beginnings and an equal number of different endings. His bedroom contains a small collection of works of contemporary literature ranging from those of "Mr. Joyce to the widely read books of Mr. Huxley, the eminent English writer" (O'Brien 1967: 11) and forty volumes of a *Conspectus of the arts and natural sciences*, published in 1854, which he uses as his source material and from which he "borrows" the characters for his work-in-progress, all in accord with what many years later Umberto Eco will call "transworld identity: transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another, from one text to another" (Eco 1979: 223). O'Brien's author justifies his "borrowing" stating that:

In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. 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 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. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before – usually said much better. A wealth of reference to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature (O'Brien 1979: 25).

Even if conceived as a literary prank, this fragment alone would secure for O'Brien's novel a permanent place in the annals of contemporary fiction, as in fact it does. Its notions of referentiality and thievery of characters were to be in a few decades legitimized in the concepts of intertextuality and metafiction; fiction made up of interrelated parodying texts, self-aware and self-reflexive, "a self-evident sham", which *At Swim-Two-Birds* so clearly displays with its Chinese boxes composition, referential absorption of other texts and an aporetic conclusion. Seen retrospectively, *At Swim-Two-Birds* conceiving itself as a parody also proleptically parodies postmodern fiction and thus also Sorrentino's *Mulligan stew*, which reads as a rehearsal of its narrative structure and also "borrows" some of its characters. Besides, the image of "a self-evident sham" situates *At Swim-Two-Birds* within the convention of self-conscious fiction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *At Swim-Two-Birds* has been recognized as a postmodern novel among others by Robert Alter who, in his *Partial magic. The novel as a self-conscious genre*, a work highly critical of O'Brien as a

The novel, which the nameless author-narrator is writing in the frame narrative of O'Brien's novel, is about one Dermot Trellis, an author of some note, who is also in the process of writing a novel. He bears a resemblance to the author-narrator in that he also composes his work staying mainly in bed in his bedroom at The Red Swan Hotel. When we first meet him, Trellis has already assembled a cast of characters from various sources – Irish mythological past, folk tales, contemporary history and literature. He also "borrowed" some characters from William Tracy, a fellow-novelist and a rival, an author of best-selling novels, among others of a Western situated in Dublin, for the purpose of which he had to demolish some parts of the city to make room for the prairie with cattle, Indians, cowboys, and ranches. In order to keep an eye on his characters, Trellis makes them stay in his hotel. Since most of the time he sleeps in his room his characters remain unemployed and engage in extra curriculum activities. Being decidedly hostile to the fiction Trellis is writing and in order to free themselves of his fictional demands, which they consider a punishment, they slip sleeping potion in his drinks, thereby subverting his project. Except for its theme: "a book that would show the terrible cancer of sin in its true light and act as a clarion-call to torn humanity" (O'Brien 1967: 36), it is not too clear what kind of novel Trellis is plotting. We learn that it is meant to combat sin, evil and depravity, but to attract readership he also intends to put in it smut, whiskey and sexual assault, yet its intent is moral. "In his book he would present two examples of humanity – a man of great depravity and a woman of unprecedented virtue. They meet. 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, gold and black sin and grace. The task would be a moving and a salutary one" (O'Brien 1967: 36). Playing God, Trellis creates a character, John Ferrisky, whom he brings to life at the age of twenty-five by applying the method of "aestho-autogeny" which involves neither fertilization nor conception, with the sole purpose of carrying out his intention. Unknown to his creator, however, Ferrisky frustrates his project by marrying his intended victim. Left to their own devices, the characters roam the countryside, hang around pubs, sing songs, recite poetry and discuss matters metaphysical, scientific, scholarly, historical, mythological, often bogus, which gives the narrative an ency-

postmodern writer, writes as follows: "If ... you are writing a novel about a novelist who invents still another novelist who is the author of bizarrely far-fetched books, there is scarcely any piece of fabrication, however foolish or improbable, that you could not put into your novel if you set your mind to it. The Irish writer Flann O'Brien, in one of the earliest postmodern novels of flaunted artifice, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), has devised just such a book" (Alter 1975: 223). The aim of the following article is, among other to take up Alter on O'Brien's "foolishness".

<sup>3</sup> It would be absurd to claim for O'Brien's novel a place within the generic category of encyclopedic narrative which, according to Edward Mendelson, attempts to "render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of national culture, which identifying the ideological perspectives from which



clopedic character.<sup>3</sup> The historical time-scheme of the plot is collapsed and the characters of the past mingle with those of the present. Such synchronization of temporal events and characters is often encountered in contemporary postmodern fictions. Finn MacCool, who in the course of the narrative often bursting into epic and lyrically mournful poetry entertains Trellis's characters with a doleful and protracted history of Mad King Sweeney, provides a mythic dimension. Like in *Finnegans wake*, where the giant figure of the legendary Finn merges with the topography of Dublin, O'Brien's Finn is also characterized in terms of various parts of Irish geography. And at one point in the narrative the historical Mad King Sweeney makes his own appearance. The contemporary dimension is provided by the poet Jem Casey and his proletarian, ludic poetry.

Of particular interest to the students of intertextuality, however, should be the story related by Paul Shanahan about his adventures as a cow-punch in the Western situated in Dublin penned by the late William Tracy. The plot of the novel centers around a theft of thousands of steers and black scullery maids brought from America, and is complete with the obligatory gun-fights, Red Indians, whiskey, saloon-girls, school-marms, moonlit prairie, as well as Dublin police and fire brigade thrown into the play of the plot, and a crowd of cheering Dubliners the thieving party being defeated and the cattle retrieved. Read along the lines of "hypertextuality", Gerard Genette's term for the study of textual transcendence (Genette 1997), O'Brien/Tracy's Western (hypertext) roots itself in its historical hypotext, the great Irish saga of *The cattle-raid of Cooley*. Though the saga focuses on the heroic deeds of youthful Cuchulain and his defense of Ulster against the advancing army of Connacht led by the licentious queen Medb and the ensuing battle in which the men of Ulster routed the Connacht forces, the whole story turning upon the capture of the cattle and the great bull of Cooley as the immediate cause of the conflict, establishes an intertextual link with O'Brien's Western. The mere two pages long narrative in O'Brien's novel would hardly justify an analogy with the epic sweep of the

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that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge" (Mendelson 1976: 269). Mendelson can identify only seven works in Western literature fully meeting such requirements, still in its fragmentary and parodic manner *At Swim-Two-Birds* shows enough stylistic features intrinsic to its formal model to be named a mock encyclopedic narrative, such as polyglot language, prophecy and satire, indeterminacy of form, manifold plot, focus on technology, science or art and history of its own medium. O'Brien's novel does prophesize in its formal medium the advent of postmodern fiction and also satirizes it in its own parody. Incidentally James Joyce described his *Ulysses* as "encyclopedic": "It is the epic of two races (Israel – Ireland) and at the same time the cycle of the human body as well as a little story of a day of [life] ... It is also a kind of encyclopaedia. My intention is not only to render the myth *sub specie temporis nostri* but also to allow each adventure (that is every hour, every organ, every art being interconnected and interrelated in the somatic scheme of the whole) to condition or even to create its own technique". In a letter to Carlo Linati, 21 September 1921 (Ellmann 1975: 271).

"Irish Iliad", but it is also a specular text, one that reflects and evokes and contains within itself the whole genre of the Western, and as such it merits intertextual reading; its generic provenance transcends its episodic confinement. Besides, the author-narrator states at the outset that he would borrow not only characters but also themes, as "[the] modern novel should be largely a work of reference", since what is being said in it "has been said before – usually much better". What transpires between these two texts then is perhaps best defined in *Palimpsests...* as "diagetic transposition" – "heterodiagetic transposition" (Genette 1997, chapters 60-64). In case of O'Brien's Western it emphasizes the thematic analogy between its own plot and that of its epic hypotext – the transfer of ancient plot into a modern setting and a different generic mode. As the hypertext relates its own story, it also tells that of its hypotext which maybe concealed, submerged, buried or alluded to, suggested, in its narrative. Thus, O'Brien's episodic Western, being an intertextual and at the same time a specular text, does highlight, if only in its mock heroic, parodying manner, the epic dimensions inherent in American Western, which in the American literature is born out by such novels as, for example, Frank Norris's *The octopus. A story of California* (1901) that exploits Western motifs in epic, heroic and mythic terms. Intertextual reading is a two-way, reciprocal process and O'Brien's Western entering, so to speak, the ancient saga foregrounds through its parody what in epic tales seems to be inherent; the tendency of its heroic sublime to slide into bathos. This reading is reinforced by "Relevant excerpt from the Press". The incredulous reader<sup>4</sup> of O'Brien's Irish Western would probably be relieved to learn that the whole story has been merely a fictional replay of an actual event that occurred in Dublin described by the police as a "gang of corner-boys whose horse-play in the streets was the curse of the Ringsend district. They were pests and public nuisance whose antics were not infrequently attended by damage to property... On the occasion of the last escapade, two windows were broken in a tram-car the property of the Dublin United Tramway Company" (O'Brien 1967: 59). This explains the presence of the police in the Western though the extent of the damage hardly calls for that of the fire brigade. Inasmuch as the Western's gun slinging, cussing, boastful, bragging, impetuous characters are both, the fic-

