THE ORIGINS OF FLANN O'BRIEN'S *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

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Abstract

Flann O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds,* published in 1939, has generally been considered as O'Brien's masterpiece due to its spontaneous narration and experimental technique. However, its origins and process of composition have not undergone sufficient examination. This paper explores the origins of *At Swim-Two-Birds* by means of the analysis of O'Brien's literary production pre-*At Swim-Two-Birds,* searching for connections between the novel and O'Brien's earlier work. It aims to demonstrate that the ideas and contents of *At Swim-Two-Birds* had been present in O'Brien's mind long before he started writing the novel.

Keywords: Contemporary Irish Literature, Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan, *At Swim-Two-Birds,* Ireland in the 1930s, University College Dublin.

Resumen

At Swim-Two-Birds, la primera novela de Flann O'Brien publicada en 1939, ha sido generalmente considerada como la obra maestra de Flann O'Brien debido a su narración espontánea y su estilo experimental. Sin embargo, sus orígenes y proceso de composición no han sido analizados en profundidad. Este artículo examina los orígenes de *At Swim-Two-Birds* mediante un análisis de la producción literaria de O'Brien anterior a su primera novela, buscando conexiones entre la novela y los primeros escritos de O'Brien. El objetivo de este artículo es demostrar que las ideas y contenidos de *At Swim-Two-Birds* habían estado ya presentes en la mente de O'Brien mucho antes de que comenzase a escribir su primera novela.

Palabras clave: Literatura Irlandesa Contemporánea, Flann O'Brien, Brian O'Nolan, *At Swim-Two-Birds,* Irlanda en los años 30, University College Dublin.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During De Valera's *Fianna Fáil* political dominance in the 1930s, Dublin's literary circles were characterized by a certain drabness and by the predominance of a parochial mentality. Despite the turbulent social situation, a handful of individuals shone in this unseemly cultural bleakness, and most of them were at University College, Dublin (henceforth UCD). During this time, UCD harboured an "immensely talented generation" (Cronin 1990: 55) of future intellectuals and writers, with the figure of Brian O'Nolan outstanding amongst them.

Brian O'Nolan, the master of pseudonyms who was later to be called Brother Barnabas, Flann O'Brien or Myles na gCopaleen — among many other pen names — enrolled in UCD with his natural aptitude for humour as a distinctive feature. He managed fairly well in the academic and intellectual world, publishing prolifically in UCD's *Comhthrom Féinne* — the university's literary journal — and finishing his university degree by writing a MA thesis on "Nature in Irish Poetry" in 1934. His presence was also frequent at the Literary and Historical Society meetings, where he produced ferociously satirical speeches, almost being elected for Auditor. Despite his early problems of alcoholism, in his early twenties Brian O'Nolan was quite an active person given the atmosphere he was immersed in. By 1934, at the age of twenty-four, he had already begun to edit his own newspaper, *Blather,* and to write his first novel.

Flann O'Brien's best friend, Niall Sherridan, stated in *Comhthrom Féinne* in 1934 that his friend "was engaged on a novel so ingeniously constructed that its plot is keeping him well in hand" (Cronin 1990: 90). This complex literary product was to be called *At Swim-Two-Birds* and it would be published in 1939. It has been, since then, Flann O'Brien's most widely known work — despite poor initial sales — and the main focus of study for academics, whose attention has been inevitably drawn to the novel due to its characteristic structure mixing metafiction and Irish mythology. However, until recently, little examination has been devoted to the rest of his oeuvre. Specifically, the most comparatively neglected field of O'Brien's production has been his early writings pre-*At Swim-Two-Birds.* In fact, "[m]ost of his writings from the thirties […] have lain in almost complete obscurity since then" (Wyse Jackson 1988: 8). Whatever the cause may be, it has been proved that *At Swim-Two-Birds* was "not so much 'written' as 'assembled' from bits and pieces which had been lying around neglected for years" (Ó Brolcháin 1997: 9). Moreover, Wyse Jackson has stated that "[f]or the first ten years, say, between 1930 and 1940, he was seeking a voice" (Wyse Jackson 1988: 9). Indeed, *At Swim-Two-Birds'* content, ideas and method had been intermittently flashing in O'Brien's mind prior to the writing of the novel (Murphy & Hopper 2013: 8), thus proving O'Brien's premeditation in contrast to his commonly attributed spontaneity. The result has been an increased amount of scholarly production on *At Swim-Two-Birds,* its structure and themes but lacking a focalized

study on its origins.[1] Therefore, my contention is to examine *At Swim-Two-Birds'* precedents and to look for connections between the novel and O'Brien's previous production aiming to demonstrate that Flann O'Brien had been formulating *At Swim-Two-Birds* in his mind for a long time before he started writing it and to establish a direct relationship between the novel and its literary precedents.

