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*Self-Evident Shams:
Metafiction and Comedy in Three of Flann O'Brien's Novels*

by

Chris Yurkoski ©
H.B.A., University of Western Ontario, 1995

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
Lakehead University
Thunder Bay, Ontario
1998



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The aim of this thesis is to analyse the connections between comedy and metafiction evident in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life*. The following pages discuss how these novels express, utilize, subvert and explode typical comic discourse within a postmodern paradigm. As works that contain numerous ontological levels that confuse a reader's sense of reality, that foreground their status as art and that take the subject of writing itself as a theme, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life* all explode traditional modes of representation in general, and the conventional comic vision in particular.

Throughout my discussion, I describe and apply theories of laughter (namely, the Incongruity, Superiority and Relief theories) to help describe how the humorous aspects of O'Brien's work disrupt the reading process and the reader's expectations of order and comfort. I also interrogate other comic/humour devices within O'Brien's works -- such as puns, which crack language to let words bleed a variety of meanings, and thus reflect how language is implicit in generating multiple levels of fluid reality.

My rhetorical pattern for this thesis consists of analysing the way O'Brien handles the mixing of the comic and metafiction from novel to novel -- that is, I chart a progression from the more obvious (*At Swim-Two-Birds*) to the more subtle (*The Third Policeman*) to the well-hidden but certainly still evident and important (*The Hard Life*). I show how O'Brien's subversion of comic discourse creates a vision of a chaotic, plural reality that is both playful and dark.

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For Mom and Dad,
in thanks for all of their support;
the financial kind,
the editorial kind,
and the just plain, old-fashioned love and encouragement kind.

“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.”

Flann O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*

“Perhaps it is only a game.”

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge, first and foremost, Dr. F.M. Holmes, my thesis advisor and the professor for whom I worked as a teaching assistant during my tenure as a graduate student at Lakehead. His instruction, advice and encouragement have been instrumental in the genesis and completion of this thesis, and I am constantly in awe of his knowledge of all matters regarding the discipline of English.

I would also like to thank those members of my family who live in Thunder Bay; my grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Yurkoski, and Mr. and Mrs. H.H. Jones, as well as my uncle, Jeffrey Jones, all of whose support throughout my period of study in Thunder Bay has been, frankly, inestimable.

I am also in debt to my readers, Dr. J.M. Richardson at Lakehead University, and Dr. Ninian Mellamphy at the University of Western Ontario, who have helped to bring this thesis to fruition.

And, ultimately, I could not have gotten through the many trying times involved in such an academic endeavour as this one without the love, advice, patient support and guidance of my fiancée, and fellow Graduate English student, Barbara Mongrain.

Chapter One: *Introduction*

I

Comedy is a literary mode that has, traditionally, seemed desperately at odds with itself. While containing internal disruptions at the levels of language, narration and story that threaten the possibility of closure and stability both for the characters specifically and for the meaning-establishing task of language in general, the comic pattern is also famous for the employment of happy endings that attempt to erase all earlier disruptions. But such traditional, and paradoxical, notions of what constitutes comedy are being untangled and subverted by twentieth-century writers such as Irish novelist Flann O'Brien. Comedy, in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life*, is not a discourse whose purpose is to test social and literary status quos only to confirm them -- it is more like a battleground on which traditional literary formats and comfortable readerly expectations are blown apart.

Contemporary comedies such as O'Brien's are very much *metafictional* novels -- that is, literary works that lay bare the processes involved in the creation of meaning through story-telling, and that take the art of story-telling itself as a theme by foregrounding the artifice involved in the fiction-making process. Such works represent "fiction about fiction -- that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 1) and "fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making" (Christensen 11). Metafiction, according to Robert Scholes, "assimilates

all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself" (114). Brian McHale also suggests, more specifically, that metafiction showcases the way in which our perception of the author as an omnipotent, God-like creator and ruler has changed in contemporary literature. These days, the author "makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work...represent[ing] himself in the act of making his fictional world" (30).

Metafiction falls within the realm of "postmodernism" -- a category of literature that, according to McHale, includes works of fiction that are less concerned with the problems of epistemology ("problems of *knowing*" (10)) that characterize modernism, than with ontological problems ("problems of *modes of being*" (10)). McHale says that

typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (10)

Metafictional works express how worlds are projected, examine "the ontology of the literary text itself," and deal with "boundaries" being "violated."