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<sup>4</sup> An implied reader if one insists, a virtual reader or an ideal reader. The choice of readers is seemingly inexhaustible and depends on the theoretical position of the critic. If the critic happens to be frustrated or furious or paranoid or benevolent, of feminist persuasion or indolent or captious or mad, he or she may employ an inept reader or a vicious reader or a maniacal reader or an enthusiastic reader, a reader with a hatchet or an ideal reader who will tell him/her what it is all about, or an idiot reader, or a reader who reads French critics or books with dead authors in them, as fancy will take her/him (the critic), as in "fancy takes her/him", cf. any smaller or larger dictionary of English, also American usage, or Shorter Oxford on CD-ROM, whenever available. See also Coleridge on fancy in *Biographia literaria*.



tional variations of the “corner-boys” and recontextualised variants of the epic heroes, they also deflate their pretensions and epic posturing through the rhetorics of deadpan comic exaggeration, which seems to be a hallmark of O’Brien’s style as an “interpretant” (Riffaterre’s term derived from Peirce’s semiotics for intertextual reading), an “interpreting intertext”, the “*excerpt*” both parodies the genre of the Western and through its parody qualifies the lofty pathos in the saga reducing it to bathetic. These three texts: the heroic epic called up by the comic Western and the journalistic as the interpretant of both, brought together into a parodying play bear out the assertion advanced by the author-narrator that “the modern novel should be largely a work of reference” and entire corpus of modern literature a “limbo” from which to draw characters. All this reads as an early blueprint for the theory and practice of the intertextual games played in the postmodern metafiction, here contained in a nutshell. It also shows the tendency inherent in self-conscious fiction towards multiplication of narratives.

Half way through the novel this medley of unrelated stories, encyclopedic facts, catalogues and poetic interludes shapes itself into a narrative with a new author and Trellis as its antihero. Together with this change in authorship the story gathers speed and acquires momentum. To expand upon the moral theme of his novel denouncing smut, filth and evil, Trellis creates yet another character, Sheila, a sister of Anthony Lamont, who, according to the plot of the novel, is meant to be abused. Trellis does it himself, however. Enraptured by her beauty he sires a son upon her, Orlick, also born at mature age. This instance of fictional incest enrages the characters and his son Orlick Trellis, who having inherited his father’s artistic talents, is now writing a narrative with his father as villain and also victim. To combine “justice with vengeance” he has Pooka Phellimey, “a member of the devil class”, drag his father through particularly excruciating torments. Among others, Pooka drags him from his bed and fenestrate him, playing a Mephistopheles to his Faust’s he takes him into the air “towards the east to discover the seam between the night and day” only to let him fall to the ground – “an aesthetic delight” (O’Brien 1967: 180). He is also made to reenact briefly the tragic history of Mad King Sweeny; his sins against the church and subsequent torments in the trees among the birds. Pooka also changes him into a rat and as an Airedale terrier breaks all bones in his body. Pooka claims to have played a part in an old Irish saga in which he won Granya from Dermont in a game of chess, which gives an interesting twist to the history of the world literature since the legend of the elopement of Dermont and Granya is the source of the famous romance of Tristram and Iseult. Charged with ill treatment of his characters Trellis is put on trial in the court of law, that resembles a cinema, a pub or a theatre with orchestra playing in the galleries and his characters serving as judges, jury and witnesses. They drink beer and play cards

as they are sitting in judgment on him, a cow that has been mistreated in one of Trellis’s novels is brought in to testify and the late William Tracy comes from the dead and accuses him of plagiarizing his novels.<sup>5</sup> No verdict is passed at the trial however because Orlick stops writing for the nighttime. At the same time murder is also contemplated as a solution to the author problem – “a half a minute with the razor and the trick is done” – but as Orlick is taking up the pen to commit textual patricide the narrative is suspended leaving the plot unresolved.<sup>6</sup> Compared with the treatment some of the authors of modern fiction receive at the hands of their characters, Trellis fares not too badly. The characters of Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, complaining of being brought from the security of their fairy tale environment into the bewildering and confusing world of postmodern fiction, charge their fellow character, Bill, who functions in Barthelme’s novel as its surrogate author, with failure, put him on trial, find him guilty as charged, and consequently hang him, though they spare him physical torture. This hanging is also seen as martyrdom and deification: “We lifted him toward the sky. Bill will become doubtless one of those subdeities who govern the calm passage of cemeteries through the sky. If the graves fall open in mid-passage and swathed forms fall out, it will be his fault, probably” (Barthelme 1967: 179). And Bill, a failed poet, teacher and “the leader of the people” acknowledges his flaw: “I wanted to be great once,” he laments, “but the moon was not in my sky. I wanted to make a powerful statement” (Barthelme 1967: 51). With Bill, the authorial double in *Snow White*, Barthelme introduces his readers into the aesthetics of failure that seems to inform also O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

In the “antepenultimate” conclusion of the novel – *Biographical reminiscence part the final* (O’Brien 1967: 208) and the “penultimate” (O’Brien 1967: 215) one, the two narrative planes: the “biographical” – the frame narrative or the story narrated by the author-narrator, the student, including the vicissitudes of his work-in-progress, and the fictional – Trellis’s attempted novel and the peculiar antics of his characters – culminating in the trial scene, are brought together in the staircase scene, in fact two analogous staircase scenes occurring simultaneously in both narrative planes in which the figure of the author-narrator begins to merge with that of his fictional self, Trellis. This identification, already

<sup>5</sup> This trial scene should be read alongside HCE’s trial in *Finnegans wake* (pp. 48-74) and Bill’s trial in Barthelme’s *Snow White* (pp. 158-159), if only for their risibility.

<sup>6</sup> O’Brien’s anticipative power is indeed uncanny. The author produces his own follower whose desire is to usurp him – to take a “razor” to him. This whole episode reads like a parody of Harold Bloom’s Oedipal model of influence (in *Anxiety of influence*) according to which the author struggles with his precursor through the stages of “revisionary ratios” – completing him, breaking with him, mythicizing him, assuming his place.



adumbrated in both authors' writing habits, is reinforced in the *Conclusion of the book, ultimate* (O'Brien 1967: 215), where Trellis and the author-narrator are told to be of the same parentage and Trellis sanity is put into doubt: "Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad? It is extremely hard to say. Was he a victim of hard-to-explain hallucinations? Nobody knows. Even experts do not agree on these vital points" (O'Brien 1967: 216). Some of them claim that Trellis suffered from an "inverted sow neurosis wherein the furrow eat their dam" (O'Brien 1967: 216). Others point to the "want of hygiene in the writer's bed-habits" (O'Brien 1967: 216) as causing "progressive weakening of the mind" (O'Brien 1967: 216). As promised, the novel does have several conclusions, but they all focus on the figure of the author and the proper ending of the story is nowhere to be seen; the narrative line fades away, as Rolick, about to execute the murder of the father, never writes the appropriate sentence. The fact however that Trellis, "working" in O'Brien's novel as the mask or persona of the author-narrator, his fictional ego, becomes progressively indistinguishable from him, though he still retains his proper name, prompts a retrospective reading of the whole story.<sup>7</sup> In order to traverse the narrative again let's revisit the staircase scene where the two begin to fade into each other.

As the author-narrator returns home "conscious of slight mental exhilaration" after having successfully passed his final university examinations and goes upstairs to his room, simultaneously, Trellis, battered up and dazed after the encounter with his characters, enters the Red Swan Hotel in his nightshirt, tired, as he says, from "too much thinking and writing, too much work my. 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" (O'Brien 1967: 216). (The author narrator in the frame narrative indulges, as we remember, in nocturnal peregrinations pondering upon his novel in progress. It is obvious that he consciously identifies with his fictional author, Trellis). He then goes up stairs to his bedroom preceded by his servant Teresa who in his absence has fed the fire in the fireplace with the pages of his book – "the pages that made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his friends. Now they were blazing, curling and twisting and turning black, straining uneasily in the draught and then taking flight as if to heaven

<sup>7</sup> Retroactive or hermeneutic; Riffaterre's two-stage process of reading. The first stage or phase, mimetic reading, word-by-word, linear decoding of message yields the meaning of the work. The significance of the work emerges in the second reading, retroactive, in the process of decoding "ungrammaticalities". The second reading involves also intertextuality. See the chapter "The poem's significance" in Riffaterre's *Semiotics of poetry* (Riffaterre 1986). Moving from the first stage to the second the reader leaves mimesis and enters semiosis – the semiotic aspect of the literary text, its "semiotic grid". It is obvious that in literary narrative the two are complementary while the second points also to its polyvalence, the manifold meaning inherent in its language.

through the chimney, a flight of light things red-flecked and wrinkled hurrying to the sky" (O'Brien 1967: 215-216). They return, as it were, to their natural habitat in the limbo to await employment in other fictions, and some of them will reappear in *Mulligan Stew* alongside their progenitor Trellis, but in O'Brien's novel their paper existence ends up literarily in mid-air and so does the narrative they are plotting with Trellis as its main protagonist, terminated by commonsensical Teresa. This begs the question why O'Brien would decide at this point to put an end his narrator's novel, obviously unfinished.

With his characters erased, removed, or simply hidden away in the recesses of the text, Trellis has no choice but to move to the biographical plane of the novel, where he now becomes fully one with the author-narrator, the same but always also different, however, since the memory of him as the authorial persona, the projection of the authorial self and at the same time an independent fictional entity, a character of its own, in the fictional plane, will always stay in the mind of the text. This conflation of the authorial figures redirects the retroactive reading along the "biographical" plane of the novel and the shift of the focus on the single narrator establishes a unified point of view distancing the reader from the fictional plane; it realigns the Chinese boxes composition of the novel into a one-tract narration with the fictional plane functioning now as the reflection of the "biographical" one, as its metaphoric displacement, or the metaphoric projection of what occurs in the biographical plane, or what in fact does not take place there, but is barely intimated and can only be inferred. In other words, the retroactive reading assumes a causal relation between both planes, the "biographical" and the fictional, and not only by virtue of being contiguous to each other.