2. PRECEDENTS OF *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

In O'Brien's literary production pre-*At Swim-Two-Birds*, it is perhaps a short story that has mainly attracted the attention of scholars[2]. As mentioned previously, O'Brien's contribution to *Comthromn Féinne,* the university journal at UCD, was constant and fruitful. The short story "Scenes in a Novel" (1934) was published precisely in this journal under the 'Brother Barnabas' pseudonym. The connection between this pseudonym and the production later presented under his most famous persona, Flann O'Brien, has been noted by some authors, such as Ó Brolcháin (1997: 11), who states that most of *Brother Barnabas* production was to appear later in a variety of ways throughout O'Brien's later oeuvre.

"Scenes in a Novel" is a short story that barely covers three pages. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it comprises, in that reduced size, most of the technical content; that is, the style, method and literary resources he uses to display his world of fiction within fiction contained in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, in the short story, as Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper have rightfully stated, "the subject-matter is obviously less fixated in the Irish culture" (2013: 8) in comparison with the novel. Above all, the truth is that "Scenes in a Novel" actually "shows the nascent stirrings of some of the artistic processes that O'Brien would later develop in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* including the 'aestho-autogamy'[3] technique and the character revolt against the despotic author" (Murphy & Hopper 2013: 8). Throughout the comparison of this short story with the novel, I will examine questions and similitudes

[1] In recent years, Flann O'Brien has been the focus of increasing academic interest. Keith Hopper's *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (2nd ed, 2009), Jennika Baines' *Is It about a Bycicle? Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (2011), Neil Murphy's and Keith Hopper's *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Flann O'Brien Centenary Essays* (2011) and their printing of his *Short Fiction* (2013) and Maebh Long's *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (2014) are valid examples.

[2] At the time of writing this paper, no academic contributions have been published focusing precisely on "Scenes in a Novel".

[3] O'Brien's defines it as the process through which a literary character self-begets itself into the story. This so-called technique used and designed by the narrator himself during his story has surprisingly not drawn deserved attention. Just Mellamphy (1985:12) has thought it worthy for subject of analysis, though rather than the technique itself, he has focused on its effects.

related with the style, the plot or the techniques that have been previously pointed out by the authors quoted above but not systematically analysed in depth.

This comparative analysis must start from the beginning. What do *At Swim-Two-Birds* and "Scenes in a Novel" have in common at face value? To a keen O'Brien's reader, the resemblance is extremely evident even at the beginning of both texts. Let us analyse the first lines of each narration:

> Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. 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 many endings (O'Brien 2003: 9).

> I am penning these lines, dear reader, under conditions of great emotional stress, being engaged, as I am, in the composition of a posthumous article. The great blots of sweat which gather on my brow are instantly decanted into a big red handkerchief, though I know the practice is ruinous to the complexion, having regard to the open pores and the poisonous vegetable dyes that are used nowadays in the Japanese sweat-shops. By the time these lines are in neat rows of print, with no damn over-lapping at the edges, the writer will be in Kingdom Come (O'Brien 2013: 49).

On the one hand, *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins by portraying the narrator in a relaxed and contented situation, reflecting on the matter of writing his novel; on the other hand, "Scenes in a Novel" features its narrator, Brother Barnabas himself — which, again, is a similitude with *At Swim-Two-Birds* inasmuch as both narratives have, in a way, the writer himself as narrator, whatever the name or identity he may be using at that moment — under stressful circumstances, making an effort to write a "posthumous article". Ignoring the evident reference to *The Third Policeman* (1967) on this last topic — as Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (2013: 9) have acutely stated[4] — the situation may be different but the beginning, in its essence, is the same: a narrator, under the condition of being a writer, is straightforwardly presented to us about to start writing his text. Apart from the kind of literature they are writing or the circumstances they are under, the connection between the two texts is quite close. Both texts include ridiculing elements that reduce seriousness in the narrator's speech and render it somewhat absurd: in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* the narrator has "placed in

[4] The main character of *The Third Policeman* — O'Brien's second and posthumously published novel (1967) — is literally dead from almost the very beginning of the novel. In fact, the novel was to be called *Hell Goes Round and Round.* Neill Murphy and Keith Hopper quickly noticed that Brother Barnabas is writing something when he knows he is dead already. It is quite possible that O'Brien forged — the same way he did with *At Swim-Two-Birds'* contents — this idea prior to even thinking on writing *The Third Policeman.*

[his] mouth sufficient bread for three minutes chewing" and Brother Barnabas, in "Scenes in a Novel", is worried because of "the poisonous vegetable dyes that are used nowadays in the Japanese sweat-shops". Curiously enough, they proceed metaliterarily speaking, *At Swim-Two-Birds* by announcing its famous theory of the three dissimilar openings while "Scenes in a Novel" does so by disserting on typographic questions.