It is this latter characteristic, the violation of ontological boundaries, that underlines the complementary nature of comic literature and metafiction. For instance,

critic T.G.A. Nelson suggests how

it is clear that the comedy of many times and places has successfully exploited techniques for teasing, cajoling or disorienting readers and auditors, for exchanging back-chat with them, and even for drawing them into the performance. It has played tricks based on illusion, it has made a joke out of the tenuousness of the grasp human beings have on reality. It has turned the world upside down. Metafictional techniques, which lend themselves to such procedures, are, for that reason, peculiarly suited for comedy. (151-152)

Comedies, according to what Nelson says, seem to demonstrate a built-in metafictional tic in the form of a “potentially disruptive force of laughter” that is “at odds with the movement of the comic fable towards reconciliation, harmony and acceptance of the world” (179). Since “laughter is often discordant, malicious, or vindictive,” Nelson says, “it can disrupt harmony rather than promoting it” (2) -- the new realities brought into being by jokes, parodies etc. show just how tenuous our notion of a “stable reality” is. This idea of reconciliation is, according to Nelson (quoting Helen Gardner) of the utmost importance in traditional comedies: “[t]he great symbol of pure comedy...is marriage, by which the world is renewed, and its endings are always instinct with fresh beginnings. Its rhythm is the rhythm of the life of mankind, which goes on and renews itself as the life of nature does” (41).

In traditional comedies, then, reconciliation and closure should generally win out over disruption. The metafictional tic should remain nothing more than that. According

to L.J. Potts (as quoted by Nelson) “the popular view of comedy in England is no doubt based on a sentimental response to *As You Like It*...and other Shakespearean plays” (41) which end with positive conclusions, such as a marriage, that serve to reinforce the present and future stability and coherence of the world to the reader.

O’Brien’s comedies seem to disregard and undermine the traditional comic pattern where

[t]he normal action is the effort of a young man to get possession of a young woman who is kept from him by various social barriers: her low birth, his minority or shortage of funds, parental opposition, the prior claims of a rival. These are eventually circumvented, and the comedy ends at a point where a new society is crystallized, usually by the marriage or betrothal of hero and heroine. The birth of the new society is symbolized by a closing festive scene featuring a wedding, a banquet or a dance. This conclusion is normally accompanied by some change of heart on the part of those who have been obstructing the comic resolution. (Frye 72-73)

Thus do O’Brien’s novels work against “[t]he action of a Shakespearean comedy [that] is not simply cyclical but dialectical as well: the renewing power of the final action lifts us into a higher world, and separates that world from the world of the comic action itself” (Frye 133). Neither do O’Brien’s novels illustrate “[t]he mythical or primitive basis of comedy [that] is a movement toward the rebirth and renewal of the powers of nature, this aspect of literary comedy being expressed in the imagery more directly than in the structure” (Frye 119). O’Brien frequently ironizes such a movement and, by neglecting to

finish with a festival and marriage that showcases “the birth of a new society,” suggests that human consciousness cannot return to the higher, focused world humanity was expelled from after the Biblical Fall.

In fact, the comic subject in O’Brien’s novels is not so much a young man as comic discourse itself – i.e. the comic pattern and thematic implications suggested by that pattern. While there may be disruptions that threaten or undermine a character’s movement towards some sort of reconciliation in O’Brien’s work, each novel’s focus seems to be on disruptions to language and authority that subvert the comic pattern in and of itself. Where the main character/narrator does not experience *any* series of dramatic dilemmas similar to those “various social barriers” Frye mentions, in novels such as *At Swim-Two-Birds*, comic discourse itself still has a number of dilemmas to overcome in order to keep itself stabilized.

Postmodern metafictional comedies like O’Brien’s, then, are driven by a dissonant rhythm -- one based in a fallen world where humanity has been alienated from the cycles of nature. Thus, more recent comedies showcase a mode more representative of chaos than harmony. Nelson writes of how it is the “absence of consummation [that] is characteristic of modern comedy: plays and novels end inconclusively or in a ridiculous, undignified death” (169). I will discuss how O’Brien’s comic novels do make a “joke out of the tenuousness of the grasp human beings have on reality” through structures that blur the boundary between life and fiction, blur the lines of worlds within fiction and remain quite inconclusive by not necessarily sweeping characters back to their respective ontological levels, or resolving these multiple worlds into one by novel’s end. O’Brien’s

metafictional comedies certainly avoid the kind of closed, 'happy-ever-after' ending that is the comedy writer's traditional stock-in-trade. They are, in fact, characterized by and given their strength through the lack of entirely neat reconciliatory endings that would tie all loose ends up together into a single bundle of neat reality. O'Brien exposes how contrived such a tying-together is; how reality cannot be so easily domesticated.

In this context, it is important to recall the traditional idea of the novel as a form of mimetic art. McHale suggests that "postmodernist fiction *does* hold up [a] mirror to reality" (39) -- however, that "reality" is not an easily-represented one, but one that "now more than ever before, is plural" (39). In this thesis, I will certainly try to demonstrate that novels such as O'Brien's contain "ontological poetics" that "[pluralize] the "real" and...[problematize] representation" (McHale 75).

