

Agonizing with Joyce: At Swim-Two-Birds as Thanatography

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Who Killed James Joyce?

That poor writer's end was hastened by that same intrusive apostrophe.

--Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*

A draft of this essay was delivered in 1989 to the panel session "Joyce and Flann O'Brien: Fifty Years of *At Swim-Two-Birds*," that panel being one among many at the international James Joyce conference, held that year in the city of brotherly love, Philadelphia. There is an irony at work here, one not without charm: the creature apparently most loathed by our self styled "ontological polymorph" Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen--especially by the last of the three--was the American Joyce scholar. That vasty archive which is *Cruiskeen Lawn* ("Full Little Jug," the column that Myles authored for the *Irish Times* for over twenty years) offers abundant evidence of this deep-seated antipathy. On 9 September 1949, for example, the "Plain People of Ireland" are warned of the "four thousand strong corps of American simpletons now in Dublin doing a thesis on James Joyce" (qtd. in Powell 53). On 7 July 1953 Myles reports that one such simpleton by the name of Richard Ellmann is in town to complete the "grim task" of writing a book on James Joyce (which book, of course, would, when published, come to be recognized not only as *the* biography of Joyce but also as the model of *all* modern literary biography); if Ellmann tries to contact him, Myles promises, "I guarantee that I will frighten the life out of him by the disclosure of the state of my mind" (qtd. in Powell 54). Then on 20 December 20 1961--just a few years before his death--our latter-day Swift makes the following modest proposal: "The Irish Government would be in order in refusing a visa to any American student unless he had undertaken, by affidavit on oath, not to do a 'thesis' on James Joyce and subsequently have it published as a book. All literature has been defaced by so many such abortions" (qtd. in Powell 60-61). A rather

harsh metaphor, abortion, especially considering the circumstances of its deployment: by a devout Catholic author to a mostly Catholic audience--this, of course, in a country where abortion is strictly illegal.

Myles was not alone among his countrymen in expressing indignation at the depredation of narrow-backed academic interlopers; his sometime-friend (most of Myles's friends were *sometime*-friends) Patrick "Paddy" Kavanaugh, to commemorate his participation in Dublin's 1954 Bloomsday celebration--the fiftieth Bloomsday since that first and fateful one--composed a poem entitled "Who Killed James Joyce?" Following are its first two stanzas:

Who killed James Joyce?
I, said the commentator,
I killed James Joyce
For my graduation.

What weapon was used
To slay mighty Ulysses?
The weapon that was used
Was a Harvard thesis.

(Kavanaugh 51)

Clearly, for O'Brien and Kavanaugh--and for many others among the Irish intelligentsia--the Joycean corpus is strictly an Irish affair. Myles asserts of *Ulysses* that only a "Dublin Paddy could get more than ten per cent of its meanings: it is manifest that foreigners DO get meanings, but meanings which are other . . . the magic of misunderstanding" (qtd. in Powell 54).

The above citations might lead one to believe that O'Brien was a true-blue disciple of Joyce, saw himself as the defender of the Joycean faith, protector of the Joyce legacy. And in certain moments he certainly did represent himself as such. Yet as often as not, when he assumes this role, Myles has his tongue clearly in his cheek--for example when

he plays Shelley to Joyce's Keats, asserting that the great man died of disappointment when a critic mistakenly made a possessive of the plural "Finnegans" in the title of his last book (see epigraph). Here the target is not so much the critic as the author: Joyce is being taken to task for his immense vanity. And the fact is that, next to the American Joyce scholar, no figure comes in for more Mylesian spleen than Joyce himself. As was the case with many admirers of "the mighty Ulysses" (including for example Joyce's greatest early champion, Ezra Pound), Myles could not forgive the Master for having produced *Finnegans Wake*, that "wallet of literary underwear," as Myles at one point describes it (qtd. in Powell 57). He goes on in his column to complain of that Joyce,

He often committed that least excusable of follies, being "literary." His attempted demolition of language was his other major attainment. What would you think of a man who entered a restaurant, sat down, suddenly whipped up the tablecloth and blew his nose on it? You would not like it--not if you owned the restaurant. That is what Joyce did with our beloved tongue that Shakespeare and Milton spoke. . . . I suppose all experiment entails destruction, and every one of us may yet pay with our lives for certain nuclear experiments being now conducted by the Americans and the Russians. (qtd. in Powell 59).

If in Myles's view most Joyce scholarship is equivalent to abortion, so Joyce's *Wake* is a veritable Hiroshima, a disaster brought about by the blind hubris of the modern experimenter. Myles becomes quite fond of this metaphor, returns to it on 22 December 1964: "*Finnegans Wake* left a sort of Wake Island in the sea of literature" (qtd. in Powell 61). A bad pun there, worthy of the Master himself.

What is readily apparent within the margins of the Mylesian text, then, is the workings of a profound ambivalence toward Joyce--an almost constant vacillation between admiration and denigration, devotion and denial, love and hate. That this ambivalence has an Oedipal quality should not surprise, given that Joyce was, after all, something of a father to our author. It is the nature of that "something" that this essay seeks to investigate.

The Name(s) of the Father(s)

It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support

of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history,
has identified his person with the figure of the law.

--Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*

Jimmy Joyce back from Paris gives me the cold shoulder
doesn't know anyone it wouldn't have been old Simon's way.

--Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*

"O'Nolan" is clear enough: it was the name of our subject's fleshly father, a customs official who contributed significantly to the production of twelve children, the third of which, born 5 October 1911, was assigned the appellative "Brian."¹ A man both literate and patriotic, this father required that Irish, and Irish only, be spoken in the home, the result being that Brian became one of the better Irish language scholars of his day (as Myles spares no pains to inform the public). As for material legacy, a brother recalls that O'Nolan senior left O'Nolan junior a fine fountain pen, which in the son's sinewy hand would become a formidable weapon (cited in O'Keeffe 30). This instrument makes an appearance (a decidedly phallic one) in one of Brian's "translations" from the Irish:

My hand has a pain from writing,
Not steady the sharp tool of my craft,
Its slender beak spews bright ink--
A beetle-dark shining draught. (cited in O'Keeffe 9)

The pseudonym Myles Na gCopaleen (or Gopaleen, in another of its spellings) was probably taken from the hero of Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860)--"Myles of the Ponies" being an Irish picaro: a rough-and-ready, hard-drinking, thoroughly charming rogue. This character's first entrance in Boucicault's play is, in respect to the problem of establishing identity (always a problem with our subject author[s]), quite suggestive:

Enter MYLES singing, with a keg on his shoulder.