Now, let us look upon the main characters of both stories, the narrators. Brother Barnabas is engrossed in composing an article, and has rented, to live surrounded by art, Trotsky's villa in Paris. He lives in the midst of poverty and has been forced to sell his personal possessions if he wants to keep his literary activities ongoing. The anonymous Irish student in *At Swim-Two-Birds* attends literary meetings and is always willing to engage in a discussion with his acquaintances on topics related to literature. Moreover, both narrators have the tendency to write under the influence of "intoxicating beverages", as O'Brien would have it: the statements"[…] is a man I created one night when I had swallowed nine stouts and felt vaguely blasphemous" (O'Brien 2013: 50) and "[t]he mind may be impaired by alcohol, I mused, but withal it may be pleasantly impaired" (O'Brien 2003: 22) demonstrate it quite evidently.

However, the most outstanding similarity in terms of characterization lies not in either of the narrators, but in their protagonists: Carruthers McDaid and John Furriskey. Both are creations of their respective writers — on the one hand, Brother Barnabas; on the other hand, Dermot Trellis (an extension of the Irish student) — and they have been created to fulfill a similar purpose. In *At Swim-Two-Birds,* Dermot Trellis is a novelist and is writing a book which will feature John Furriskey. This is the general description the Irish student gives to his colleague Brinsley, before presenting his antihero John Furriskey:

> Trellis […] is writing a book on sin and the wages attaching thereto. He is a philosopher and a moralist. He is appalled by the spate of sexual and other crimes recorded in recent times in the newspapers — particularly in those published on Saturday night. […] Trellis wants this salutary book to be read by all. He realizes that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Therefore he is putting plenty of smut into his book. There will be no less than seven indecent assaults on young girls and any amount of bad language. There will be whiskey and porter for further orders (2003: 35).

Comparatively, in "Scenes in a Novel", we learn the following:

> If a great mind is to be rotted and deranged, no meanness or no outrage is too despicable, no maggot of officialdom is too contemptible to perpetrate it […] the whole incident reminded me forcibly of Carrruthers McDaid. […] [I]f the truth must be told I had started to compose a novel and McDaid was the kernel or the fulcrum of it. Some writers have started with a good and noble hero and traced his weakening, his degradation and his eventual downfall; others have introduced a degenerate villain to be ennobled and uplifted to the tune of twenty-two chapters,

> usually at the hands of a woman [...] In my own case, McDaid, starting off as a rank waster and a rotter, was meant to sink slowly to absolutely the last extremities of human degradation. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was to be too low for him, the wheaten-headed hound […] (O'Brien 2013: 50).

As can be seen, John Furriskey and Carruthers McDaid are the protagonists of a narration which is in the process of being written and Brother Barnabas and the Irish student have prepared for them a depraved course of actions that they are forced to follow. Indeed, in the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds,* it is stated that the book is written with the intention of inducing moral considerations in the reader in order to purify their souls. Dermot Trellis is aware that morality is a value at risk of extinction. However, when we learn the intentions of Brother Barnabas, he does not seem to have a final aim: he just wants to create chaos and destruction through his a character. Regardless of this similarity in terms of intention, they do not share a similar physical appearance. John Furriskey does not seem to have been based on Carruthers McDaid, as can be seen in the following examples: "*The second opening:* There was nothing unusual in the appearance of Mr John Furriskey […] His teeth were well-formed but stained by tobacco, with two molars filled and a cavity threatened in the left canine" (O'Brien 2003: 9). We also learn that he is "a black small man" and that he is dressed with "a suit of navy-blue of the Pre-War style" (2003: 69). On the contrary, in 'Scenes in a Novel', Carruthers McDaid has "a sickly wheaten head, the watery blue eyes of the weakling" (O'Brien 2013: 50). Although both descriptions are not incompatible with each other, there is no explicit connection between both of them.