While satire, according to Leonard Feinberg, is a "playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (19), it should not be confused with traditional notions of comedy. "Satire is permeated with disapprobation, complaint, exposé, denunciation, rebuke, [and] condemnation" while "[c]omedy is also critical; but comedy ends in a conciliatory mood, having resolved the conflict and pretended that things will be better in the future" (59). Still, if satire "ridicules man's naive acceptance of individuals and institutions at face value" and exposes "the contrast between reality and pretense" (Feinberg 3), then we can see a satiric bent within O'Brien's novels -- where he ridicules traditional notions of a static reality and of traditional comic works that suggest "things will be better in the future."

A consideration of a more extreme attack on literature can be found in Patrick

O'Neill's discussion of "entropic comedy" and "entropic parody." In O'Neill's terms, parody does not seem to merely involve one literary work mocking another easily identifiable one, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* parodying Homer's *The Odyssey* (although parodies create disorder themselves through changing elements of a parodied work (*A Theory of Parody* 32)) so much as works that mock the fiction-making process itself to create disorder at the level of meaning-creation and authorial control.

O'Neill bases his theories on the scientific notion of entropy, which "is predicated on the erosion of certainty" and "order develop[ing] irreversibly into chaos" (O'Neill 299). O'Neill says that "[e]ntropic comedy may be defined as the expression -- literary or otherwise -- of a form of humour whose primary characteristic is its own awareness of its status as *decentred* discourse" (xiii) and the works that he groups together as entropic comedies, then, can be seen as novels so disordered that they have no one central overriding authority to hold them together into stable meaning.

Such disordering and decentring is expressed by "entropic parody," which is "metalaughter, a comedy of discourse" (135), a "comedy of comedy itself" (136). In such a context the ultimate purpose of jokes (such as puns or even parodies themselves) is not just to create a humorous situation in a novel but to destabilize discourse and point to the fictional framework. While normal parody may simply be "concerned with intertextuality, with the relationship between texts" (O'Neill 138), entropic parody deals with the mechanics of novels and the relationship of these mechanics to the material they transmit to the reader. Entropic parody represents a "comedy of narration, discourse, structuration, fiction, making" (138) and can describe a comic work that does not come

back together at its conclusion in the traditional comic mode. In his study of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La maison de rendez-vous*, O'Neill describes that novel as containing "a parody of narrative, a subversion of narrative writing" (270), and while O'Brien certainly utilizes parody to such a disordering effect with regards to traditional fictional works, he also does so with specific regards to the processes of traditional *comic* narratives.

Such "entropic comedies" are so decentred that they have no definable authority, as O'Neill suggests with his examination of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a book in which

we never gain any conclusive footing, any Archimedean point of leverage in the shifting sands of the narrative...The reader is constantly challenged to establish the relative validity of the conflicting authorial voices in the text to *create* an authorial and authoritative voice, and in the end can only admit the impossibility of the task. Reality is no longer accessible, for in the end all is appearance only, the play of artifice, and the butterfly possibility of difference. (294)

Linda Hutcheon's ideas on parody are also applicable to O'Brien's comedies. In *A Theory of Parody*, she notes that metafiction "rework...discourses whose weight has become tyrannical" (72) and that "[p]arody," in such a context, "can also be seen...to be a threatening, even anarchic force...that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts" (75). While parody "disrealizes and dethrones literary norms" its "transgressions remain ultimately authorized -- authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert" (75). "Even in mocking," she suggests, "parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence"

(Hutcheon 75). She suggests that since “[p]arodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material” then “[a]ny real attack would be self-destructive” (44).

O’Brien, however, does seem to be striving for such a self-destructive goal -- with regards to parodying the comic novel in particular. Frye suggests that in traditional comedies

[t]he overthrow of the anti-comic power has about it some feeling of a Saturnalia, or reversal of social order to something closer to the Golden Age. Such a reversal does not (at any rate not in Shakespeare) alter the actual hierarchy of society. Kings remain kings, and clowns clowns: only the personal relations within the society are altered. (104)

O’Brien’s novels showcase such hierarchies being torn apart, as disruption is not defeated.

In the wake of all this detail about the subversion of comic traditions in postmodern metafictional works, it seems possible to suggest a more compact label to provide context for O’Brien’s *oeuvre*. Since O’Brien’s novels are, to paraphrase Hutcheon, comic fictions about comic fictions, it seems useful (within academic discourse) to dub works that both express attributes of comedy while simultaneously deconstructing and undermining the processes of the traditional comic novel with the compact title *metacomic*.

Another obviously important aspect of the comic equation is laughter itself, and a variety of theories exist that seek to explain why we laugh; the three most popular

theories being the Superiority, Relief and Incongruity theories.