With rare visits to the university the student author spends the days in his bedroom or taking long walks, often nocturnal, pondering upon his novel. His uncle and guardian urging him to apply to his studies, to "open" a book ("You open your granny... I know the game you are at in your bedroom" (O'Brien 1967: 12)) only occasionally disturb his equanimity. The epiphanic ladies are often mentioned but hardly ever seen, and perhaps the most memorable event in his life as a student is the discovery of the joys of beer to which none other but a medical student introduces him.<sup>8</sup> In the fictional plane this event is celebrated by a poem composed by the poet Jem Casey entitled "Workman's friend" with appropriate refrain "A pint of plain is your only man" (O'Brien 1967: 77-78). The rest of his time he spends with his friends and acquaintances in idle talk always ready to discuss his work-in-progress and the vicissitudes of its characters. It is with some surprise then we learn that he has already passed his examinations

<sup>8</sup> Medical students used to be Stephan Dedalus' particular drinking companions.



with “a creditable margin of honour”, the event itself never being mentioned in the narrative, and his fictional project apparently abandoned. At this juncture we would do well to evoke Father Brown’s image of “tapestry” and read it as an intratextual trope – “...we here are on the wrong side of the tapestry... The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else”.<sup>9</sup> Assuming that Assuming that Assuming that in the narrative structure of the retroactive reading the “right” side of tapestry is situated in the fictional plane which is now a contiguous reflection of the “biographical” narrative and the figure of Trellis as the authorial self of the student justifies such assumption, we may then read the masquerade of the trial with Trellis in the dock confronting his tormentors as a metaphoric replay of the examination. The parody of the judicial trial here may serve as a parody of academic examination, also a trial with the examinee as defendant and the examiners as judges and jurors dispensing verdicts – a procedure that from the point of view of the student may involve no small amount of mental torment and harassment. This metaphoric displacement of the judiciary into academic brings some teleological order into the hodge-podge of the fictional plane – a jumble of unrelated events and arbitrary characters, stories, songs, encyclopedic facts, historical and scientific, paralogical arguments – fictional fragments resisting integration into a viable narrative. In the course of undergoing torment under Pooka’s tutelage Trellis encounters his three characters, Furriskey, Shanahan and Lamont, who now play in Orlick’s novel devising special tortures for him and conspiring how to dispose of him. The last two will also play in Sorrentino’s novel. They are engaged in a scholarly discourse that unmistakably sounds like a review of sundry university subjects in preparation for an examination:

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<sup>9</sup> “‘We are here on the wrong side of the tapestry,’ answered Father Brown, ‘The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else. Somewhere else retribution will come on the real offender. Here it often seems to fall on the wrong person’” (Chesterton 1958: 161). In the context of the short story this image of tapestry is used both, as a device for solving crime puzzles and a metaphysical implications of committing crime. It follows from an earlier discussion about the double aspect of fairyland as an enchanting and also evil place – “a looking-glass land”. I noticed the usefulness of Father Brown’s “tapestry” image for intertextual study while reading Joanna Kokot’s article “Chestertonowski ksiądz Brown. Detektyw w nierealnej rzeczywistości” [The Chestertonian Father Brown. A detective in a unreal reality], not yet published. In its simplicity and brevity it does seem to echo the well known Riffaterre’s “ungrammaticality” – ambiguities, figurative language, indeterminacies, undecidabilities, obscurities which alert the reader to the presence of an intertext (the other or the right side of the tapestry) where they find their explanation, clarification, acquire grammaticality: “... any ungrammaticality within a poem is a sign of grammaticality elsewhere ... The poetic sign has two faces: textually ungrammatical, intertextually grammatical; displaced and distorted in the mimesis system, but in the semiotic grid appropriate and rightly placed” (Riffaterre 1986: 164-5). O’Brien’s polyphonic and dialogical novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* having several distinct narratives invites such intratextual reading – intertextual reading within one work or several works of the same author.

Paris, son of Priam, king of Troy, carried off the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta and thus caused the Trojan War. The name of the wife, said Lamont, was Helen. A camel is unable to swim owing to the curious distribution of its weight... Capacity in electricity is measured by the farad; one microfarad is equal to one millionth of a farad. A carbuncle is a fleshy excrescence resembling the wattles of a turkey-cock. Sphragistics is the study of engraved seals. (O’Brien 1967: 190)

And this goes on for several pages foregrounding the satirical intent in the fictional plane of presenting the academy as a comic theatre with graduation as its dramatic denouement. In the light of the academic metaphor the encyclopedic, historical, mythical and modern dimensions of the novel may be also read as a mockery of university curriculum, the characters as students and Trellis’ tortures as torments of tutoring with Pooka as the tutor. Assuming that the frame story – the “biographical” plane – constitutes the real of the novel, always the mimetic real, then its “academic” parody imbedded in the fictional plane illustrates the process of palimpsestuous fiction making akin to that already seen in the transtextual “Western” fragment, with a difference, however, since here the hypertext (Trellis’ trial) generates its own hypotext – transforms itself into the parody of academic examination. As a parody they can be read together, as we are reading them at this point, yet the hypertext also stays apart as a separate narrative in its own fictional right. Such reading introduces some exegetical order into the narrative structure of O’Brien’s novel, but it hardly exhausts its palimpsestuous meaning since not all parts and narratives of the novel can be integrated in the academic plot.<sup>10</sup>

The birth of Rolick, constituting what may be seen as a turning point in the novel, generates its own narrative line in which he figures as both its hero and its author. As the news of his birth is put about, the characters congregate into a pilgrimage led by Pooka and the Good Fairy – the devil and the angel vying for the soul of the newborn baby – and proceed to pay him homage as though greeting a harbinger of a new dispensation. The pilgrimage is riotous and joyful. At one point the emaciated Mad King Sweeny falls from the tree and must be resuscitated and the characters who used to play in the Western pose as dangerous gun slingers. On the way they gather nuts, berries and fruits as gifts for the

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<sup>10</sup>Palimpsest seems a much more fitting descriptive figure for O’Brien’s novel-within-a-novel than that of commonly used Chinese boxes which suggest a sequence of completed separate stories whereas *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ narrative lines fade into each other. They shine through each other as they complete themselves. Besides, the novel has the same set of characters, considering that the characters on the fictional plane are variants of those on the biographical one, and all the authors are variants of the same author.



bride. Waiting for the happy event in the Red Swan Hotel they play cards and Pooka the devil in human shape wins Orlick from the angelic Good Fairy. Orlick makes his appearance engulfed in celestial light and asks for a cigarette but the story is aborted because Trellis spirited away the mother. The redemptive prophecy, however, is fulfilled in the Oedipal context of the story when Orlick, brought up by Pooka to “evil, revolt and non-serviam” (p. 150), revenges himself on his father for making him a bastard and for dishonouring and death of his mother, by writing a new text in which he acts as its author and the saviour of the people from the tyranny of the old author. (The “non-serviam” is an obvious echo of Stephen Dedalus in *The portrait* and brings in the perennial Joycean

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<sup>11</sup>It is obvious that O’Brien plays here with very powerful paradigm of the Nativity. Though much of its sacred import is dissipated in the antics of the characters, its parodic, sacrilegious treatment displaced and hidden in the sophomoric comedy of the hypertext, yet it reemerges in the parricidal motif of the Oedipal extension of the narrative, whose elucidation in the context of the whole novel calls for an intertextual reading. In Donald Barthelme’s 1975 novel *The Dead father* the gigantic and Godlike figure of the Dead Father, dead and yet alive – “Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead” (Barthelme 1975: 3), is in the process of being buried by a band of sons who want the Dead Father to be dead: “We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead” (Barthelme 1975: 5). Though they do manage to physically bury him, yet Barthelme’s novel proves the impossibility of annihilating the Father. “When a father dies, his fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, who is the sum of all dead fathers taken together. ... Fatherless now, you must deal with the memory of a father. Often that memory is more potent than the living presence of a father. ... At what point you become yourself? Never wholly, you are always partly him ...” (Barthelme 1975: 144). Barthelme’s father derives from various sources: from Freud’s notion of the Law as Father in *Totem and taboo* and from Lacan’s concept of the “Name-of-the-Father”, binding the son for life to the Father as the symbol of time, tradition, law, history, as well as from James Joyce’s *Finnegans wake* which provided Barthelme’s novel with its own literary dimension in the figure of Shaun, the critic and detractor of his twin brother Shem’s literary production (*Finnegans wake*), who, as Thomas, in Barthelme’s novel composes his own spatial text in which as the Dead Father’s successor and the leader of the sons he takes him to his burial place. Incidentally, promising to write his own novel he accuses his brother Shem of putting his Mother on fire. Barthelme’s Father signifies literary tradition and as an intertextual entity he aligns himself with the paradigm of mythic and divine All-Fathers of which Joyce’s Finn and HCE are also a part. Brought over by their intertextual son, Shaun, into Barthelme’s spatial narrative to be buried there, they also infuse it with the *Finnegans wake*’s temporal circularity – HCE’s funeral has always already taken place while his voice is still being heard – that problematizes the Dead Father’s burial and death. Inasmuch we always see the figure of the sleeping Finn dreaming the text of *Finnegans wake*, and the sleeping Dead Father dreaming his kingdom of children, on the far horizon there is the figure of sleeping Trellis as though in parody of them both dreaming his novel which does not want to take off the ground and Orlick’s razor poised over his body. In the light of all this we can now reread O’Brien’s staying Orlick’s hand as a gesture of protecting the fiction of the Fathers from the onslaught of the literary sons. Time proves such gestures futile but in the context of the novel it is telling and significant as it has a bearing on O’Brien’s decision to bring the narrative to a sudden and inconclusive end as if the author refused to die in his own text. To bring up all this intertextual machinery to bear upon what could be seen as a trivial event in a novel full of comic trivia, as Alter reads it (see note 2), would indeed mean reading into it undue significance, incommensurate with its triviality. It all depends how one reads O’Brien’s novel,