There is, however, a kind of affinity which is of paramount importance when both characters are present. This similitude, consisting in the use of the aestho-autogamy technique, firstly introduced and named by the narrator himself, is perhaps one of the most important features in common in the two productions. Dermot Trellis is, at the beginning of the novel, engaged in designing a character "so bad that he must be created *ab ovo et initio"* (O'Brien 2003: 35). The fact that the character is being "created" and not "borrowed" from another novel is striking and contradictory as regards the terms of the aforementioned theory enunciated by the young Irish student when talking to his friend. If he is creating him, then, there should not be any similar character in the literary tradition that embodies Furriskey's features. However, this way of creating is unparalleled: "he was born at the age of twenty-five and entered the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it" (2003: 9). Aestho-autogamy has been noted by some scholars as a way of "[dramatizing] the tensions between chaos and control essential to the dilemma of the artist as creator and to the experience of the reader as interpretative co-creator" (Mellamphy 1985: 12). That is because the novel, constantly displaying the process of creative writing as one of its major characteristics, intentionally puts the reader into the mind of the artist. Besides, aestho-autogamy seems to be, in the crazy world of Dermot Trellis, a regular and trustworthy resource when creating characters:

> *Extract from the press regarding Furriskey's birth:* We are in the position to announce that a happy event has taken place at the Red Swan Hotel, where the proprietor, Mr Dermot Trellis, has succeeded in encompassing the birth of a man called Furriskey. […]
>
> Our Medical Correspondent writes: the birth of a son in the Red Swan Hotel is a fitting tribute to the zeal and perseverance of Mr Dermot Trellis, who has won international repute in connexion with his researches into the theory of aestho-autogamy. […]
>
> Aestho-autogamy with one unknown quality on the male side, Mr Trellis told me in conversation, has long been a commonplace. For fully five centuries in all parts of the world epileptic slaves have been pleading it in extenuation of uncalled-for-fecundity. It is a very familiar phenomenon in literature. (2003: 40)

The creation of Furriskey will cause problems for Trellis: Furriskey will be the first one to consider the possibility of a revolution against the despotic author; indeed, he will marry somebody he was not meant to and will encourage the other characters to revolt before Trellis awakes. When he is born, in the middle of a room, he is requested by a voice that comes from a previously formed cloud to be ready for something. That voice, as may be expected, is Trellis', who intends Furriskey to obey his orders. Later on, Trellis will have to answer before a jury in a trial about the facts of this event.

As we can imagine, given the direct relation between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and "Scenes in a Novel", a theory as innovative as the aestho-autogamy technique must have its parallel in the original text. In fact, the appearance of aestho-autogamy in "Scenes in a Novel" is slightly different from *At Swim-Two-Birds* inasmuch as it is neither explicit nor detailed: there is no theorizing about either the application or the name it is given. Brother Barnabas simply needs to create a character and avoid all the dull data about his birth and infancy, so he makes use of the aestho-autogamy process to create Carruthers McDaid. It is clear then that in the novel O'Brien was expanding on a roughly created idea from the short story:

> Carruthers McDaid is a man I created one night when I had swallowed nine stouts and felt vaguely blasphemous. I gave him a good but worn-out mother and an industrious father, and coolly negativing fifty years of eugenics, made him a worthless scoundrel, a betrayer of women and a secret drinker. (O'Brien 2013: 50)

Brother Barnabas, also under the influence of "intoxicating beverages", *creates* Carruthers McDaid. It is interesting to note how O'Brien follows the same process as when he sets out Trellis to create Furriskey: he avoids any previous past biographical information about the character and just selects the main features about him. Also, the character seems to have been provided with a consciousness when he is being created, because he seemed to have asked to be being a learned person who had studied "fifty years of eugenics" (2013: 50), a condition that his creator refuses to bestow.

The use of this procedure seems to enhance the superiority of the author over his creation, in every sense. However, it seems that being so daring as to play God has its consequences. In both cases, there is a negative response regarding the created characters. This is one of the predominant features of the characteristic structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and highly dependent on the division in different narrative levels; in "Scenes in a Novel" the same situation takes place but in a comprised way. The conflict is, however, more direct; and the interactions between the characters and their creator are easier to appreciate in the 1934 short story. There is a moment in *At Swim-Two-Birds* when the Irish student is speaking to his friend Brinsley about the novel he is composing and its elements. He asserts that "he is compelling all his characters to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them and see there is no boozing" (O'Brien 2003: 35). However, despite this precautionary measure, he cannot control them all the time: "Trellis has absolute control over his minions but this control is abandoned when he falls asleep" (2003: 35). Given Trellis' fondness for bed, it is not surprising that the characters are acting behind his back. They begin by arranging little innocuous conversations in the Red Swan Hotel, but as they grow fonder of each other, they begin to scheme. This scheming bursts when "*Note on Constructional or Argumentative Difficulty"* (2003: 144) takes place: that is, the birth of Orlick. Orlick is the byproduct of the sexual interaction between Trellis, the creator, and Sheila, Trellis' own creation. He arrives on the scene intending to have a good time with the characters present but he is quickly encouraged to write something. This activity they are about to perform is not precisely harmless: they intend to give Trellis what he deserved by writing a story where he suffers. Later on, after the first story is unsuccessfully encompassed, a trial will take place in which the characters are about to judge Trellis for his depraved methods of treating characters.