The Superiority Theory comes, to a large degree, from Thomas Hobbes and his suggestion that “finding something humorous necessarily involves a feeling of triumph and superiority, and this is why we laugh at human incompetence, clumsiness, clowning and misfortune” (Clark 140). If, as Clark suggests, “[s]ometimes the feeling is one of moral superiority, as when we are amused by incidents involving sex, drinking or human greed” (Clark 140) such a theory would certainly seem compatible with comic works that may use laughter to ridicule social outsiders and thus, uphold a strict status quo.

The Relief Theory, on the other hand, involves laughter that “arises from psychic release, ‘the arousal’, as James Feibleman puts it, ‘first of terrific fear, then of release, and finally of laughter at the needlessness of the fear’” (Nelson 7) after a supposed threat has passed. This theory could include, for example, a situation in which someone initially fears that his/ her life, or an aspect of his/her existence, is in danger, but then, as the threat passes and order is restored, comes to the realization that he or she unduly misjudged the situation. Thus does s/he laugh at the thought that life could have turned out otherwise, finding reconciliation and reassurance in a universe that seems to have returned to stability.

Thirdly, there is the Incongruity Theory, largely advanced by Schopenhauer and his belief that

[t]he cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the

expression of this incongruity. It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through *one* concept, and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it then becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view. (Clark 145-146)

Throughout this thesis, I plan to demonstrate how incongruity enters O'Brien's works in the form of clashing literary styles that are parodied and/or juxtaposed against one another; in inappropriate pairings of style and subject matter or of character and social/geographical context; and language that has been fiercely bent and twisted out of shape. In such situations, I will show how incongruity confuses common-sense notions of reality; suggests the deliberate constructs that novels and language are; underlines how every literary style is merely a convention that has no necessary authority over another; and helps undermine the goal of comic discourse.

Furthermore, if "laughter...is...the expression of [such] incongruity" then when someone is in the midst of laughing, perhaps we can see them as existing in a state in which sense has broken down and perception has gone beyond a "one-sided" reality. Such amusement is "enjoyable to us [because] it reconciles us to our own condition" (Scruton 169) of being in a plural universe. Since, in metcomedies, disruption reigns in the end, metacomic novels never suggest a way back to a former, common-sense perspective but leave us in a new, more chaotic one.

But the Incongruity Theory, as Feinberg suggests, can also be stretched in

different directions:

Dr. Edmund Bergler...insists that we laugh not at incongruity itself but at the proof it offers that our teachers were wrong. In our youth, Bergler says, we were taught that there is logic in the world, that all things are 'congruous' to the educated person. But subconsciously we suspect that this is not true, and incongruity delights us by furnishing evidence to the 'child in the adult' that the logic which once was forced upon us is faulty. We triumph at this exhibition of the educator's inadequacy, and we laugh at the fallibility of our former superiors. (102)

Such an idea has interesting consequences for a writer such as O'Brien, whose work undermines the authority of authors, academics, and religious figures, among others. By undermining what we previously believed was rote knowledge or accepted belief, comic incongruity, in Feinberg's terms, expresses chaos at the level of the objective authority and fact delegated to us by a status quo. Though this overturning of a status quo could suggest that those who are in on the joke may now be in some sort of superior position, O'Brien himself will seldom, if ever, propose a new concept or belief to rule in place of a previously privileged, now toppled, one.

While no single one of the above theories can make a stable, all-inclusive claim to explain laughter, each theory may work to describe certain situations. In such a case, the most suitable model for a postmodernist such as Flann O'Brien would appear to be the Incongruity Theory. The Superiority Theory (in which humour is derisive and aimed at inferiors to support some kind of status quo) seems antithetical to O'Brien's goals. The

Relief Theory, in which a natural order may be challenged but is ultimately re-established or maintained, does have a slight relation to O'Brien -- here, I am thinking of *The Third Policeman* and when discussing that novel, I shall suggest that the fact that it ends on a note of fear rather than release can be seen as an ironization of the Relief Theory.

O'Brien's texts, however, work mainly by a hyper-version of the Incongruity Theory where there are numerous disparate times, figures, texts and styles.

II

My thesis will focus primarily on how comedy and metafiction collide within *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life*, and with the consequences of what it means for a novel to be metacomic. I am leaving *An Beal Bocht* out of my study as, originally written in Gaelic, its extensive punning does not translate as fully into English. I am also leaving out *The Dalkey Archive* due to that novel's being very much a re-write of *The Third Policeman*. However, I do feel it is necessary to engage some of O'Brien's lesser-known, minor works, for he produced a number of articles and short stories that show the development of his comic and metafictional techniques in basic forms, while also sharing, elaborating upon and clarifying themes dealt with in his novels.