CORRIGAN: Is that you, Myles?

MYLES: No! it's my brother. (Boucicault 60)

O'Nolan, evidently impressed by this grand entrance, would develop in *Cruiskeen Lawn* (the "full little" keg on Myles's shoulder?) the adventures of "The Brother"--a sort of boarding house *magnifico*. Myles was the name by which most of O'Nolan's world (that is, Dublin city and environs) knew him in life--a name the sound of which inspired either profound laughter or profound dread, depending upon the auditor.

But what of the third of our trinity of names, "Flann O'Brien"? The name of the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds*? In a letter to his publishers of 10 November 1938, our hero writes, "I have been thinking over the question of a pen-name and would suggest FLANN O'BRIEN. I think this invention has the advantage that it contains an unusual Irish name and one that is quite ordinary. 'Flann' is an old Irish name now rarely heard" ("Sheaf" 67). Although this letter might suggest that the name had come fresh off the top of the writer's head, the fact is that "Flann O'Brien" had a history--the way a loose woman has a history. An anxious author writes again to his publisher in January 1939: "I am extremely sorry if I appear to be nervous and shilly-shallying in connection with my book but I am afraid that title 'At Swim-Two-Birds' must be changed, likewise 'Flann O'Brien.' I have long had a hobby of provoking dogfights in the newspapers here on any topic from literature to vivisection and I have been using 'Flann O'Brien' as a pen name for some time" (qtd. in Wäppling 18).

"Flann" means "blood red"--a by no means inappropriate appellative, given the young man's "hobby." But what of "O'Brien"? Are we to accept that the name was chosen simply because it was common? The choice may have been somewhat more complicated than that. In the "Eumaeus" chapter of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom recalls how Parnell's "trusty henchmen . . . penetrated into the printing works of the Insuppressible no it was United Ireland (a by no means, by the by, appropriate appellative) and broke up the typecases with hammers or something like that all on account of *some scurrilous effusions from the facile pens of the O'Brienite scribes at their usual mudslinging*

occupation, reflecting on the erstwhile tribune's private morals" (654; emphasis mine).² Quite the Mylesian occupation, that. Could it be that our subject had this passage in mind when choosing his (other) pen name?

John Garvin, once O'Nolan's boss and another of his sometime-friends (he contributed the Greek epigraph to *At Swim*), offers another theory of derivation: "I do not recall having ever discussed with Brian the origin of his pen-name, Flann O'Brien, but I was and am quite certain that he derived it from the hero of an old ballad, Brian O Lynn, in Irish, Brian O'Fhloinn, which he turned backways, taking the nominative of O'Fhloinn, Flann, as a personal name which, indeed, it was--one thousand years previously" (qtd. in O'Keeffe 60). Granting Garvin authority in this matter, we may also grant Joyce some, for in *Finnegans Wake*--that book Myles loved to hate--"Brian O'Lynn" is transformed into "Lynn O'Brien" (70). If Myles was familiar with Joyce's text in the late thirties (which is altogether likely, given that Joyce's *Work in Progress* had been in serial publication for years prior to the text's appearance in book form), he may have been taking his cue in turning the name Brian O'Lynn "backways" (as Garvin puts it) from Joyce. For O'Nolan to take his pen name from Joyce (from either *Ulysses* or the *Wake* or both) is, in a sense, to be named *by* Joyce, as a son is named by his father. So if the nom de plume is also the *nom de guerre* (as it always is with O'Brien, whose first pen name, adopted when he was a university student, was *An Broc*--the badger), the *nom de guerre* is also, as Lacan puts it, the *Nom du Pere*.

That the pen name of the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* may be Joycean seems fitting enough, given that the name of the main character of the text, the plagiarist Dermot Trellis, may also be derived from Joyce. As Mays notes, Joyce described his use of the philosophy of Vico in *Work in Progress* as follows: "Of course, I don't take Vico's speculations literally; I use his cycles as a trellis" (qtd. in O'Keeffe 106).³ Yet the presence of Joyce in O'Brien's first novel goes far beyond one character's name. As almost every critic of the text has noted, it is, among infinite other things, a thoroughgoing parody or pastiche of the Joycean corpus, from *Dubliners* to *Work in Progress/Finnegans Wake*. The book resembles *Ulysses*, for example, in that it is written in a variety of styles--thirty-six, according to the count of one scholar (Clissmann 86)--

and features a frame narrator who, in his person and in some aspects of his personality, bears a striking resemblance to Stephen Dedalus, both of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. Just as Joyce introduces into the otherwise-naturalistic *Ulysses* echoes of the mythic story of Homer's *Odyssey*, so O'Brien incorporates into his realistic novel of Dublin student life the ancient Irish tales of the Madness of Sweeny and the feats of Finn Mac Cool. By juxtaposing mythic with everyday characters, O'Brien creates an uncanny and hilarious effect--much the same effect achieved by the grotesque "gigantism" of the "Cyclops" chapter of *Ulysses*. One can go on drawing such parallels for pages (many have, so I won't here⁴); in short, one can say that O'Brien has answered Joyce's Luciferian *Non Serviam!* with a more earthy, and more Irish, *Pogue Mahone!*⁵