In "Scenes in a Novel", the same problem takes place. Characters are not fully convinced of the role they must play in the story and some of them completely disagree with the actions they are supposed to perform. For example, "McDaid, who for a whole week had been living precariously by selling kittens to foolish old ladies and who could be said to be existing on the immoral earnings of his cat, was required to rob a poor-box in a church. But no! Plot, or no plot, it was not to be" (O'Brien 2013: 51). Therefore, the idea of plot vanishes and the chains that attach a character to the story are dangerously loose. McDaid is certainly free to do whatever he wants, but Brother Barnabas is not precisely happy with this turn of events:

> "Sorry, old chap," he said, "but I absolutely can't do it."
> "What's this, Mac," said I, "getting squeamish in your old age?"
> "Not squeamish exactly," he replied, "but I bar poor boxes. Dammit, you can't call me squeamish. Think of that bedroom business in Chapter Two, you old dog."
> "Not another word," said I sternly, "you remember that new shaving brush you bought?"
> "Yes."
> "Very well, you burst the poor-box or it's anthrax in two days."

> "But, I say, old chap, that's a bit thick."
> "You think so? Well, I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that your opinions don't matter". (2013: 51)

The only remedy left for the author is to threaten his characters with death and suffering. It is the same case as in Trellis'. They are "determined to yield not one tittle of [their] inalienable rights" (2013: 51). Again, Carruthers McDaid is unhappy with his fate of serving evil and he wants to do something different. Moreover, this matter of the revolt of characters against their creator is something that even Brother Barnabas recognizes as "new":

> Knowing that he was a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, I had sent him to a revivalist prayer-meeting, purely for the purpose of scoffing and showing the reader the blackness of his soul. It appears that he remained to pray. Two days afterwards I caught him sneaking out to Gardiner Street at seven in the morning. Furthermore, a contribution to the funds of a well-known charity, a matter of four-and-sixpence in the name of Miles Caritatis was not, I understand, unconnected with our proselyte. A character ratting on his creator and exchanging the pre-destined hangman's rope for a halo is something new. (2013: 51)

It is difficult to assert whether Carruthers McDaid really wants to be good or he just wants to annoy his creator; however, what is really important here is that Carruthers McDaid has taken a step forward and has released himself from the yoke of his creator. The example of McDaid is followed by other characters, such as Shaun Svoolish, the hero of the story. Brother Barnabas intends Svoolish to marry a character he has created, Sheila[5], a natural beauty produced "for the sole purpose of loving [Shaun] and becoming his wife". However, Shaun Svoolish cannot heed him:

> "Frankly, Shaun," I said, "I don't like it."
> "I'm sorry," he said. "My brains, my brawn, my hands, my body are willing to work for you, but the heart! Who shall say yea or nay to the timeless passions of a man's heart? Have you ever been in love? Have you ever—?
> "What about Sheila, you shameless rotter? I gave her dimples, blue eyes, blonde hair and a beautiful soul. The last time she met you, I rigged her out in a blue swagger outfit, brand new. You now throw the whole lot back in my face … Call it cricket if you like, Shaun, but don't expect me to agree."
> "I may be a pig," he replied, "but I know what I like. Why can't I marry Bridie and have a shot at the Civil Service?"
> "Railway accidents are fortunately rare," I said finally, "but when they happen they are horrible. Think it over."
> "You wouldn't dare!"
> "O, wouldn't I? Maybe you'd like a new shaving brush as well."
> And that was that". (2013: 52)

[5] Another clear reference to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Sheila Lamont is a character Dermot Trellis creates based on his own paradigm of beauty. He rapes her, his own creation, and the biological product to that unlikely union is Orlick.