Even before looking at an actual work, we can see O'Brien's metacomic technique at work in something as simple as his use of pen-names. The name "Flann O'Brien" is, in fact, just one of the pen-names ("Myles na Gopaleen" being the other chief moniker) of Brian O'Nolan. Incidentally, I will, for simplicity's sake, generally use

“Flann O’Brien” to refer to the many-headed-hydra that this author is, following Monique Gallagher and her rationale that O’Brien is the name “by which [O’Nolan] is best known abroad” (7).

It was under the “Myles” pseudonym that O’Brien wrote a newspaper column for *The Irish Times* called *Cruiskeen Lawn* (or “little brimming jug” (Cronin 124)) which ran from 1940 to the time of his death in 1966, covered an enormous range of diverse topics and suggests characteristics of a metafictional nature. The pseudonym itself, which means “Myles of the little horses” (Cronin 127), works as a sort of ontological level set up by O’Nolan to exist below his real self. As O’Brien would say, the subject matter of *Cruiskeen Lawn* is “inter-related...in the prescience of the author” (*At Swim-Two-Birds* 9) and this ‘author’, according to Anne Clissmann, “became the mind, the memory and personality which would bind together all this amorphous mass of material, from the most precise and pedantic to the most universal and transcendent” (190).

“Myles” has his roots back in 1939 (Hopper 29),

when O’Brien and Niall Sheridan, using pseudonym, joined in a controversy being aired on the ‘letters’ page [of the *Irish Times*]-- significantly enough on the subject of drama, Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*, which was not playing to full houses in Dublin at the time. When the stir eventually died down, O’Brien and Sheridan started various bogus exchanges of their own, often holding opposing points of view on facetious topics under different names. (Asbee 12)

O’Brien would “attack[] and counterattack[] his own endlessly shifting position” (Hopper

29) and, subsequently, “the editor of *The Irish Times* was impressed enough by the writer’s versatility to offer him a job as columnist with that paper” (29).

Hopper considers the “letter campaign” to be “an index of O’Brien’s emergent ideological position” that “demonstrated an aesthetic shift towards a polyphonic, post-realist mode of discourse” and “showed the deconstructive potentials of intertextual composition” (29). This epistolary game was very much a playful jab and mocking of authoritative opinion, but one that certainly suggests aspects of *At Swim-Two-Birds* -- a novel in which a variety of literary styles jostle against each other; each weakening the authority of the other to such a degree that they seem to leave little more than a void in their wake.

The “Myles” pseudonym, then,

established a crucial distinction between author and text; a post-modernist theme later explored in [O’Brien’s] metafictional novels. As Myles himself wrote: ‘Compartmentation of personality for the purpose of literary utterance ensures that the fundamental individual will not be credited with a certain way of thinking, fixed attitudes, irreversible technique of expression. No author should write under his own name nor under one permanent pen-name.’ (Hopper 29-30)

If this “author,” then, in whose “prescience” the subject matter is “inter-related” is, himself, a fake, is nothing more than a frame to keep subject matter separate from a “real” author, then what does that say about the literary products of that “author?” O’Brien’s use of such “compartmentation” expresses how any literary creation comes from “a

certain way of thinking, fixed attitudes, irreversible technique of expression” and thus, does not necessarily have any natural objective authority over other portraits of “reality” but merely reflects the perspective of the creator of the work of art in question. Each of O’Brien’s various compartmentations include “certain way[s] of thinking, fixed attitudes [and] irreversible techniques” of their own and keep the “fundamental individual” (i.e. Brien O’Nolan) and his own basic attitudes hidden.

While O’Nolan himself may be somewhat of an enigma, a trembling of identity can also occur at the level of his personas. As Gallagher says, the “Myles” pseudonym “became a mythical figure in which were mixed characteristics borrowed from the experiences of a typical Dublin man -- and occasionally of O’Nolan himself -- and a mass of unbelievable, extravagant features” (12). According to Gallagher, “Myles, never tried to give a convincing, consistent image of himself...His birthdate [for instance] fluctuated between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries” (12). The fact that O’Brien mixes aspects of himself in with this mask showcases ontological levels (those of the real and fictional worlds) bleeding into one another.

The “Myles” mask can also be seen as an ironic one. Gallagher suggests that “O’Brien uses the different faces of his mask to observe himself observing, to distance himself from the follies of humanity, from his own pretension as regards a mysterious, incomprehensible world” (18); that “[h]e rejects a multitude of attitudes, but finally does not propose any in exchange” for “[h]is scathing rigour prevents him from adhering to any ideology because his derisive mind perceives flaws in every choice” (18-19). I will show that such ideas of infinite regress are also present in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The*

Third Policeman and that, again, O'Brien's hyper-juxtaposition of literary styles, parodies and conventions agrees with this assessment of him as a writer who "rejects a multitude of attitudes, but finally does not propose any in exchange."