Niall Sheridan (who played Pound to O'Nolan's Eliot, cutting one-fifth of the text of *At Swim* in manuscript) remembers carrying this new Work-In-Progress to Joyce in Paris; on the flyleaf was inscribed the following: "To James Joyce from the author,/Brian O'Nolan with plenty of/What's on page 305"--and on that page was underlined the phrase "diffidence of the author" (qtd. in Cronin 93). A diffident Myles? A diffident Flann? Can badgers be diffident? Joyce, we are told, loved the book ("the last novel he ever read"--Cronin 94), thought it the work of "a real writer, with a true comic spirit" (this praise now the inevitable jacket blurb). One might expect such praise to please a "diffident" young man, but a letter to his publisher in May 1939 seems to suggest otherwise: "a friend of mine brought a copy of 'At Swim-Two-Birds' to Joyce in Paris recently. . . . Being now nearly blind, he said it took him a week with a magnifying glass and that he had not read a book of any kind for five years, so this may be taken to be a compliment from the Fuhrer. He was delighted with it--although he complained that I did not give the reader much of a chance, *Finnegan's* [sic] *Wake* in his hand as he spoke" (qtd. in Cronin 93). The tone here suggests O'Nolan's indignation at having been patronized (he felt) by Joyce. This response appears the opposite of "diffidence," certainly. The comparison with Hitler is intriguing, particularly in the light of Myles's late comment about the fate of Flann's novel. From *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 4 February 1965: "In the year 1939, a book curiously entitled *At Swim Two-Birds* appeared. Adolf Hitler took serious exception to it and in fact loathed it so much that he started World War II in order to torpedo it. In a

grim irony that is not without charm, the book survived the war while Hitler did not" (qtd. in Clissmann, 78-79). Neither, of course, did Joyce survive, although Flann O'Brien would resurrect him later, in 1965, as a character in *The Dalkey Archive*. "A man says to me 'What do you mean "the late James Joyce"? You might as well say Hitler is dead' " ("Sheaf" 80). From any perspective, the continued identification of James Joyce with Adolf Hitler--our century's Bad Father--must be telling. But what does it tell?

Flann Meets Freud

. . . and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use--silence, exile, and cunning.

--James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

A wise old owl once lived in a wood, the more he heard the less he said, the less he said the more he heard, let's emulate that wise old bird.

--Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*

"Do you know what I'm going to tell you?" Telling is important to our author, who was after all a scholar of the oral tradition in Irish literature. Telling is also important in psychoanalysis, the "talking cure." When it comes to reading our author's works, then, is psychoanalysis "your only man"?

One can be sure that O'Nolan would howl out in protest at the prospect of his work being subjected to the Freudian gaze. In *At Swim*, the frame narrator and his friend Brinsley are engaged in "sapient colloquy" during which we are told, "Psychoanalysis was mentioned--with, however, a somewhat light touch" (32). A light touch, one gathers, because the boys found Freud's hand rather heavy. The Father of the Oedipus Complex also takes his lumps near novel's end, this in the context of psychoanalytic literary criticism: "Professor Unternehmer, the eminent German neurologist, points to Claudius as a lunatic but allows Trellis an inverted sow neurosis wherein the farrow eat their dam" (314-15). In a review he wrote in 1950 of Strong's *The Sacred River: An Approach to James Joyce*--a review with the suggestive title "Joyce Re-Approached" (Joyce reproached?)--Myles scolds

Strong for making too much of Joyce's interest "in the pseudo-science formulated by Freud and Adler" (71). Finally, our author expresses contempt for writers such as Proust and Kafka, takes them to task for engaging in (literary) autoanalysis when he refers to them as "layabouts from the slums of Europe poking around in the sickly little psyches" (qtd. in O'Keeffe 39-40). In short, O'Nolan's distaste for biography of the type that "lifts the veil"--and thereby dismantles the careful "compartmentalization of personality" he thought necessary for proper literary utterance--makes it inevitable that he should violently reject that highly specialized form of veil-lifting that Freud fathered.

A psychoanalyst, of course, would account for such violent rejection by labeling it as symptomatic of "denial." In other words, our author is protesting too much. Perhaps O'Nolan is so deprecatory of psychoanalytic approaches to literature because he is aware, on some level, of how readily his works lend themselves to such "treatment." This is especially true of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where the Freudian Primal Scene is massively translated to the realm of literary relations. A concern with origins--the inaugural and motivating concern of Freudian psychoanalysis--in this context becomes a concern over *originality*, more precisely *literary* originality. *At Swim* can be seen as an extended interrogation of the idea of legitimate beginnings. Myles in this column fearlessly admits that his "sole contribution to the terrestrial literatures has been to refute each and every claim to originality on the part of other writers" (qtd. in Powell 58). Thus in the eyes of *At Swim*'s frame narrator, the novel becomes a "work of reference," *should* be a "self-evident sham" (33). That the frame narrator's antiaesthetics are also Myles's is made evident by a perusal of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, wherein the latter writes "that all literature is, *per se*, disgusting. Turning a page is like lifting a flat stone--you see maggots" (*Hair* 165). *At Swim-Two Birds*, then, can be seen as a ludic intertextuality employed as a shillelagh against artistic pretension, as an intensely ironic and yet highly ambivalent document. Like Plato's *Republic*, it is a highly poetic attack on poetry, a thoroughly self-contradicting, self-consuming (and yes, self-deconstructing) artifact.

The Name of the Father. Again, questions of paternity and legitimacy are the thematic focus of O'Brien's "book web." The frame narrator of the novel is writing a novel, the protagonist of which is a novelist, Dermot Trellis. Trellis is an author--like another--of

woe. He lacks originality in any of its senses, particularly in its literary sense. He does not hesitate to utilize the characters of other novelists (especially one William Tracy, progenitor of cowboy books) in his own novel. O'Brien's genius, as Mays has observed, is in literalizing the literary. Or perhaps one should say in strategically confusing the literal and literary realms. Thus Trellis is a "psycho-eugenicist," a pioneer in the realm of "aestho autogamy" (*At Swim* 55)--in giving birth, that is, to full-grown characters, bypassing the usual, literal method of reproduction. O'Brien is clearly accusing the artist of a species of self-gratification, as when the frame narrator-novelist admits that "Under the cover of the bed-clothes I poked idly with a pencil at my navel" (31), then, during his Dedalian (anti)aesthetic disquisition, observes "the novel was self-administered in private" (32). By means, then, of this attack on the notion of legitimate origins (does not Stephen Dedalus observe, after all, that paternity is "a legal fiction"?), O'Brien has made plagiarism a nonquestion, and writing suddenly becomes a violent free-for-all (not unlike, perhaps, the "row and the ruction" at Tim Finnegans wake?).