theme of the rejection and the quest for the Father).<sup>11</sup> This again leads to the trial scene, which we have already visited twice, this time its judiciary and academic meanings modified and complemented by the Oedipal. That O’Brien conceived of his novel as a palimpsest, with three authors, all variants of the same authorial figure, each one of them with his own narrative line, interconnected, showing through each other, is born out in the story. Rolick is writing his narrative accompanied by running commentaries of his fellow characters, their approval or disapproval and often practical help: “Shanahan at this point inserted a brown tobacco finger in the texture and in this manner caused a lacuna in the palimpsest” (O’Brien 1967: 185). The peripatetic student author in the course of writing his novel often invites comments and help of his friends, which means that he identifies himself as much with Rolick as with Trellis who composes his novel mainly in the solitude of his bed. Besides, the same set of characters play in all three narratives, judiciary, academic and Oedipal.

As the novel begins to generate its own signifying process, narratives multiply,<sup>12</sup> and the “somewhere else” place where the meaning is supposed to be

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however. Reading it as a palimpsest of intertexts foregrounds its significance and this, in accord with “Ars est celare artem” (O’Brien 1967: 216), indicates concealment as a possible theme of his novel. *Finnegans wake* for all its epic scope also abounds with trivia, so does Barthelme’s *The Dead father*.

<sup>12</sup>The students of the genre often emphasize this aspect of the self-conscious mode. Robert Alter writes that “self-conscious novels, because they are so aware of the arbitrariness of narrative conventions, tend to diverge in a verity of ways from the linear unitary structure of the usual traditional narrative; and as a result they exhibit a fondness for reproducing themselves *en abyme* as Gide liked to say working with Chinese-box constructions...” (Alter 1975: 186-7). Brian Stonehill mentioning O’Brien’s method of “simultaneous performances” which he puts down to the influence of James Joyce, writes that the structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* thus points “towards the infinite regression which become even more prevalent in later self-conscious novels, and which may assume the imagery of nesting boxes, wheels within wheels, mirrors reflecting mirrors, *mise-en-abyme* itself *mise-en-abyme*. When one level not only duplicates but also parodies the level before, the effect may be a constant undercutting of the novel’s own implications thereby isolating the novel ever more profoundly from the world outside. Such seeming isolation immediately raises the question of narrative plausibility, which the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* addresses ... in a characteristically direct fashion” (Stonehill 1988: 41-42). To prove his point Stonehill quotes the student-narrator’s dictum that “satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which reader should regulate at will the degree of his credulity” (O’Brien 1967: 9). Stonehill’s is a fair description of the narrative structure of O’Brien’s novel, yet its self-reflexive devices and accumulation of narrative sequences may not necessarily be seen only in terms of the loss of plausibility in its ever growing isolation from the real and the dispersal of the author’s meaning, but also in terms of expansion and replenishment of meaning which *At Swim-Two-Birds* also shows. Janusz Semrau recognizes this aspect in Donald Barthelme’s self-conscious short story “Sentence”: “The narrative is potentially endless recitation about its own composition, ongoing development and linguistic identity. As the sentence unfolds, rearranges and categorizes itself, it interpolates a number of independent stories which prove to be but additional, dramatized commentaries on the text” (Semrau 1986: 26). This description may be also applied to O’Brien’s novel and in general and broad terms reflect the cyclical structure of *Finnegans wake*, the utmost in contemporary self-consciousness, which Alter never mentions.



found, to evoke Father Brown's image again, is nowhere in view. It seems that text are always written on the wrong side of the tapestry, always implying the right side being "somewhere else". Searching for it we may revisit once more the staircase scene with Trellis plodding wearily upstairs behind his servant and Muse, Teresa:

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 rise and 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 finely modulated body. If it betrays its own presence when fulfilling its task, its purpose must largely fail.

Ars est celare artem, muttered Trellis, doubtful as to whether he made a pun.  
(O'Brien 1967: 216)

The words are Trellis's but the voice behind these words is authorial omniscient. It is the same voice that tells the reader at the outset of the novel: "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" (O'Brien 1967: 5), which includes also the student narrator. As a narrative unit embedded in the narrative structure of the novel, this passage functions as what Riffaterre calls a "subtext", *mise en abyme*, a specular text, a sustained metaphor of the whole text in which it appears, a hermeneutic model. "The story it tells and the object it describes refer symbolically and metalinguistically to the novel as a whole or to some aspect of its significance" (Riffaterre 1990: 131). I propose now to read this fragment along the lines suggested by Riffaterre as a subtext – the hermeneutic model and extended metaphor of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Trellis's pun acting within it as syllepsis, an intertextual link, connecting O'Brien's novel to an analogous passage in *Finnegans wake*.

As a metaphoric vehicle with its tenor in the text of the novel, Teresa's clothes reflect the waywardness of its narrative structure. Trellis's homonymous "ars" in "Ars est celare artem" is a pun that that cross between English and Latin, the anatomical and the aesthetic. From the well known adage: *ars est caelare artem* – in itself a pun, "art is simultaneous creation and concealment of itself, art engraved",<sup>13</sup> Trellis chose *celare* (concealment) the better to emphasize the anatomical in the *double entendre* of the homonymous *ars* inspired by the backside view of his Muse Teresa. Veiled in Teresa's dowdy dress it now functions as a *mise en abyme* within *mise en abyme*, a mirror within a mirror, also a

<sup>13</sup>Translated by Frederick Ahl. "Although *caelare* describes the creation of art, it simultaneously describes the concealment of art" (Ahl 1988: 39).

normative and a critical mirror. Inasmuch as it reflects Teresa's clothes in disarray, it at the same time reflects the whole of the novel and finds its form aesthetically wanting and failing. Instead of creating the "illusion of a finely modulated body", it flaunts (betrays) its self-consciousness, its self-conscious (presence) modality. Thus, it simultaneously discredits the "self-evident sham" as a critical device capable of bringing about aesthetically satisfying fiction as well as the initial assumption claiming that the "modern novel should be largely a work of reference". The novel thus discovered a failure, indeed a "sham", is duly terminated before it would get entirely out of hand, with Teresa, Trellis's unwitting Muse acting as *a deus ex machina*.

Dismantling the original Latin *ars est caelare artem*, Trellis leaves out the "creative" in it, buries it in the text, so to speak, and highlights the anatomical connotation of the pun in order to use it as a critical descriptive term, yet in a pun nether meaning can exist without its opposite; intrinsically bound together they generate syllepsis in Trellis' staircase fragment. In Riffaterre's hermeneutics syllepsis, containing two incompatible meanings alongside each other, is also an intertextual trope – one of its meanings refers to the text in which it appears, the other meaning being valid only in the intertext.<sup>14</sup> It would be safe to assume that in the case of homonymous puns functioning as syllepsis the part of it anchoring itself in the intertext cannot help but drag in also its opposite or at least retain it in its memory. The intertext to which Trellis's sylleptic pun indicates can be found in *Finnegans wake* in a fragment in which fiction is also defined in terms of female garment and which also functions as a subtext. The choice of Joyce's novel is additionally justified by the fact that like *At Swim-Two-Birds* it also a self-conscious construct. The passage in question occurs in Book I, Chapter 5, that establishes the origin, the meaning and the authorship of Joyce's novel. It opens with three pages of alternative titles and proceeds to raise the question whether there is a body as distinct from the words that envelope it and the answer seems to be at the same time in the negative and the positive. It follows from the passage where the body and the clothes are seen as both indistinct and also capable of being separated. The choice seems to be the reader's. The chapter ends with the conclusion that the text of the novel (*Finnegans wake*) concerning the fate of the father has been dictated by the mother, written by one of the twin brothers, Shem the Pen (James Joyce's textual ego), com-

<sup>14</sup>The full description of Riffaterre's version of syllepsis runs as follows: "the trope that consists in using one word for two incompatible meanings without repeating that word. One meaning is acceptable in the context in which it appears; the other meaning is valid only in the intertext to which the word also belongs and which it represents at the surface of the text as the tip of the intertextual iceberg. The syllepsis is a mere phonetic shape that is filled in turn by two otherwise alien universes of representation" (Riffaterre 1990: 131).



mented upon, criticized, censured and distributed by his twin brother Shaun the Post, hence in the passage its meaning is described in terms of woman's clothes. As an intertext of Trellis's fragment, Joyce's passage is also its interpretant and thus also an interpretant of the whole novel. Involving Trellis's fragment in a dialogical relationship, it brings out into view its muted homonymous Latin *ars*, already in its first sentence, as it begins to inscribe its own presence in O'Brien's novel:

Yet to concentrate solely on the literal sense or even psychological content of any document to the sore neglect of the enveloping facts themselves circumstantiating it is just as hurtful to the sound sense (and let it be added to the truest taste) as were some fellow in the act of perhaps getting an intro from another fellow turning out to be a friend in need of his, say, to a lady of the latter's acquaintance, engaged in performing the elaborative antecistral ceremony of upstheres, straightaway to run off and vision her plump and plain in her natural altogether, preferring to close his blinkhard's eyes to the ethiquethical fact that she was, after all, wearing for the space of the time being some definite articles of evolutionary clothing, inharmonious creations, a captious critic might describe them as, or not strictly necessary or a trifle irritating here and there, but for all that suddenly full of local colour and personal perfume and suggestive, too, of so very much more and capable of being stretched, filled out, if need or wish were, of having their surprisingly like coincidental parts separated don't they now, for better survey by the deft

<sup>15</sup>Teresa going upstairs. As O'Brien's intertext, Joyce passage rearranges itself now to serve also as the subtext of *At Swim-Two Birds*. Roland McHugh reads "upstheres" as referring to both: "my ancestral stair" (Yeats: "Blood & the moon"), and Yen Ying, Tsi minister, deriding Confucius: "It would take generations to exhaust all that he knows about the ceremonies of such a simple thing as going up and down stairs" (McHugh 1980: 109). The Red Swan Hotel could hardly accommodate Confucius while Teresa walks up and down its stairs. Nor would she fit into the company of the personages inhabiting Yeats' "ancestral stair": Goldsmith, the Dean, Berkeley and Burke (Yeats 1962: 126). Not in her dowdy clothes. She would be more at home here as Kate the Slop, the housekeeper of Earwicker establishment, who at dawn one fine night with a candle raised in her hand saw her master roused from his drunken sleep on the floor of the tavern and indecently exposed tiptoe creaking upstairs to his connubial bedroom shushing her to silence – "galorybit of the sanes in hevel, there was a crick up starkiss and when she ruz the candle to see, galohery, down and she went on her knees to blesserself that were knocking together like milkjuggled as if it was the wrake of hapsurus or old Kong Gander O'Toole of the Mountains or his googoo goosht she seein" (Joyce 1965: 557) – and down she went on her knees thinking she saw the wreck of Hesperus or old King O'Toole or his ghost.

<sup>16</sup>Trellis contemplating Teresa's posterior, his Muse.

<sup>17</sup>Beginning with "captious critic": Shaun in *Finnegans wake*, Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and also Robert Alter on *At Swim-Two-Birds*: "Flann O'Brien, however, following the formula he attributes to his own protagonist, in fact produces a hodgepodge of fictions where nothing seems particularly credible and where everything finally becomes tedious through the sheer proliferation of directionless narrative invention. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a celebration of fabulation in which

hand of an expert, don't you know? Who in his heart doubts either that the facts of feminine clothiering are there all the time or that the feminine fiction, stranger than the facts, is there also at the same time, only a little to the rere? Or that one may be separated from the other? Or that both may be con-

novelistic self-consciousness has gone slack because fiction is everywhere and there is no longer any quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real. I am not aware that it has influenced later books, but it has proved certainly to be a novel ahead of its time, for its faults of conception and execution provide a perfect paradigm for those of much contemporary fiction, especially in this country, where a new literary ideology of fabulation has too often turned out to mean license, not liberty, for the novelist" (Alter 1975: 224). Since Trellis himself would agree with this opinion, Alter's criticism of self-conscious novel deserves a closer look. In the chapter "Inexhaustible genre" of *Partial magic*, Alter announces the decline in the fiction of the 60s and 70s: "Over the past two decades, as the high tide of modernism ebbed and its masters died off, the baring of the literary artifice has come to be more and more a basic procedure – at times, almost an obsession – of serious fiction in the West" (Alter 1975: 218). This tendency to "flaunt the artifice" (Alter's expression) at the expense of the real upsetting the "the quixotic tension" of the self-conscious genre, Alter finds, among others, in the practice of American postmodern writers: Robert Coover, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut and Flann O'Brien earlier on in Ireland who in this context does seem an influence notwithstanding what Alter maintains in the above quotation. Alter's generic model of self-conscious novel, mainly based on the narrative structure of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and such "early masters" as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and Diderot's *Jacques the fatalist and his master*, assumes ontological duality of the genre – an overlapping polarity of reality and fiction – reality imitated and transformed in fiction, producing tension from which arises the meaning pertaining to human experience. In other words the meaning of self-conscious novel is contingent on the stable relationship between the signifier and the signified. This equilibrium has already been disturbed in modernism. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Alter claims, instead of a "solid-seeming illusion of reality" the reader experiences "a phantasmagoric dissolution of external reality in the quick solvent of the mind" (Alter 1975: 142). This tendency of the modern self-conscious novel to resign from reflecting and transforming reality and replace it with the arbitrary artifact itself, reaches its apex in postmodernism. Depriving itself of the experience of the real the postmodern self-conscious novel condemns itself to self-reflexivity and set over against the paradigmatic self-conscious novel of the past, it trivializes itself and fails to encompass the human experience. In Trellis's analytic terms this means the failure of art which by shifting the attention to itself, to its own "presence", fails to perform its function to reflect and aestheticize the real, to conceal the real in itself – "to create the illusion of a finely modulated body". For a less biased view of American self-conscious postmodern fiction see Stonehill (1988) and Semrau (1986).

<sup>18</sup>Trellis still in the reflective mood is contemplating Teresa's rear view and a remark of general nature on the state of woman novel circa 1930s. This latter should be read together with (Joyce 1965: 112-113) where Joyce prophesizes the rise of golden age of female letters: "Yes, before all this has time to end the golden age must return with its vengeance". Here is the whole passage in *A skeleton key*'s summary: "Her socio-scientific sense is as sound as a bell, and the gloomy belief that letters have never been quite their own selves again since Bidy Doran looked at literature is not justified; in fact, the golden age of feminism is to come! She may be a mere bit of cotton quilting, this midget majesty, Mistress of Arts, but her letter is no anomalous bit of hearsay. She is energetic, economical, and has a heart of iron, and will follow the direction of the wind. But how many of her readers realize that she is not out to dazzle with a great show of learned splendor, or to lift a complaint against the man what he did?" (Cambell and Robinson 1961: 100). In this context Teresa's burning of Trellis' manuscript may be read as prophetic.



templated simultaneously? Or that each may be taken up and considered in turn apart from the other? (Joyce 1965: 109)

The reader is advised to see double here: syntactically “one” and “other” in the last sentence refer to the “clothiering”, that is to the structure of the novel, to *Finnegans wake* itself, and simultaneously to the two fellows, mentioned in the first sentence of the quote, Shem the Pen and Shaun the Post, the author and his critic. Although they remain in the state of permanent conflict, one cannot exist without the other. In the symbolic logic of the novel they signify time and space (“for the space of the time being”): they provide the temporal and spatial dimensions for the structure of the novel and as such they always merge with each other and at the same time retain their separate identities in accord with the law of coincidence of contraries that animates the language, the structure and the meaning of Joyce’s novel and which in Joyce’s definition states that “every power in nature must evolve an opposite in order to realize itself and opposition brings reunion etc. etc.” (Ellmann 1975: 306). Foregrounding simultaneously similarity and difference and thus bringing about transformation, it can be seen at work also in intertextual relationships.

In the narrative structure of *Finnegans wake* this law shows itself in the never-ending transformations, repetitions, returns to and integrations of opposing categories, so that each new “recombination” of meaning is also “decomposition”, producing still new “recombination”. This creates an impression of constant movement and merging of the opposites and also of their permanence. Joyce provides a working definition of this narrative method at (Joyce 1965: 614-615) which in *A skeleton key* is rendered as:

Our wholemole millwheeling vicociclotometer receives the separated elements of precedent decomposition for the purpose of subsequent recombination, so that the old Adamic structure of our Finnius may be there for you when cup, platter and pot come piping hot. As sure as herself pits hen to paper and there’s scribblings scrawled on eggs. scribblings as those of the letter.

(Cambell and Robinson 1961: 352-353).

“As those of the letter”: as those of *Finnegans wake*. Thus, at any given time Joyce’s novel can be read as a modernist novel and at the same time as a semiotic postmodern fiction. As a novel generating its own frame of reference, its own history – “the sameold gamebold adomic structure of our Finnius the old One” (Joyce 1965: 615), “Adamic structure”, and as a postmodern fiction dispersing its meaning in the “atomic structure”. If we assume, as we are in fact intended to, that the meaning of the novel resides in its own history (embodied in the figure of the Father) which is also the history of its own writing, then we understand why the novel generates a new narrative each time it returns to its own history, always the same and always different: “evolutionary clothing, inharmo-

nious creations ... not strictly necessary or a trifle irritating ... but for all that ... full of local colour and personal perfume and suggestive”, while the ultimate meaning is always delayed. It is always a rehearsal of the same. Here art indeed creates itself and conceals itself in art. And Joyce’s passage can be seen as a metaphoric definition of self-conscious fiction with its own critical apparatus built into its composition provided by Shaun who finds his brother’s novel a morbid abomination, “puffedly offal tosh” (Joyce 1965: 419), “bags of trash ... reduced to writing” (Joyce 1965: 420). He accuses his brother’s work of plagiarism: “the lost word of stolentelling” (Joyce 1965: 423) in which every “dimmed letter is a copy” (Joyce 1965: 424). He also claims to have written a “good” part of it himself, which his brother stole from him and adulterated, turned it into “that idioglossary he invented” (Joyce 1965: 422-423). Shaun’s claim is justified. In his many critical guises he passes judgment, comments upon, evaluates and explicates the text for the benefit of his various audiences: students, scholars, citizens and readers. His commentaries are parodies and often oblique and confusing but it is mainly through him that the readers learn about the basic facts of the narrative. Thus, he also participates in the creative act as its coauthor and critic. This brings us back to Trellis and Teresa.