One of the recurring features of *Cruiskeen Lawn* was the series of stories involving Keats and Chapman -- two poets whom O'Brien has pulled from the "real" world but who did not share the same historical space. Hopper describes the Keats and Chapman stories as "corny parables" that "involved the coining of an ingenious pun out of a common platitude, which then became the punchline of an absurd anecdote, delivered with dead-pan solemnity" (36). One such example involves Keats, who has "bought a small pub in London" (na Gopaleen 188), receiving Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Dr. Watson as a patron one evening. When Watson, a less than exemplary guest, refuses to leave at closing time, Keats implores him and his companion with the groaner, "Come on now gents, have yez no Holmes to go to!" (188)

Another important feature of these stories is O'Brien's technique of stealing his central figures from their particular historical contexts and employing them in a liberal variety of situations and epochs across the space/time continuum. "It is a game. Not a book to be read straight," (3) says Benedict Kiely in the introduction to *The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman and The Brother*. Indeed, the Keats and Chapman stories do recall Nelson's assertion of comedy as something that "tease[s], cajole[s] and disorient[s] readers" and "play[s] tricks based on illusion" (152).

I will suggest another context for Kiely's suggestion about the fact that *The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman and The Brother* is "[n]ot a book to be read

straight"-- that is, that the compendium of Keats and Chapman is certainly not something that is based in *linearity*, in any sense of the term. Kiely describes how

Keats and Chapman were to soldier on together in the oddest places and in many historical periods. They are to be found in Greyfriars where Billy Bunter went to school -- or to the tuckshop; in the Vale of Avoca where Tom Moore sat under a tree and wrote a song; on the slopes of Vesuvius 'watching the bubbling lava and considering the sterile ebullience of the stony entrails of the earth', and making a dreadful pun about the drinking of whiskey. (7-8)

Like the characters that are "hired" from other works of literature to appear in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (though there is a difference here in that these two figures are not originally fictitious ones, only treated as such) Keats and Chapman are liberated from their original contexts to be sent hopping back and forth through time and space, arriving even in O'Brien's present, where Keats is seen taking a ride with a millionaire in a "luxurious car" (na Gopaleen 197). Hopper describes "[t]he inner landscape of the Keats-Chapman world" as "a self-conscious intertextual zone, where familiar literary and historical figures freely co-mingle, and much of the comedy arises from these absurd juxtapositions" (36). The specific fictional realm in which Keats and Chapman move seems to be a vast play of signification, where ordinary notions of space and time crumble due to the vast incongruities juxtaposed and thus, the stories make no real *sense* -- and anything resembling the significance of comic closure is, needless to say, completely out of the picture.

Another comic technique utilized within the Keats and Chapman stories is wordplay, an aspect that “echoes [O’Brien’s] technique in the novels where the author manipulates the elasticity of language -- in particular the nuances of Hiberno-English -- through pun, malapropism, solecism, double entendre, metonymy and synecdoche” (Hopper 37). The main form of wordplay in these stories is, specifically, the pun -- a comic device that works in a metafictional context by destabilizing language and meaning and calling attention to the processes by which a novel is constructed. Hopper suggests that “[a]ny metalinguistic device -- like the humble pun -- drives a metafictional wedge between the normal conventions of discourse and draws attention to the text *as text*” (37). An obvious example of this idea can be seen in the story in which Keats and Chapman pay a visit to a rich friend who is worried that his son (an obvious drunk at the age of 12) has contracted some strange illness. After leaving, Keats makes the diagnosis, “[t]here’s a nip in the heir” (na Gopaleen 190). Here, one needs to see the *written* version of the story rather than simply hear it read aloud in order to get the full effect of the pun. Such an example demonstrates O’Brien’s characteristic technique of foregrounding the written word -- a metafictional/metalinguistic technique allotted greater room for development within his longer works. As Sue Asbee notes,

puns are [an] instance of the instability of language. The same words -- or, indeed, as an acceptable variation, words that *sound* the same -- used in different contexts indicate that the “meaning” of language is not fixed, that language is in fact a system of signs with no intrinsic meaning or reference. (116)

The pun, according to Walter Redfern, “is clearly an agent of disorder, a disturbing influence” (14) that “offers the constant lesson that we can keep nothing in neat categories” (123). O’Brien uses puns to underline the point that we cannot keep the plural experiences of life in one neat, objective container, whatever that container may be. In comedies, a reconciliatory ending might seem an effort to suggest that the puns within it are only a brief structural tic and that language can make true sense of things after all. But in metafictional comedies that defy closure, puns are allowed to perform with full flourish their natural function, never to be reigned back in.

Puns suggest the arbitrariness of words; that words are little more than man-made signs. Thus does O’Brien, through his use of puns, make a joke of the authority of language as well as literary styles and works. Amusement here derives “from the sheer pleasure” we take in realizing “the perfidy of language, the ease with which a minute alteration can bring about a transformation of meaning” (Nelson 128). To put it in an ontological context: within O’Brien’s novels, traces of new worlds burst forth from the very words on the page.