There is danger in this free-for-all: if the writer is no longer the Father, if the Author has been de-authorized, then the difference between members of the "author class" and members of the character class begins to dissolve. The effect of this dissolution is uncanny: authors and their characters suddenly have the same ontological status, exist and interact on the same level of Being. The margins of the text disintegrate, or rather *there is nothing outside the text* (it is almost as if in *At Swim* O'Brien has anticipated and literalized the antimetaphysics of Jacques Derrida, just as he literalizes the theories of Einstein in his next novel, *The Third Policeman*⁶). And so we are faced with the horrifying (and hilarious) spectacle of the farrow turning on their dam, of Trellis's "son" Orlick--product of Trellis's rape of another of his characters (again, self-abuse is implied)--conspiring with other characters to write a revenge text whereby they can gain control of their "author" and perhaps grant him a strong sense of closure (shades here of the band of patricidal brothers who make their debut in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*). Thus "plot" takes on a double meaning here: both storyline and conspiracy. Brinsley observes of the frame narrator and his novel, "the plot has him well in hand" (139), and he is not master in his own house (as Freud claimed of the conscious mind)--in this case the

psychical Red Swan Hotel, with a cellar "full of leprechauns" (the Unconscious?). The assassination plot is foiled only when Trellis's servant Teresa inadvertently burns the pages of the work-in-progress that give Orlick and his cohorts "life"; when the master suddenly appears in the doorway, complaining "I have bad nightmares and queer dreams and I walk when I am asleep," Teresa replies "You could easily get your death, Sir" (313). Indeed, in the world of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, all of life resolves into what the narrator's uncle refers to as "a paper chase"--a chase with potentially deadly consequences.

The Name of the Father. In *At Swim*, in attempting to elucidate through precis the dusky tale of Sweeny for his friend Lamont, cowboy Shanahan observes "the upshot is that your man becomes a bloody bird" (118). Shanahan's observation not only describes the song of Sweeny but also is a clear echo of the metaphoric transformation of Stephen Dedalus into the mythic "bird boy," Icarus, at the end of Joyce's *Portrait*. Again, wherever one looks in O'Brien's novel, one sees the Joycean subtext peeking out. The question I want to address here is the following: Can this palimpsestic character of the text be interpreted as somehow symptomatic? To ask this question differently, was there ever an author who better lent himself to psychoanalytic treatment of the Bloomian variety than O'Nolan? By "Bloom" I mean Harold, not Leopold. Our author all but discovers the "anxiety of influence" when as a student, in his encorpification as "Brother Barnabas," he promises to recount "How I discovered and hastily re-covered James Joyce" (qtd. in Clissmann 47)7. Anxiety may lead to resentment, and resentment to all-out war. Although it is easy for scholars to dismiss O'Nolan's hostility toward Joyce as merely a jealous reaction to the critical attention the latter received (O'Nolan himself, in certain contexts, encourages this view), a close reading of *At Swim* as well as earlier writings reveals that the aggression was already there and has a deeper, more complex source than petty jealousy. From *At Swim Two Birds* on, O'Nolan persistently and obsessively *re-covers*, or recuperates in parodic form, the corpus of the Father. One can detect in *The Third Policeman* (written 1940; published posthumously in 1967), for example, under the name of the eccentric philosopher De Selby, the name of Joyce; under the surface of the unreadable De Selby "Codex," the unreadable *Finnegans Wake*; beneath the footnote-residing De Selby

scholars, those "juvenile drools," those "high school punkawns" (qtd. in Powell 53, 59), the American Joyce scholars. *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* (1961), is also an exegesis, of sorts, of Joyce: a satirical echo of the "scrupulous meanness" of *Dubliners*. Finally, in *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), as I mentioned above, Joyce is brought back from the dead, inhabits as character to corpus of the Son.

Although it would be wrong to say that all of the above mentioned texts including *At Swim* are nothing more than responses to Joyce, they are all, on some level, at least that. They are instances of the Son revising the Father. And thereby, perhaps, *reviving* the Father?

"Two in One," or "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?"

The aim of all life is death.

--Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

[Freud] links the appearance of the signifier to the Father,

as author of the Law, with death, or even to the murder of the father.

--Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*

Evil is even, truth is an odd number, and death is a full stop.

--Flann O'Brien, *At Swim Two Birds*

In the final chapter of her book on Lacan, a chapter entitled "The Dream of the Dead Author," psychoanalytic theorist Jane Gallop observes, "If one tries to think at one and the same time the desire for the father's death and the desire to be in the father's place, one risks facing the desire for one's own death" (170). This observation appears to describe O'Nolan's predicament vis-à-vis Joyce exactly, as O'Nolan himself in some moments seems to realize. In the Gothic tale "Two in One," written in 1954, a taxidermist's apprentice murders his cruel master, Kelly, and, not knowing how else to dispose of the body, flays it and then dons the skin. The apprentice thus assumes the identity of his master. A problem arises, however: the skin won't come off. The upshot of

this tale: the apprentice is arrested, in the person of his master, for his own murder (since "he" had disappeared) and is condemned to death.