He wants to marry another character but Brother Barnabas is not willing. Thus, he threatens Shaun Svoolish, his hero, with killing him by means of a shaving brush — again — or by arranging a train accident. Brother Barnabas really seems to be under severe pressure when trying to control his wayward creations. In fact, as in the case of Trellis, he is under threat of death due to the sudden disappearance of a paper-knife: "What is troubling me just at the moment, however, is a paper-knife. I introduced it in an early scene to give Father Hennessy something to fiddle with on a parochial call. It is now in the hands of McDaid. It has a dull steel blade, and there is evidently something going on" (2013: 52) He then adds that "the book is seething with conspiracy" (2013: 52). He is not, however, in the same condition as Trellis; he is wide awake and can perceive his character's movements. But, despite his attention, he is about to suffer the same fate as Trellis, the only difference being that he does not have the help of his maid at the last moment. When Trellis' characters are preparing the death sentence to end with Trellis once and for all, in the superior planes of narration Trellis' maid suddenly appears and by mistake throws her master's papers into the fire. Brother Barnabas is telling us this story from a posthumous perspective which is specified at the beginning of the story; that is, Brother Barnabas is dead. This posthumous innovative kind of writing — later on exploited in *The Third Policeman* — induces us to think that Brother Barnabas' characters have been successful in killing him. The truth is that "Scenes in a Novel" was indeed the last production O'Brien wrote under the pseudonym "Brother Barnabas". "Scenes in a Novel" is, therefore, the most specific reference to *At Swim-Two-Birds* throughout O'Brien's early production and a leading precursor when talking about the origins of O'Brien's first novel.

However, there were other short stories published in *Comhthrom Féinne* that contained inklings to *At Swim-Two-Birds*[6]. Two interesting examples are the two "Lionel Prune" columns: "Lionel Prune comes to UCD" and "Lionel Prune must go", both published under the "Brother Barnabas" persona and with Barnabas as the main character. In these two recollections, he relates the encounter with Lionel Prune, a fictional poet who attends UCD for a short period in order to seek inspiration. From these two stories there are a few interesting things to note. First of all, they both feature Brother Barnabas, who is a student, and both take place in UCD. This inevitably draws the reader's attention to *At Swim-Two-Birds'* main character, the anonymous student. There is, as happens in the novel, a general description of the college to recreate the setting. Our character Brother Barnabas interviews him and the

[6] Ó Brolcháin (1997: 10) has pointed out that a short story called *The Voice of Eternity* (*Glór an tSíoraíocht*), published in *Comhthrom Féinne*'s March 1933 issue is also related to *At Swim-Two-Birds* inasmuch as Finn MacCool and Irish mythology play an important role in it. However, this story still remains unpublished in English, thus rendering this field of *At Swim-Two-Birds*' origins presently unavailable for non Irish-speaking scholars. I would like to thank Neil Murphy for his helpful information on this particular point.

poet feels comfortable enough to share pieces of his own spontaneous poetry with Brother Barnabas. And here there is the link with *At Swim-Two-Birds:* both works abound with poetry. The columns are constructed by a succession of poems read by Lionel Prune. Though there is no noticeable relation between those pieces and *At Swim-Two-Birds'* own compositions, it is true that O'Brien seems to be experimenting with a generic mixing at this early stage of his writing career. Apart from that, the inclusion of literary opinions and theories on the part of the narrator when listening the poetry is also something to remark upon: "Note the staccato rhythm (he went on) the air of fervid nothingness followed by the dramatic *dénouement.* […] How simple, but how impressive! In a perfect picture without a word wasted it exposed the hollowness of modern thought! […] Art has been caged cramped and must be free" (O'Brien 1988: 30-31). It somewhat reminds us of the famous aesthetic theories in *At Swim-Two-Birds* on the concept of the novel that art must be free from any kind of chain:

> The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. 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 a decent standard of living. (O'Brien 2003: 25)

It is an imprecise connection, albeit valid; as shown in the column "The 'L. & H.' from the earliest times", where he points Finn McCool, one of the mythical Irish characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* as being the Auditor of the Literary and Historical Society in 198 AD: "Auditor, Mr F. McCool, B. Agr.Sc. Mr McCool, speaking first in Irish and continuing in English, said he wished to draw the attention of the members to a reference in the Minutes of previous — very previous — meetings, to 'members' tails'" (O'Brien 1988: 23). The question is: what is Finn McCool, a legendary character, doing in a university comic column and appearing later on in a novel as a main character? The connection can be drawn: O'Brien, as a student of old Irish, had knowledge of the legends and traditions of his own culture and attempted to include elements from that source in his literary productions. Also, the humorous aspect of taking a legendary hero and turning him into a mundane middle-class Irishman seems to be part of O'Brien's comic agenda: to overturn conventional ideas using humour and devices such as well-known figures to create a new order; that is, to turn the extraordinary into the ordinary.