Another significant work in the O’Brien canon is the short story, “John Duffy’s Brother.” While the scant critical attention paid this story has been mostly derisive (Clissmann dismisses it as “not particularly amusing, though it does indicate that O’Brien’s sense of eccentricity was ever-present”(266)), “John Duffy’s Brother” is certainly characterized by comic incongruity in an ontological context. This incongruity is evident in a scene in which John Duffy’s brother, who has come to believe that he is a train (and “a particular train, the 9.20 into Dublin” (94)), engages in conversation with his

co-workers, who act as if the whole situation is normal:

‘How many wheels has your engine?’ asked Mr Hodge. ‘Three big ones?’

‘I am not a goods train,’ said Mr Duffy acidly. ‘The wheel formation of a passenger engine is four-four-two -- two large driving wheels on each side, coupled, of course, with a four-wheel bogey in front and two small wheels at the cab. Why do you ask?’

‘The platform’s in the way,’ Mr Cranberry said. ‘He can’t see it.’

‘Oh, quite,’ said Mr Duffy, ‘I forgot.’ (95)

The story deals with what McHale calls a problem “of *being*” -- John Duffy’s Brother believes that he is not a man but a train, and in the above passage, that mode has been placed in contrast with the mode of being of his co-workers, or the nine-to-five work world. The laughter such a passage may provoke will express the reader’s reaction to that collision -- how s/he is used to seeing reality as a single plane of existence, and not to seeing different (though potentially equal) modes of being juxtaposed in such a manner.

Though O’Brien will, true to form, undermine such notions elsewhere, this story also seems to underline the author (the one who creates stories and thus, meaning) as an omnipotent, god-like figure -- an investigation very much at the heart of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. “John Duffy’s Brother” begins with an absurd statement in which the narrator begins to suggest the scope of his own power:

Strictly speaking, this story should not be written or told at all. To write it or tell it is to spoil it. This is because the man who had the strange

experience we are going to talk about never mentioned it to anybody, and the fact that he kept his secret and sealed it up completely in his memory is the whole point of the story. Thus we must admit the handicap at the beginning -- that it is absurd for us to tell the story, absurd for anybody to listen to it and unthinkable that anybody should believe it. (91)

This story, according to Asbee, "is not a first-person narrative, but, like that of *The Third Policeman*, the position from which it is told is an untenable one" (120). The problem it poses is that

[i]f the story was never told in the first place, how does the present narrator know about it unless it happened to him, and we are, in fact, reading a disguised first-person narration? The straightforward answer is that it is O'Brien's invention; nevertheless, the question is valid because of the gesture toward anecdote: "the man who had the strange experience *we are going to talk about*: (my emphasis) and the sense of authenticity this statement aims to confer. It presupposes the attitude that actual lived experience is fundamental to fiction, a view to which O'Brien certainly did not subscribe. (Asbee 120)

By the end of the story, "[w]e are told that the 'strange malady' never returned, but the insight Duffy gained into the workings of his mind remains to haunt him" (Asbee 121) and that "new horizons" had been "opened for...the inoffensive, quiet citizen of Inchicore who would have preferred the unfathomable depths of his mind to have remained undiscovered" (122). The fact that the depths *have* been discovered (and re-

told here) suggests the power of the author as a governing (and potentially reconciling) force with god-like abilities. True to form, however, O'Brien undermines this idea elsewhere.

"Scenes in a Novel" is a work of short fiction (assigned the authorship of "Brother Barnabas," an earlier O'Brien pseudonym) that subverts the author-as-god idea put forth in "John Duffy's Brother." The author-figure here is certainly less than omnipotent, and any remote possibility of comic reconciliation is blown into a million shards of possible worlds as Brother Barnabas' characters stage a Lucifer-like revolt against him. The main culprit is one "Carruthers McDaid" who, the author claims, he "created one night when I had swallowed nine stouts and felt vaguely blasphemous" (78). But McDaid (who, like Dermot Trellis' characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, seems to be living a life of his own when not in the author's narrative focus) is less than willing when instructed to perform a task within a story Brother Barnabas is working on:

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.