The tale of those poetic rivals, god Apollo and satyr Marsyas, should come to mind here. The moral of O'Nolan's allusion to the myth? Flay or be flayed (*Difficile est satyras non scribere*). O'Nolan, like the apprentice of his story, puts on his master's skin--that is, parodies Joyce in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He then discovers (grim irony of ironies!) he can't take the skin off, is mistaken for the man he has "murdered." "Ignorant reviewers," Myles fumes, "have messed me up with another man, to my intense embarrassment and disgust . . . I mean James Joyce. I'm going to get my own back on that bugger" (qtd. in Clissmann 291). Getting his own back meant writing what he himself called "not a novel . . . [but] an essay in extreme derision" ("Sheaf" 85), *The Dalkey Archive*, wherein O'Nolan digs up Joyce to throw stones at him: makes him into a character, has him deny the authorship of his greatest works ("I have heard more than enough about that dirty book [the reference is to *Ulysses*], that collection of smut, but do not be heard saying that I had anything to do with it" [191]), then leaves him at the end humiliated, reduced to repairing Jesuit underwear. And still this was not revenge enough: "I'm not happy at all about the treatment of Joyce: a very greater mess must be made of him. Would one of his secret crosses be that he is an incurable bed-wetter" ("Sheaf" 82). Here, clearly, is O'Nolan playing Orlick to Joyce's Trellis. One of the farrow turning on the sire.

The revenge of *Dalkey* is positively Dantean: Joyce is suffering his sin, for did he not turn real people into "characters"? In his Joyce essay, "A Bash in the Tunnel," O'Nolan recounts how a friend of his "found himself next door at dinner to a well-known savant who appears in *Ulysses*. When this man denies acquaintance with the works of Joyce, the friend remarks that he finds this extraordinary because he, the man, is a character in one of these works: "The next two hours, to the neglect of wine and cigars, were occupied with a heated statement by the savant that he was by no means a character in fiction, he was a man, furthermore he was alive and had published books of his own" (206). O'Brien must have sympathized a great deal with this put-upon fellow, felt himself oppressed and exploited in the same way by his precursor. As I suggest above, one can see the way in which the metafictional aspects of *At Swim* dovetail with the anxiety of influence theme,

for metafiction characteristically solicits the distinction between "fiction" and "reality," between "character" and "author." *At Swim* features what, at first glance, might seem a conventional disclaimer: "*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*" (7). The metafictional play of the text, however, problematizes the disclaimer's conventionality, makes us look again at terms such as "character," "represented," "book," "first personal singular," "entirely fictitious," "relation," "person," "living," "dead"--all of these are called into question. That suspicion of the ordinariness of the disclaimer is justified receives confirmation in an examination of the disclaimer the author affixes to his later book, *The Hard Life*: "*All the persons in this book are real and none is fictitious even in part*" (7).

The story "Two in One" concludes as follows: "That is my strange and tragic story. And I end with the thought that if Kelly and I must each be murderer and murdered, it is perhaps better to accept my personal fate as philosophically as I can and be cherished in the public mind as the victim of this murderous monster, Kelly. He *was* a murderer, anyway" (61). James Joyce was, in O'Nolan's mind, twice a murderer. First he murdered the English language: "Poor Jimmy Joyce was the boy that made English 'go' [bad]" (qtd. in Powell 51). Second, he murdered O'Nolan the artist *in utero* by having in his own corpus exhausted the possibilities for literary expression. We can easily cast "Two in One" in Freudian terms: Oedipus murders Laius (who attempted to murder him), becomes Laius (that is, takes his place), and dooms himself in the process--yet finds consolation in the thought that he takes the Da with him. "If one tries to think at one in the same time the desire for the father's death and the desire to be in the father's place, one risks facing the desire for one's own death." H.O., H.A.: Hit One, Hit All. Watch out Death, **H**ere **C**omes **E**verybody.⁸

Postmortem Effects

Pardon me the joke of this gloomy grimace and trope.

--Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

For all of O'Nolan's books are, in some sense, deathbooks. His early sketch "Scenes in a Novel," which would be expanded into *At Swim*, is parenthetically marked "Probably Posthumous," and begins "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" (14). As we read the article we discover why it is "posthumous": Its author, Brother Barnabas, has probably been murdered by the fictional characters he has created, the nightmare farrow. Metafictional effects become postmortem effects. O'Brien's second novel, *The Third Policeman*, is posthumous in two ways. First, in the usual sense: although written immediately *after At Swim*, it was published only in 1967, after O'Brien's death. Second, the narrative turns out to be a tale told by, not only an idiot, but a dead idiot. The narrator, a sort of imbecile scholar, has committed murder in order to raise the funds necessary to publish a commentary on the unintelligible work of a madman named "De Selby" (shades of American Joyce scholars and scholarship here). That this narrator has in turn been murdered by his accomplice is revealed only at the narrative's end. Thus the reader has spent hours, unknowingly, in the company of a talking corpse. *The Poor Mouth*, O'Brien's parody of Gaelic autobiography (originally published in Irish in 1941 as *An Beal Boch*) and *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor*, are both exquisitely morbid texts, supersaturated with death and damnation from beginning to end. And finally, of course, is the necromantic *Dalkey*.

In her reading of Freud (via Lacan), Jane Gallop rehearses one of the Master's rules of interpretation: "if there is no mention in the dream of the fact that the dead man is dead, the dreamer is equating himself with him: he is dreaming of his own death" (170-71). If dreaming is, as Freud theorizes, wish fulfillment, then, according to the logic of interpretation that Gallop outlines, O'Nolan's dreambook *Dalkey*, where a dead Joyce is not dead, is also a wishbook and a deathbook--or, more precisely, a death-wish book. And to a certain degree this is true of all of his texts. Upon close inspection O'Nolan's art resolves into an uncanny *ars moriendi*: autobiography in *articulo mortis*. It is, I would argue, what theorist Philippe Sollers has termed "thanatography." In describing Lautreamont's *Les Chants De Maldoror*, Sollers observes as follows: "in the system we are attempting to extrapolate . . . an essential point is the integration of the death of the

biographical subject (the death of both the subject of the enounced and the subject of the enunciation), so that we read what should be called *thanatography*: 'I write this on my deathbed/'I know that my annihilation will be complete'" (138). In dreaming Joyce's death, then, O'Nolan dreams his own.