Both, Joyce’s passage and O’Brien’s fragment describe fiction in terms of woman body and woman clothes that function as metaphors of their novels’ fictional self-consciousness and as aesthetic objects. Their palimpsestous similarity is obvious and interesting in itself, O’Brien’s fragment does read like a condensed paraphrase of Joyce’s passage, but more telling are the differences in the treatment of the aesthetic object. Trellis separating the body from the garment, which is also implicit in the meaning of his pun, presupposes polarity of reality and art, and if art does not fulfill its function of successfully transforming reality, art fails. This is evident in the figure of Teresa displaying the disturbance of metonymic contiguity of body and garment. Garment – art – drawing attention to itself, “betraying its own presence”, fails to “create the illusion of finely modulated body”. This is the failure of self-conscious art to transform reality and conceal it within itself. In Alter’s terms, the case of novelistic self-consciousness going “slack (in *At Swim-Two-Birds*) because fiction is everywhere and there is no longer any quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real” (Alter 1975: 224). Censuring the novel in which he appears for its failure to establish harmonious relationship between art and reality, Trellis is reenacting in O’Brien’s novel the role Shaun plays in *Finnegans wake*, not only that of its captious critic, but also that of its reader and explicator, and also its author or a co-author, considering that he, his son Orlick and the student narrator are variants of the same authorial figure. What his critique should tell us when applied to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and what O’Brien apparently discovered in the course of writing his novel, is that self-conscious fictional mode has an inertia of its own



that tends to proliferate itself regardless of authorial intention, not unlike the endless semiosis produced by the interpretant in Charles Peirce's triadic sign: sign, object, interpretant or signifier, signified, interpretant. The interpretant generates meaning through mediating between the signifier and the signified – defining for the signifier its meaning, its signified thereby becoming a sign demanding an interpretant of its own. This transformation of meaning never stops (Sheriff 1989). In *At Swim-Two-Birds* this process is evident in the multiplication of the narratives. The trial scene with Trellis in the dock in the fictional plane becomes the interpretant for the examination in the “biographical” narrative. The birth of Orlick Trellis triggers off the pilgrimage narrative which shading into Orlick's narrative calls up Oedipal narrative as its interpretant thwarted by the authorial intervention. Had O'Brien not stopped Orlick from executing the fictional murder the narrative structure would have sought an interpretant to spawn yet another narrative removing itself ever further from the real which Robert Alter sees as a modern perversion of the self-conscious novel and which Trellis saw in the image of Teresa's dress going awry “failing to act as art”. It is at this juncture that the novel moves from the mimetic into what Riffaterre calls “semiotic grid” (Riffaterre 1986: 164) and which is a hallmark of the postmodern self-conscious fictional mode.<sup>19</sup> The other side of the tapestry

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<sup>19</sup>What fictional space would then O'Brien's novel move into if Teresa did burn Trellis' manuscript consigning his characters back to the limbo? The answer can be found in Donald Barthelme's novel *Snow White*, whose characters, removed from the security of their habitat in The Brothers Grimm's fairy tale and placed in the semantic multiplicity of their new text, suffer ontological anxiety discovering that: “There is not enough seriousness in what we do ... Everyone wanders around having his own individual perceptions. These, like balls of different colors and shapes and sizes, roll around on the green billiard table of consciousness ... Where is the figure in the carpet? Or is it just carpet?” (Barthelme 1967: 129). Bill, the author surrogate of Barthelme's novel, whom the characters blame for putting them in this confusing book, complains of being unable to come to terms with his fictional material – Snow White's hair's “multiple meaning” (Barthelme 1967: 51), and the characters afraid of losing their identity, dream about burning Snow White “like in Dreyer's *The burning of Joan of Arc*” (Barthelme 1967: 109). Barthelme's heroine epitomizes the novel itself. Here fiction is also feminine. Arguing from the position of postmodern poetics in a lecture on *Snow White* (and also the novel of that title), Hugo de Bergerac, the villain in Barthelme's novel, pontificates on the randomness of *Snow White* phenomenon as an exchangeable and expendable quality of girliness. The language of “thought and feeling”, love and respect is *blague*; he maintains, “My point is that you should bear in mind multiplicity and forget about uniqueness. The earth is broad and flat, deep and high” (Barthelme 1967: 75). O'Brien's characters resist the authorial encroachment upon their equanimity and integrity, if needs be they restore law and order into their fictional environment by punishing the author threatening them with existential relativity and ambivalence. In this respect, O'Brien's novel does present a paradox. As it enters the postmodern semiotic space, its characters still maintain their presence in the comfortable enclave of a traditional novel, their limbo. Viewed from the vantage point of the history of fiction, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a transitory novel.

proves to be space where sings, narratives, themes, events proliferate, apparently endlessly, unless contained in some aesthetically satisfying narrative structure.<sup>20</sup>

If we assume that the staircase scene constitutes a critical conclusion of O'Brien's novel and the discovery of its failure as a work of art, recognized in the metaphor of Teresa's clothes, leads to the sudden and arbitrary termination of its plot, then, as we have already seen, this discovery compromises and proves aesthetically wanting the initial theoretical assumption claiming that “a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity”. This assumption, however, is validated and thus also redeemed, in Joyce's intertext where fiction is seen also in terms of female clothes: “evolutionary clothing, inharmonious creation, a captious critic might describe them as, or not strictly necessary or a trifle irritating here and there, but for all that suddenly full of local colour and personal perfume and suggestive, too, of so very much more and capable of being stretched, filled out, if need or wish were, of having their surprisingly like coincidental parts separated don't they now, for better survey by the deft hand of an expert”. This metaphor of happy sartorial disorder, disharmony of malleable parts [narratives] apparently flaunting themselves as artifacts – “self-evident sham” that Trellis finds so disturbing, although “irritating” yet “full of local colour and personal perfume and suggestive”, here is applauded as aesthetically satisfying – “satisfactory” fiction. Redeeming the “self-evident sham” as a critical metaphor for self-conscious fiction, Joyce's intertext recuperates at the same time the “art” in Trellis's homonymous pun *ars* and thus acting as an interpretant of Trellis/Teresa subtext it inscribes into *At Swim-Two-Birds* the structural principle of *Finnegans*

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<sup>20</sup>In Thomas Pynchon's *The crying of lot 49 Oedipa Mass* conceives the world as a tapestry: “In Mexico City they somewhat wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych titled ‘Bordando el Manto Terrestere’, were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners of a top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world” (Pynchon 1982: 10). In the course of her effort to unravel the riddle of the legacy left for her by her former lover, Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa encounters signs that take her to the world “somewhere else”, to use father Brown's image, where things have “meanings” – the “right” side of tapestry, or signs whose interpretants lead always back to Inverarity's estate, in other words to the “wrong” side of tapestry – signs which in their turn need interpreter. Thus, Oedipa finds herself in the grip of endless semiosis and the first name of Inverarity may be read as an anagram of Peirce. Here the two worlds, two realities, two sides of the “tapestry” intersect and intertwine and the understanding of the one is contingent on the interpretant of the other, and interpretants, as Peirce says, are signs which demand their own interpretants. Pynchon leaves the plot of his novel unsolved, which seems only right, since it is not the solution of the riddle but the process that leads to it that seems to carry the epistemological import of his novel.



wake, or at least some of its aspects, thereby defining for O'Brien's novel its own aesthetic modality. And the participation of the readers in the production of the text is also encouraged in both, *Finnegans wake* ("by the deft hand of the expert") and *At Swim-Two-Birds* ("the reader that can regulate at will the degree of his credulity"). At least this is what O'Brien's novel announces at the outset and what Joyce's passage claims, and if we read it as a subtext, a *mise en abyme*, then we may assume that this principle obtains in the whole text of *Finnegans wake*.<sup>21</sup>

What is then the "aspect" of Joyce's novel that has informed the narrative structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*? In order to identify it let us look briefly again at Trellis' critique of the novel in which he appears, this time in the context of Alter's notion of self-conscious fiction (see also notes 2 and 17). The text of *Finnegans wake* organized by the law of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of contraries, is capable of self-reflective transformation and replication. As the text expands and transforms itself, it simultaneously comments upon itself and folding upon itself, it reshapes itself. It is an everchanging rehearsal of the same. The narrative grid thus produced is reflected in one of the many self-reflective images dispersed in the text of the novel: "But by writing thithaways end to end and turning, turning end to end hithaways writing with lines of litter slittering up and loads of latters slettering down, the old semetomyplace and jupetbackagain from tham Let Rise till Hum Lit. Sleep, where in the waste is the wisdom?" (Joyce 1965: 114). Here the meaning, "the wisdom" does not follow from the inherent tension produced by the polarized real and fictional, as Robert Alter would claim for self-conscious fiction in *Partial magic*, it resides in the fictional reality produced by the text. It is the difference between the simile that