There are, however, even further glimpses to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The following pre-*At Swim-Two-Birds* literary products we will examine were mostly published under another of his early identities, The O'Blather, a persona he adopted when he launched his own magazine, *Blather,* in August 1934. *Blather,* edited by Flann O'Brien along with his brother Ciarán and his friend Niall Sherridan, was a humorous magazine that was to last only five issues — until January 1935 — due to the absence

of advertisements. However, it was also a forerunner of O'Brien's unique journalism which was later to be demonstrated in his famous *Irish Times'* column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, beginning in 1940. In fact, it has been pointed out that "the editorials are pre-Mylesian flights of fancy" (Wyse Jackson 1988: 98). Nevertheless, *Blather* was not just an experimentation for what was to come after his first novel, but also some dispensable draft of what he had begun writing at that time; that is, *At Swim-Two-Birds.*

Throughout the five issues of *Blather*, there are several elements that might induce the reader to establish a connection between the pieces published in the magazine and O'Brien's first novel. For example, in the column[7] "Your ignoramus of a son? … What of his future? … For that matter, what of his past?" presents us a succinct but obvious reference to a certain *At Swim-Two-Birds'* fragment related to cowboys: "A lucrative but somewhat overcrowded profession. Candidates must be able to throw a sombrero in the air and riddle it with a six-shooter […]. Cowboys can always get a living punching steers in Ringsend, or holding up the Tullamore stage at Tyrrelspass" (O'Brien 1988: 159). Though perhaps not excessively noteworthy, it has also been pointed out by other authors, like Cronin, that "*At Swim-Two-Birds* was already in some sort of gestation and that Brian Ó Nualláin had already formed the habit of maturing his comic themes a long time in advance" (Cronin 1990: 80). It has been frequently noted in the passage at the beginning of the novel where Mr. Shanahan recalls previous experiences not under Trellis' command, but under Tracy's, — an author whose death allows Trellis to extract characters from the deceased's stories and to use them freely — who ordered him to participate in some cow-punching business in Ringsend. The following fragment, belonging to *At Swim-Two-Birds,* proves that O'Brien included in his first novel a subplot dealing with Westerns and cowboys, which inevitably leads the reader's attention back to the column quoted above:

> *Substance of reminiscence by Mr Shanahan, the comments of his hearers being embodied parenthetically in the text; with relevant excerpts from the public Press*: Do you know what I am going to tell you, here was a rare life in Dublin in the old days. (There was certainly.) That was the day of the great O'Callagan, the day of Baskin, the day of Tracy that brought cowboys to Ringsend. I knew them all, man. (O'Brien 2003: 53)

Moving on to other literary manifestations, one of the most important of these series of columns, articles and stories published under The O'Blather pseudonym is "Hash". "Hash" is presented by his author, The O'Blather, in the following way:

> A novel — even a very bad one — can cost you a good sevenansix-pence. Eleven or twelve novels can cost you £4 2.s 6d. (or £5 5s. 0d., as the case may be). *Blather,* ever jealous for your honour and eager that you shall not let our grand old paper

[7] The compilations from which the columns are quoted lack the original date of publication.

> down by displays of ignorance or illiteracy when In Company, has pleasure in presenting the pith and the cream of eleven or twelve novels in the grand Non-stop Hash-up below. (O'Brien 1988: 125)

He further adds that "you are even saved the bother of wading through pages of muck in order to get at the good bits" (1988: 125). The column consists basically in a "hash", that is, joining a chaotic mixture of fragments belonging to different texts in order to create a story. As we can see, the intended effect is purely comical, but it compellingly reminds the reader of *At Swim-Two-Birds'* characteristic principles of juxtaposition — being determined as the main characteristic of the novel (Mellamphy, 1985: 13) — and its ability to "recognize and manipulate different styles of writing and [to subvert] various high and pedestrian styles of writing" (Cohen 1993: 211). O'Brien's technique of generic juxtaposition and intertextual narrative is first hinted at the very beginning of the novel, when we are informed that our nameless author deals with a wide variety of genres and sources:

> The washstand had a ledge upon which I had arranged a number of books. Each of them was generally recognized as indispensable to all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature and my small collection contained works ranging from those of Mr Joyce to the widely read books of Mr A. Huxley, the eminent English writer. […] The mantelpiece contained forty buckskin volumes comprising a Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences. (O'Brien 2003: 11)