Deathbook and Dreambook. In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 19 December 1957, Myles informs his readership that the title *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce's "New Book of the Dead") devolves on a pun on the German *traum*, which means both "dream" and "wound." So Freud's *Traumdeutung*, his "The Interpretation of Dreams," might as well be translated "The Interpretation of Wounds"? And so might O'Nolan's texts: his funny nightmares full of *trauma*, of shocks and deadly violence. In *The Third Policeman* he laughs at death by assuming the place of the dead (here one might recall an observation made by another modernist laughing boy, Céline, who once observed that "one has to be more than somewhat dead in order to be truly a wisecracker" (qtd. in Kristeva 138)). O'Nolan comments in a letter to William Saroyan apropos his second novel: "When you are writing about the world of the dead--and the damned--where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks. It [the book] is supposed to be very funny but I don't know about that either" (*Third Policeman* 200). One might similarly question *At Swim*. How funny is the monumental beating that Trellis takes at the hands of the Pooka? Is this not a signal example of *Schadenfreude*: joy in suffering? Is it not funny precisely because it is so exorbitant in its cruelty? And how funny is the "*Conclusion of the book, ultimate*": "Well-known, alas, is the case of the poor German who was very fond of three and who made each aspect of his life a thing of triads. He went home one evening and drank three cups of tea with three lumps of sugar in each cup, cut his jugular with a razor three times and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye" (316). Is O'Nolan's case, then, the same as that of Byron's Don Juan, who pleads for tolerance as follows: "And if I laugh at any *mortal* thing/Tis that I may not weep" (699, emphasis mine)?

What I'd like to suggest here is that O'Nolan, as is the case typically with satirists, is a highly aggressive writer. What makes O'Nolan unique, perhaps, among satirists is the

degree to which his texts are the product of aggression directed toward *one person*, that person being, of course, James Joyce. When the Pooka flays Trellis, the myth of Apollo and Marsyas is turned on its head, with the god being flayed by the satyr. This, I argue, can be read as code for the relationship between O'Nolan and Joyce: the "Pooka" satirist O'Nolan flaying (that is, parodying) the self-styled "God of creation," Joyce. The story "Two in One," then, can be seen as rewriting--perhaps as an obsessive resurrection--of that earlier (sub)text.

The Dead Father

What is he doing under the ground, that idiot? When will he Decide to come out?
He's watching us all the time.

--Lucia Joyce, on her father's death

*Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead. . . . we **want** the Dead Father to be dead--meanwhile doing amazing things with our hands.*

--Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father*⁹

The problem with the Dead Father, it appears, is that he just won't stay dead. To put it another way--Freud's way--the repressed always returns. As thus, from an early *Cruiskeen Lawn*:

SIR MYLES NA gCOPALEEN (the da) who has been buried in the country for some months, was exhumed last week following a dispute as to the interpretation of a clause in his will. . . . The grand old man was alive and well, and looked extremely fit as he stepped from the coffin. "Never again," he said as he jested with reporters before being driven away in a closed car. (*Best* 158).

The Dead Da is aware of the problems his resurrection causes and of the heavy task before him:

I would have to show that there is an alternative to testacy or intestacy, viz., extestacy, which would be the condition I would claim to be in. I would have to show that death is an essential concomitant of intestacy and this would involve lengthy legal definitions of death. I would have to show that death is not final and conclusive. This in itself would involve equally recondite definitions of life. (159)

Myles (the son) provides commentary:

The kernel of the legal impasse appears to be this--that life is not in law the opposite of death, nor is being born the opposite of dying. Death is a *process*, resulting usually in a serious fatality. To undo the legal consequences of death insofar as the disposal of the deceased's assets are concerned, it is apparently not sufficient merely to be demonstrably alive; it is necessary to *undie*, to the satisfaction of the court. As apparently nobody has yet performed this mysterious act, the grand old man is diffident at the prospect of being, at his age, the first to attempt it; he is in any event uncertain as to how the task should be approached. (160)

All of this is funny-business, certainly: Myles is having fun with the legal system and its absurd noncorrespondence to reality. Yet this is a multivalent nonsense, as becomes clear when we look at it in the light of O'Nolan's relationship with Joyce. We have already seen above how Myles plays with Joyce's death. On 29 September 1949 he writes, "Joyce is not living--though indeed that were a minor accomplishment on the part of one who reduced the entire literary world to a state of chronic and helpless exegesis" (qtd. in Powell 53). O'Nolan is a part of that literary world and is in a sense Joyce's most faithful, most "chronic," most "helpless" exegete. He is helpless, as it were, before Joyce's demand that his readers spend the rest of their lives studying his work: "This Easter I will be in the torments of my definitive exegesis of James Joyce" (*Cruiskeen Lawn*, 30 March 1959; qtd. in Powell 60). Myles figures himself here as the suffering Redeemer, nailed by Joyce to the cross of interpretation. He returns to this figure when considering a photo for the dust jacket of *Dalkey*, the book wherein he sets out to get his "own back" on Joyce:

"Must get a new, proper picture taken and don't see why I couldn't be shown crucified, wearing a cross of shamrocks" ("Sheaf" 82).

And then again our author will do an about-face, imagine Joyce as Christ, himself as the Betrayer, as when he foresees *Dalkey* accomplishing "the long overdue rehabilitation of Judas Iscariot" ("Sheaf" 80). The character in the novel who undertakes this rehab project is named "Hackett," a name O'Nolan had earlier considered when searching for a pen name to affix to *At Swim* (Clissmann 78). Hackett, it turns out, is himself something of a Judas, having betrayed the novel's protagonist by seducing his fiancée. In adopting the role of Judas, perhaps O'Nolan is manifesting his guilt over the transgressive nature of his necromancy, over his lack of filial piety vis-à-vis the Father Joyce. In *At Swim* the reader encounters an excerpt from a book entitled *The Athenian Oracle*, which book advertises itself as "an Entire COLLECTION of all the Valuable QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS" (shades here, perhaps, of the catechism-like "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*). Among the questions is one likely to be asked by an unmarried woman who finds herself with child: "Whether it be lawful to use Means to put a stop to this growing mischief, and kill it in the Embryo; this being the only way to avert the Thunderclap of my Father's Indignation" (144). If the "growing mischief" here is a veiled reference to O'Nolan's work-in progress--which seems likely, what with the text's preoccupation with procreation, with "aesthopsychoeugenics" (206)--to what must the "thunderclap of my Father's indignation" refer, if not to the mortifying one-hundred-letter thunderclap of Joyce's *Work In-Progress*, and to the displeasure O'Nolan anticipates the Father will experience upon reading the Son's travesty of same? After the appearance of *Dalkey* and a few months before his death, O'Nolan published an essay in the *Manchester Guardian* entitled "Can a Saint Hit Back?" in which he claims that the cancer killing him is the revenge of St. Augustine, whom he also brings back from the dead to assassinate, character-wise, in that novel. Could it be just a coincidence that Joyce's saint's name is "Augustine," and that O'Nolan elsewhere refers to Joyce as "St. James" (Powell 62)? Finally, there is the *Dalkey* dedication: "I dedicate these pages to my Guardian Angel, impressing upon him that I'm only fooling and warning him to see to it that there is not misunderstanding when I go home." Only