<sup>21</sup> Like any novel *Finnegans wake* yields itself to interpretation and there is the whole Joyce's critical industry to prove it, yet its text is often seen as impregnable. According to Barthelme, Joyce in *Finnegans wake* "wrote every sentence in three languages and four ways and left the reader the least possible space of participation" (Barthelme 1976: 9). And several years earlier searching for a viable form for modern American literature to emulate, Barthelme found Joyce's novel "problematical": "Joyce enforces the way in which *Finnegans wake* is to be read. He conceived the reading to be a lifetime project. The book remains always there, like the landscape surrounding the reader's home or the building bounding the reader's apartment. The book remains problematical, unexhausted" (Barthelme 1964: 14). Jacques Derrida seems to hold similar view on *Finnegans wake* in the essay "Two words for Joyce": "You are not only overcome by him, whether you know it or not, obliged by him, and constrained to measure yourself against his overcoming ... *Being in memory of him* ... to inhabit his memory, which is henceforth greater than all your finite memory can, in a single instant or a single vocable, gather up all cultures, languages, mythologies, religions, philosophies, sciences, history of mind, literatures, I don't know if you can like that, without resentment and jealousy. Can one pardon this hypermnesia which a priori indebts you, and in advance inscribes you in the book you are reading? ... You can say nothing that is not programmed on this 1000<sup>th</sup> generation computer" (Derrida 1984: 147). It is within this context that one should perhaps see Jung's quarrel with Joyce's fiction (see note 21 below).

depends on comparison to realize itself and a metaphor that is self-contained, self-reflexive, non-transcendental construct.<sup>22</sup> Trellis acting Trellis acting as the

<sup>22</sup> Jung noticed this quality of James Joyce's fiction as a self-sufficient entity, a thing in itself. In his 1932 essay "Ulysses. A monologue" Jung compares Joyce's novel to a tape worm that is "a whole living cosmos in itself" capable of producing nothing but other tape worms. "[The] book can just as well be read backwards, for it has no back and no front, no top and no bottom. Everything could easily have happened before, or might have happened afterwards ... every sentence is a gag, but taken together they make no point. You can also stop in the middle of a sentence – the first half still makes sense enough to live by itself, or at least seems to. The whole work has a character of a worm cut in half, that can grow a new head or a new tail as required" (Jung 1972: 111-112). In Jung's perception of Joyce's novel there is no room for meaning, beauty, feeling and value; it is all soulless nothingness, cold and stony, defying human intelligence. "The stream begins in the void and ends in the void (Jung 1972: 109). It is the void that Robert Alter also experienced reading *Ulysses*. "This singular and uncanny characteristic of Joycean mind" writes Jung, "shows that his work pertains to the class of cold-blooded animals and specifically to the worm family. If worms were gifted with literary powers they would write with the sympathetic nervous system for lack of a brain. I suspect that something of this kind has happened to Joyce, that we have here a case of visceral thinking with severe restriction of cerebral activity and its confinement to the perceptual processes. One is driven to unqualified admiration for Joyce's feats in the sensory sphere: what he sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches, inwardly as well as outwardly, is beyond measure astonishing ... one wonders whether one is dealing with a physical or a transcendental worm" (Jung 1972: 112). Jung's imagery derives from the 'equational cluster' (Kenneth Burke's term) of anal procreation. The tape worm that symbolizes Ulysses is also a metonymic representation of the author and his voice talking to himself and arriving forth from the depth of his bowels: "There we have it. The cold-blooded unrelatedness of his mind which seems to come from the saurian in him or still from lower regions – conversations in and with one's own intestines" (Jung 1972: 113) – a procreative tape worm articulating itself in *Ulysses* – "As a piece technical virtuosity it is brilliant and hellish monster-birth" (Jung 1972: 110). Jung conceives this birth as anal, appearing in segments: "From this stony underworld there rises up a vision of the tape worm, rippling, peristaltic, monotonous because of its endless proglottic proliferation. No proglottic is like any other, yet they can easily be confused. In every segment of the book, however small, Joyce himself is the sole content of the segment" (Jung 1972: 114). "*Ulysses* turns its back on me" (Jung 1972: 115). And as a psychiatrist, Jung says, he expends his sympathy only "on people who do not turn their backs on me. It is unco-operative ..." (Jung 1972: 115). The vehemence of the language employed in "A monologue" and its revulsion, suggest that Jung is settling some personal scores here, yet however negative its terms, it easy to discern that he is dealing with self-conscious fiction and recognizes it as such. As "creative destruction", *Ulysses* for Jung epitomizes the pathology of modern art which he equates with Cubism as a "collective manifestation of our time" which Jung recognizes as schizophrenic. "Jung recognized in Joyce's writing a powerful effect of negation ... This recognition, usually in the form of a violent attack, was applied to each of Joyce's text ... widely received as the vicious and aberrant destruction of literature, Jung having already called *Ulysses* a backside of art ("die Kunst der Ruckenseite, oder die Ruckseite der Kunst")" (Heath 1984: 34). Perhaps it would be unseemly to place the ludic, carnivalesque, punning Trellis side by side the Olympian figure of the psychiatrist, but in both cases the object of the gaze is the same, and only the depth of its insight differs. In Jung's essay "ars" is bared and is found scatological and also masculine and stony. Unlike Trellis, however, Jung sees modern art as "evolutionary" – moving to some Apocalyptic end. Jung calls Joyce "a man of stone" and identifies him with Moses – "he with horns of stone, the stony beard, the petrified intestines, Moses, turning his back with stony unconcern on the flesh-pots and gods of Egypt, and also on the reader, thereby outraging his feeling of good will" (Jung



authorial figure in his critical guise apparently adheres to Alter's views of a well-made novel seeing in the disarray of Teresa's clothes the failure of its formal aesthetics in *At Swim-Two-Birds* which entangling itself in ever-multiplying narratives dilutes the necessary tension between itself and reality, or, according to Brian Stonehill showing "infinite regression (of narrative levels) isolating the novel ever more profoundly from the world outside" (Stonehill 1988: 42). Thus Trellis anticipates Alter's criticisms of O'Brien's novel voiced years afterwards. It is a failure of aesthetics that "betrays its own presence" – "flaunts" (Alter's

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1972: 114). This passage is indeed telling and perhaps, like the whole of "*Ulysses*. A monologue", ought to be read in the light of Joyce's refusal to be psychoanalyzed by Jung, for which Mrs Edith Rockefeller McCormick, who, as Richard Ellmann writes, was "heavily endowing" Jung, apparently encouraged by the puritanical psychoanalyst, punished Joyce by cutting off his subsidy of 1000 Swiss francs a month (Ellmann 1983: 422). In the second part of his essay Jung is more friendly to *Ulysses*, he wants to discover its "secret". Nevertheless he still sees it as pure consciousness: "it wants to be an eye of the moon, a consciousness detached from its object, in thrall neither to the gods nor to the sensuality, and bound neither by love nor by hate, neither by conviction nor prejudice" (Jung 1972: 124). By denying *Ulysses* a symbolic meaning (see Jung 1972: 123), and thus negating it as a "revelation of the unconscious", Jung removes Joyce's work to some "saurian" region of petrified beings, beyond the pale of common humanity. Whatever "secret" he did discover in *Ulysses* and by 1930's he was also reading parts of *Finnegans wake*, Jung would not want to be "*in memory*" of Joyce, "indebted" to him or see himself in advance "inscribed" in his book (see Derrida in note 20 above). Discussing in an interview the clinical case of Joyce' daughter, Lucia, as schizophrenia and acting as her father's Anima, his "femme inspiratrice", Jung diagnoses Joyce's "psychological" style as "definitely schizophrenic", and also tries to marginalize his work: "In any other time of the past Joyce's work would never have reached the printer, but in our blessed XXth century it is a message, though not yet understood" (Ellmann 1983: 679-680). And in Joyce he will be always remembered as "a certain Doctor Jung (the Swiss Tweedledum who is not to be confused with the Viennese Tweedledee, Dr Freud) [who] amuses himself at the expense (in every sense of the word) of ladies and gentlemen who are troubled with the bees in their bonnets" (Joyce in a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver of 24 June 1921 (Ellmann 1975: 282)). And he also found his way into *Finnegans wake* as one of the old "Sykos": "we grisly old Sykos who have done our unsmiling bit on 'alices' when they were jung and easily freudened" (Joyce 1965: 115). She is subjected to "The law of the jungerl" (Joyce 1965: 268), which is a portmanteau word made up of C. G. Jung, 'jungle' and 'girl'. And Jung's concept of Anima is translated as "Anama anamaba anamabapa" (Joyce 1965: 267) – Anima and Animus rolled into one. Jung advised Joyce to remove Lucia from Dr Brunner sanatorium in Switzerland where she remained under his treatment finding her "a very exceptional case and certainly not one for psychoanalytic treatment which ... might provoke a catastrophe from which she would never recover" (Ellmann 1983: 681). Apparently Lucia had turned her back on him too. She is on record as saying later: "To think that such a big fat materialistic Swiss should try to get hold of my soul" (Ellmann 1983: 679). According to Ellman Joyce took offence at Jung's contention that *Ulysses* could be read backwards and this found an echo in *Finnegans wake* in: "the words which follow may be taken in any order desired ..." (Ellmann 1983: 680). Whatever Jung's motivation, certainly not friendly neither to Joyce nor his *Ulysses*, because of its cyclical composition *Finnegans wake* does invite a backward reading, and not in the least in the sense suggested by Riffaterre's two-stage hermeneutic reading. Jung's reading of *Ulysses*, however vicious, exaggerated and negative his terms, is a fitting description of self-conscious fiction.