Given the content of the column "Hash", it is easy to understand O'Brien's dexterity when compiling and conveniently arranging literary excerpts at his will. However, *At Swim-Two-Birds'* inclusion of different texts to create one has not, as it happens in "Hash", a recreative aim, but many of them "serve as textual reflections of the main themes" (Gallagher 1992: 122). Indeed, "Hash" intention is purely spontaneous, aiming to link texts in order to create a cohesive and coherent story; meanwhile, *At Swim-Two-Birds* includes throughout its own narrative fragments of different texts to support and to complete the narration itself. This proves to be another instance in which O'Brien was gathering previously manufactured literary ideas and remodeling them into a new artistic, more polished product.

However, O'Brien's activities during the 1930s were not only related to journalism and writing columns. In fact, he developed the typology of the short story fairly well — as it has been previously demonstrated with "Scenes in a Novel" — such as in the case of "The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!" (1932), published in *The Irish Press,* curiously enough, under his real name: Brian Ó Nualláin. Though there are no apparent similarities regarding the plot, it is interesting the early experimental use of the *mise-en-abyme* technique[8] and the division of the story in headings:

[8] Literarily speaking, the *mise-en-abyme* technique consists in the inclusion of sub-texts or narrative frames which are always dependent on the core text. Constanza del Río Alvaro's article

THE DRUNKARD'S STORY

> "Stay for a moment," he said, "until I tell you my story. It'll depress you, if you're a normal man at all. . . . One airy Spring morning ten years ago, I heard the woman's voice for the first time, and if my memory is not deranged, I reckoned at the time that she had a good voice, a voice that would become first-rate with care and practice. (O'Brien 2013: 35)

This division into different headings was a narrative technique he adopted in his early writings but also one that he perfected in *At Swim-Two-Birds.* "Revenge on the English in the Year 2032" (1932) and "The Arrival and Departure of John Bull: The Relic of English — Let it Be Put on Record!" (1932), also published under his real name, also show this unique characteristic. The latter is even more similar to *At Swim-Two-Birds* inasmuch as it toys with the idea of including mythological and legendary Irish characters in the narrative: "On an assembly day, when the high-council was convened by Séan Mac Cumhaill, son of Airt son of Tréanmhóir of the Lineage of Baosigne, and the seven tribes of the Gaels and the seven tribes of the Common Gaels were gathered in Dun Laoghaire […]" (2013: 29). Generally, his contributions during this time were, in fact — as it has been aforementioned — a conscious search for his own style and method. Moreover, these contributions also tend to show genetic features of future and mature O'Brien works, especially *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* (Wyse Jackson 1988: 163).

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, it has been demonstrated that *At Swim-Two-Birds* was a novel whose process of composition started before 1934, when all critical accounts place the beginning of its composition. To do so, all of O'Brien's currently available literary productions pre-*At Swim-Two-Birds* have been reviewed in order to find connections that would show signs that they served as training or inspiration when writing the novel. As it has been posed, "Scenes in a Novel" is the most obvious production and the majority of the technical processes of *At Swim-Two-Birds* comes from the short story. The use O'Brien makes of metafiction in general, the so-called aestho-autogamy technique and the character's uprising against their creator are especially relevant for the analysis of this issue. It is thus clear that when 'Scenes in a Novel' was published, Flann O'Brien already had consistently laid the foundations of his first novel. However, these previous productions show recently discovered signs

entitled "Narrative embeddings in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*" (1994) explores this issue in depth.

of *At Swim-Two-Bird* having been wandering in O'Brien's mind even long before "Scenes in a Novel". Precisely, the short stories published under the *Irish Press* in 1932, "The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!", "Revenge on the English in the Year 2032" and "The Arrival and Departure of John Bull: The Relic of English — Let it Be Put on Record!" are perhaps the earliest literary productions O'Brien wrote showing signs of an incipient *At Swim-Two-Birds.* Other literary attempts written in *Comhthrom Féinne* and in *Blather* are possibly early considerations of elements which he would later include in the novel. Apart from that, the other main purpose of this article has been to prove O'Brien not to be as spontaneous and unreflective an author as has been suggested until now, but rather premeditative and thoughtful. O'Brien definitely took up previously sketched ideas and perfected them to include them in his first novel. A direct analysis of these literary productions but also the opinions of renowned academics would point to the same direction: the elaborated and carefully-crafted origins of *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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