fooling? A grim--but in a way charming--irony that O'Nolan "goes home" on April Fool's Day, 1966.

Exhuming the Da. From 1960 until 1966--roughly during the time of the genesis, composition, and publication of *Dalkey*--O'Brien wrote, under the pseudonym "George Knowall," a column for the *Nationalist and Leinster Times* entitled "Bones of Contention." Most of the pieces are uninspired, hacked out for quick cash. But there is one article that connects to our discussion: "From Clongowes to Martello Tower"--this article a record of a Bloomsday celebration in Dublin. In the Martello tower featured in the opening of *Ulysses* (now the James Joyce museum), Knowall encounters Joyce's death mask: "an extremely successful cast," he opines, "ironically a thing in death that was extremely life like" (*Myles Away* 134). And what does that "ironically" signify? Maurice Blanchot has written of the "resemblance of cadavers": "[at the moment] when the presence of the cadaver before us is the presence of the unknown, it is also now that the lamented dead person begins to *resemble himself*" (82). How could O'Nolan know that the mask was "life-like," he who never looked upon Joyce in the flesh? Blanchot continues "the resemblance of cadavers is a haunting obsession, but the act of haunting is not the unreal visitation of the ideal: what haunts is the inaccessible which one cannot rid oneself of, what one does not find and what, because of that, does not allow one to avoid it. The ungraspable is what one does not escape" (84). O'Nolan spent a lifetime attempting to escape the shadow of Joyce, and the more he struggles to escape, the deeper in the shadow he falls--the firmer the Father's grasp. George Knowall deplores the fact the Joyce's corpse lies outside Dublin and environs; "Would it not be an idea," he asks, "to disinter the remains and rebury him at his own beloved city?" (135). Is not disinterment the essential gesture, the inspiring trope, behind *The Dalkey Archive*, which brings Joyce back from the dead, places him as a publican in a suburb of his own beloved city? *Dalkey* was sent to the publishers, its author informs a friend, "perhaps to show I was not dead" ("Sheaf" 84). "It is necessary to *undie*, to the satisfaction of the court." Exhuming the Da to prove one's presence among the living, for the purposes of literary utterance. The artist as violator of graves, as necro-fils.

Could it be that the Father Joyce, sensing the Oedipal aggression that lies just beneath the playful surface of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, praised the text in order to mollify the Son, to defuse the epigonic time bomb? The Father seems even to anticipate the Son's later attempt at resurrection (that is, *Dalkey*) and also to underscore the futility of the attempt, in the pages of the *Wake*, in the final versus of the "Ballad of HCE":

And not all the king's men nor his horses
Will resurrect his corpus
For there's no true spell in Connacht or hell
(bis) that's able to raise a Cain. (47)

If Joyce was attuned to the mechanisms of the anxiety of influence, if he was aware of the possibility of the appearance of murderous epigones, could it be that, in anticipation of attack, he had employed a defense strategy not unlike Harold Bloom's "Apophrades," where the dead are resurrected to be overcome--only this act turned backways? Barbara Johnson theorizes "a supplementary twist to the traditional oedipal situation. For if the father survives precisely through his way of affirming himself dead, then the son will always arrive too late to kill him. What the son suffers from, then, is not the simple desire to kill the father, but the impotence to kill him whose potency resides in his ability to recount his own death" (272). Could it be that the decentered and decentering *Wake* was Joyce's self-affirming suicide note, his way of doing himself in so that his son(s) could not have the satisfaction? Or perhaps the suicide comes earlier in the corpus, encoded in Leopold Bloom's memory of his dead father. Or earlier still, in the still ending of "The Dead": "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (*Dubliners* 224). Could it be that O'Nolan's immense frustration as a writer derives in part from his recognition, not that the dead father will not stay dead, but that, already dead via self-slaughter, the father cannot be killed?

Theorist Walter Benjamin writes that "death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (94). An echo of Freud here, his vision, as expressed in

Beyond the Pleasure Principle, of the eternal return to the inorganic, the ultimate telos. Benjamin goes on to observe of the novel that it is significant "not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" (101). Death, then, according to this theorist, is both center and circumference of the novel, its origin and aim. It may be inevitable, then, that O'Nolan, in discovering the corpus of Joyce, read death there--and read his own death. O'Nolan brings Joyce back from the dead and gives him voice. This is risky business, as Paul de Man notes in his analysis of the trope "prosopopeia":

by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death. The surmise of the "Pause, Traveller!" thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the pre-figuration of one's own mortality but our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead. (78)

After killing Joyce off, as it were, in his parodic *At Swim* ("good-bye, good-bye, good bye"), it is precisely "the frozen world of the dead" that O'Brien evokes in his next text, *The Third Policeman*, which text is haunted by uncanny echoes of the Joycean corpus, particularly of "The Dead."