term) its materiality instead of creating it and concealing it within itself. A non-transparent, "self-evident sham" whose validity as a viable fictional device organizing the narrative structure of the novel is questioned in the semantics of Trellis' *double entendre* of "ars" and which justifies the erasure of the characters and also the plot of the novel, if we assume that plots are actualized through characters, together with the student narrator who, his project abandoned, fades out of the scene into his upstairs bedroom and that leaves in the end only the Mad King Sweeny in the trees huddled "between earth and heaven" and "mad" Trellis now the sole proprietor of the novel.<sup>23</sup> What Trellis, however, fails to see as he walks behind Teresa upstairs to his bedroom is what Joyce tells him in the intertext that clothes are "evolutionary" and also "inharmonious creations" and being evolutionary they open themselves up to transformation and change and also disorder and we may add also to readjustment. In Frank Kermode's critical terms: "the history of the novel is the history of forms rejected or modified, by parody, manifesto, neglect, as absurd. Nowhere else, perhaps, are we so conscious of the dissidence between inherited forms and our own reality" (Kermode 1973: 229-230). And to the extent that fiction mediates between itself as form and contingent reality, and for Kermode modern reality is contingent, the novel must always remain an artifact, a contrivance, a counterfeit, and in the rhetoric of *At Swim-Two-Birds* a "sham", since a mimetic relationship with thus conceived reality would destroy what for Kermode constitutes the basic fictional paradigm of the beginning, the middle and the end. This quotation from Kermode is brought up not to create a theoretical context for *At Swim-Two-Birds* which does not fit into Kermode's fictional paradigm, but to remind Trellis that the clothes are indeed "evolutionary" and the form in which he plays the critic is indeed a self-conscious and sham and also art.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *At Swim-Two-Birds* erasing its own characters and thus erasing its plot, in other words questioning itself as novel, may be construed as a manifestation of postmodern sensitivity, particularly as it is often read, and justly so, as a harbinger of postmodern fiction. Although it has all the salient features of postmodern self-conscious fiction and shows typical postmodern playfulness, it does not follow from postmodern epistemology of absence or indeterminacy and does not inscribes itself into postmodern textual semiotic space as its comparison with Barthelme's *Snow White* is meant to show (see note 19). Ontologically O'Brien's novel is placed within modernist poetics of presence while its form situates itself in postmodern self-conscious mode.

<sup>24</sup> Kermode's excellent study of the novel, delivered as a series lectures in 1965, was published as *The sense of an ending* in 1967, the year that witnessed the publication of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* and postmodern novel was well established on the American literary scene, though the criticism was yet searching for an appropriate language to deal with this relatively new phenomenon. Kermode studies modernist novel, English and French and, like Alter, he concerns himself with the tension between fictional form and reality. The closest he comes to the postmodern novel is in his rather cursory analyses of French *nouveau roman* and no less skeptical view of Musil's attempt to come to terms with the non-narrative contingences of modern reality by creating in *The man without*



One of the briefest, shorthand descriptions of *Finnegans wake's* narrative structure, its time/space continuum, is contained in: "The proteiform graph itself is polyhedron of scripture" (Joyce 1965: 107). Unraveling the "graph" we discern *protean* inscribed into *proto* that suggests a varying form (a "graph") text, transforming itself and evolving into a polyhedral ("scripture") structure of expanding narratives, which catches also the basic structural rhythm of *At Swim-Two-Birds* realizing itself in the movement of narratives generated through simultaneous difference and identity with themselves. And if we read the "self-evident sham", rejected and also redeemed in its own text through intertextual transaction with Joyce's novel, as reflecting also the narrative method of *Finnegans wake*, then it also brings into O'Brien's novel Joyce's concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*,<sup>25</sup> one of the simplest of literary devices put to the most effective use in what may be seen as the most complex of novels – *Finnegans wake*, where it creates an all inclusive textual totality embracing its characters, themes and language. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* it is evident in the manner the three authorial figures simultaneously exchange and retain their identities and consequently their narratives function at the same time on more than one level of meaning. The judiciary narrative merges with the academic one through parody and gives rise to the Oedipal. The same principle is also discernable at work in the parodies created by the intertextual play – in the reciprocal texts exchanging and retaining their generic identities so that we can recognize the heroic and the mythic in O'Brien's Western which in turn impart its comic elements to the epic. As much as in Joyce's novel the law of coincidence of contraries acts as a unifying principle also in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. And it is through this aspect that O'Brien's novel enters into the aesthetic space adumbrated by *Finnegans wake*. For all of its self-declared failure, *At Swim-Two-Birds* marks a postmodern turn in the history of contemporary fiction. And fail-

*qualities* a narrative structure that is "multidimensional, fragmentary, without the possibility of a narrative end" in which "he [Musil] tries to create a new genre in which, by all manner of dazzling devices and metaphors and stratagems, fiction and reality can be brought together again" (Kermode 1973: 128), which Kermode considers a failure. He also makes a tentative inference, quoting Butor and Peter Brooks, that fiction in its search for a new relation with reality will concentrate upon itself as fiction and that is as close as he comes to the poetics of self-conscious fiction.

<sup>25</sup> This concept, which refers mainly to the characters who often exchange identities; as they merge into each other they also retain their separate individual features, extends also to whole narrative structure of the novel and its language. Among the many references to it in the text of *Finnegans wake* one of the most succinct runs as follows: "so that when we shall acquired unification we shall pass on to diversity and when we shall passes on to diversity we shall have acquired the instinct of combat and when we shall have acquired the instinct of combat we shall pass back to the spirit of appeasement?" (Joyce 1965: 610). Though it is perhaps not quite accurate to say that this definition could work as a key to O'Brien's novel, it does seem however to capture the visisitudes of "sham", its "exprogressive" movement, if we read it as a synonym of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Internally discounted as aesthetic failure, in historical perspective can be seen a success, inasmuch as it accurately anticipates and reflects the modality of postmodern self-conscious novel.

ure is written into art, as Donald Barthelme said: "... the artist fails again, and again and again, repeatedly. He fails to do what he knows can be done. Even great achievements are failures. Even Shakespeare was a failure as an artist, because, by definition, there is always a level of achievement that can be greater" (Zeigler – Bigsby 1982: 52).

The sheer magnitude of *Finnegans wake* discourages comparison or imitation, yet, as Barthelme said in 1983, to quote him again, finding *Finnegans wake* still impenetrable and inimitable, "I think that writers got past being intimidated by Joyce ... but I think that people realize that one did not have to repeat Joyce (if that were ever possible) but one could use aspects of his achievement ... the effort is not to write like Beckett. You can't do Beckett all over again, any more than you can do Joyce again" (Le Clair and McCaffery 1983: 38, 48). *Finnegans wake* was published in 1939 the year *At Swim-Two-Birds* appeared, but O'Brien could well acquaint himself with its chapters published in *transition* from 1927 on as "*Work in progress*".<sup>26</sup> What transpires between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Joyce's novel is illustrated here by the relationship between O'Brien's Trellis/Teresa subtext and a corresponding subtext in *Finnegans wake* as its intertext and interpretant foregrounding its muted "*ars*" and thus binding O'Brien's novel to the still nascent aesthetics of postmodern self-conscious metafiction. And as Brian Stonehill has it: "The impetus which Joyce gave to the self-conscious tradition may most immediately be seen in the work of two other Irish writers, Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien" (Stonehill 1988: 40).<sup>27</sup> Speaking with the voice borrowed from Joyce, O'Brien's novel remains what Derrida, writing about *Finnegans wake* and its relationship with other texts in "Two words for Joyce", calls "metonymic dwarf": The second text, the one which, fatally, refers to the other, quotes it, exploits it, parasites it and deciphers it, is no doubt a minute parcel *detached* from the other, the metonymic dwarf, the jester of the great anterior text ..." (Derrida 1984: 148).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Flann O'Brien and Niall Sheridan had an interview with Joyce's father, John Stanislaus Joyce in 1931 when they were both students at University Collage in Dublin and James Joyce used parts of this interview in *Finnegans wake*. Flann O'Brien later claimed to have invented this interview as a hoax, which as Ellmann writes, was itself a hoax (Ellmann 1983: 747). John Stanislaus Joyce is one of the prototypes of the father figure in *Finnegans wake* when one reads the novel as a family chronicle. He is All Father, Old Adam, Finnegan, HCE, Mr. Porter the publican, Viconian God and by extension Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds* in his fatherly tyrannical aspect, like Joyce's fictional father in *Finnegans wake* also put on trial and testified against by his sons.

<sup>27</sup> According to Stonehill "The influence upon subsequent fiction of self-consciousness of *Ulysses* is not easily exaggerated ... In many senses Joyce is the horizon beyond which our novelist have yet to go, and the countless novels written since *Ulysses* and *Finnegans wake* have tended merely to flesh out various possibilities that Joyce had already indicated" (Stonehill 1988: 39-40).

<sup>28</sup> Here is the rest of the quotation: "... which would have declared war on it in languages; and yet it is also another set, quite other, bigger and more powerful than the all-powerful which it drags off and



The student narrator, before vanishing in his upstairs bedroom, is presented by his uncle with a second hand watch as a reward for having successfully passed his university examinations, we may also read this reward as an appreciation of his fictional achievements, and the fact that the watch is second hand may or may have not a symbolic meaning.

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