Is O'Nolan's an insane project? It is extremely hard to say. Joyce observed of *Ulysses*, "In any event this book was terribly daring. A transparent sheet separates it from madness" (qtd. in Mercanton 226). Near the conclusion of *At Swim*, the outermost narrator asks "Was Hamlet mad? Was Trellis mad?" (314). Years later O'Nolan would write "A Bash in the Tunnel" and would remark within the essay, "A better title of this piece might be '*Was Joyce Mad?* ' by Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." Was the Father mad? Was the son mad? In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 20 December 1957: "Joyce has been reported as saying that he asked of his readers nothing but that they devote their lives to the reading of his works. Such a method of spending a lifetime would be likely to endow the party concerned with quite a unique psychic apparatus of his own. I cannot recommend it" (qtd. in Powell 58).

The voice of experience here. A month before he died Myles Na gCopaleen, in a sort of valedictory address to the Plain People of Ireland, wrote that if a man "has the courage to raise his eyes and look sanely at the awful human condition . . . he must realise finally that tiny periods of temporary release from intolerable suffering is the most that any individual has the right to expect" (qtd. in Clissmann 36). In the face of life, one must cultivate what Myles refers to as a "sane madness," a system of "studied delusion." Perhaps a literature?

As Freud grew to be an old man, he grew more and more skeptical of the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a clinical therapy. "My discoveries," he confided to his patient, the poet H.D., "are not primarily a heal-all. My discoveries are a basis for a very grave philosophy" (qtd. in Doolittle 18). Freud came to the conclusion that the backward-looping process of psychoanalysis would necessarily be "interminable," an always-ongoing rediscovery of the lost object. Turning to O'Nolan, what I've tried to establish in this essay is that his corpus can be seen, from one point of view, as a futile self-analysis--as a never-ending attempt to raise the spirit of the Father (the lost object, always already dead) in order to effect, through a kind of transference, a "cure" to life's ills. But life has no cure, is a terminal illness. In a passage left out of the published version of *The Third Policeman*, the narrator's soul (named "Joe") describes hell: "He said it was again the beginning of the unfinished, the re discovery of the familiar, the re-experiencing of the already-suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered. Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature is *interminable*, repetitive, and very nearly unbearable" (200; my emphasis). Might not a weary old Freud have found something uncannily familiar in that description? And might not as well a scholar of that book of "doubleends jined," *Finnegans Wake*?

"And if I laugh at any mortal thing/'Tis that I may not weep." O'Nolan argued consistently over the years that Joyce's true strength was his humor. "Joyce was a great master of the banal in literature. By 'banal' I mean the fusion of uproariously comic stuff and deep tragedy. For in troth you never get the one without the other, unless either be a fake" (*Hair* 120). Like Father, like Son. In the end, which wins out, the laughter or the sorrow? Mays reports that "Joyce set *At Swim-Two-Birds* and [Samuel Beckett's] *Murphy*

against one another as 'Jean qui rit' and 'Jean qui pleure'" (80).¹⁰ If O'Nolan is a laughing boy, then he is laughing through his tears.

Postscript

Dublin Apocrypha: O'Nolan's last words, from his deathbed, to a friend pouring water into his gin: "Almighty God, are you trying to drown it entirely?" (qtd. in Ryan 43).

"Cruiskeen Lawn"¹¹

And when grim Death appears

In long and happy years,

To tell me that my glass is run,

I'll say, begone, you slave

For great Bacchus gave me lave

To have another Cruiskeen Lawn--Lawn--Lawn

(Chorus)

Gramachree, mavourneen, slanta gal avourneen

Gramachree ma Cruiskeen Lawn, Lawn, Lawn

With my smiling little Cruiskeen Lawn.

(Boucicault 107)

NOTES

1 In my text my "default" name for my subject author will be "O'Nolan," although I will use "Myles Na gCopalleen" or "Flann O'Brien" in places where it seems appropriate. If this seems awkward, it is an awkwardness that O'Nolan has made inescapable by his perverse and incorrigible pseudonymity.

2 *United Ireland*, a Parnellite organ until the fatal O'Shea affair, was edited by William O'Brien--thus the "O'Brienite scribes." Lyons, in his *The Fall of Parnell*, gives a good account of the incident Bloom remembers.

3 Anthony Cronin, on the other hand, reports that the name Trellis was derived from O'Brien's writing table, which had been manufactured from bits of a broken trellis salvaged from the back garden of O'Brien's parents (84-85).

4 See, for example, Clissmann 100-15.

5 Gaelic for "kiss my arse."

6 For an analysis of O'Brien's response to Einstein, see Kemnitz.

7 Seamus Deane has noted as well that "O'Brien's reaction to Joyce's work and, later, to Joyce's fame is one of the most astonishing examples of the 'anxiety of influence' to be found, even in Ireland where the closeness of the small literary community stimulates fiction and friction of varied quality and unvaried regularity" (194).

8 Joseph Voelker suggests that "Two in One" can be read as an allegory of the artist's predicament in Ireland, but does not suggest, as I do, that the story can be read as an allegory for an interpersonal conflict, that is, between O'Nolan and Joyce.

9 There are clear echoes of *At Swim* throughout Barthelme's 1975 text. For example, in the section entitled "A Manual for Sons," we are informed that "Text fathers are usually bound in blue" (123)--an allusion to O'Nolan's evocation of *Ulysses* as the "sea-blue book" (the first edition of the novel had a blue cover), itself a parodic twisting of Joyce's memorable phrase "snot-green sea."

10 The two literary sons of Joyce once met, as Cronin reports: "In a letter to Anne Clissmann in 1967 Beckett said that O'Nolan's reply [to Beckett's telling him that Joyce liked *At Swim*] was 'best forgotten'; but in Berlin later on, he decided to tell all and twice repeated O'Nolan's reply to Aidan Higgins, the second time with what Higgins called emphatic distaste. 'His reply was the following,' Beckett said, ' "Joyce, that refurbisher of skivvies' stories!" ' ' (172)

11 This song is sung by the Colleen Bawn in Boucicault's play of that title--again, the play where Myles Na gCopaleen makes his first dramatic appearance. Another source for the title of Myles's column is (you guessed it) Joyce: the "Cyclops" chapter of *Ulysses*, where the Citizen is spied in Barney Kiernan's pub, "in his gloryhole, with his cruiskeen lawn and his load of papers, working for the cause" (295).

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