'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 its anthrax in two days.’ (79)

Other characters give Brother Barnabas equal trouble. There is “Shaun Svoolish,” Barnabas’ “hero” who, we find out, has

formed an alliance with a slavey in Griffith Avenue; and Shiela, his ‘steady’, an exquisite creature I produced for the sole purpose of loving him and becoming his wife, is apparently to be given the air. You see? My carefully thought-out plot is turned inside out and goodness knows where this individualist flummery is going to end. Imagine sitting down to finish a chapter and running bang into an unexplained slavey at the turn of a page! (79-80)

But things get worse still for Brother Barnabas before the story ends:

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. The book is seething with conspiracy and there have been at least two whispered consultations between all the characters, including two who have not yet been officially created...Candidly, reader, I fear my number’s up. (80-81)

The metafictional joke this story turns on suggests that an author actually has a less-than

god-like control over his/her story. Here, perhaps O'Brien is suggesting that no matter what the author's intentions, a work itself is an interpretive field that need not imply one interpretation only. Furthermore, the metacomic subversion occurring within the story (Barnabas, the author, is persecuted by his artistic creations) pushes Nelson's assertion that there is a "disruptive force of laughter" within comedies to an ultimate, most extreme conclusion. In "Scenes," nothing less than mere anarchy is unleashed upon the world of the story -- an occurrence that serves to underline how comic closure is a very artificial device, especially when paired with a discourse so inherently plagued by disruption and so involved in the creation of new worlds. "Scenes in a Novel" suggests that the nature of the human world, again, is a chaos that can only be controlled through forcing structures onto it.

Still, some may feel that, today, as Nelson suggests,

the most honest ending is that which simply returns us to the inadequacies of the world ('The rain it raineth every day', as Feste mourns in *Twelfth Night*), to the awareness that life is a struggle in which nobody can always be on the winning side, and where each of us will sometimes fill the role of victim, scapegoat, or fool. (Nelson 186)

But in contemporary comedies, laughter signals the end of an old way of thinking and the beginning of a new; anticipates the realization and acceptance of the absurdity of easy, objective reconciliation. O'Brien's works do not simply showcase an acceptance of such disturbances that Nelson describes above. His works do not ultimately "palliate" any "sense of doom." Rather, O'Brien's comic vision, one that revels in the "inadequacies"

of human existence, suggests that the most honest ending is one that is not, in fact, an ending.

Chapter Two: *Bum*

Early on in the novel, the unnamed narrator of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* delivers his own personal narrative theory to his friend, Brinsley:

The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before -- usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (33)

Brinsley responds to this intense monologue with the rather deflationary retort, "That is all my bum" (33).

While this manifesto may seem like a barb aimed at a specific target (e.g. the difficult works of modernists such as Eliot and Joyce) it also expresses O'Brien's attitude to literature in general; his delight in exposing the artificiality of literary conventions with a mischievous, school-boy glee. However, no literary form is reduced to the level of "bum" in *At Swim-Two-Birds* more than that of comedy. In O'Brien's novel, we find the traditions of the comic novel meeting the disruptive mode of metafiction to create a chaotic, Pier 6 brawl of a book in which the comic disruption generated can never be satisfactorily calmed down enough to assure "the reader [who] makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches" by "drawing on a tacit

knowledge of the world in general and of literary conventions in particular” (Eagleton 76) that any sort of absolute narrative authority or meaning, or stable vision of the universe, can be taken away from it.

At Swim-Two-Birds is Flann O’Brien’s first novel and his most explicitly metafictional one; it is the one in which the ways that works of literature create meaning are most blatantly exposed. The novel, according to Hopper, “is so determined to lay itself bare that it invites us to decentre it in straightforward manner, with signposts clearly provided” (113). As we move on to *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life*, I will discuss the ways in which O’Brien *seems* to be abandoning such metafictional studies in favour of simpler and more traditional narrative structures, but is, in fact, merely removing most of his “signposts”; that is, cloaking obvious self-referential aspects in more subtle ways and relying less on obvious parodies and the like. Here, however, there are a number of explicit ways in which O’Brien shows the novel in general, and the comic novel specifically, to be nothing more than a (very) “self-evident sham” (*At Swim-Two-Birds* 33).

At Swim-Two-Birds contains a plethora of ontological strata: at the (apparently) top level is the un-named narrator, a university student whose “Biographical Reminiscences” and excerpts from his work-in-progress make up O’Brien’s novel; at the next level down (within the narrator’s novel) is the narrator’s main character, an author named “Dermot Trellis”; and further down yet is the novel Trellis is writing that features a number of characters including John Furriskey, as well as Trellis’ own “son” Orlick, whom Dermot has created through an illicit relationship with one of his own characters

and who, in a head-spinning metalepsis, begins, in turn, to write about Dermot. In addition, there are several other characters within each ontological level who are also engaged in the act of writing, and a great number of parodies existing at all ontological levels that serve to create a further plurality of worlds that collide and smash into each other like billiard balls.

At Swim-Two-Birds contains metacomic aspects. Here, that “potentially disruptive force of laughter” that is “at odds with the movement of the comic fable towards reconciliation, harmony and acceptance of the world” (Nelson 179) and is usually cancelled out in traditional comedies, is allowed free reign; allowed to permanently shake up the model of stability that traditional comedies try to push off on the reader. While the novel may suggest that a new order of consciousness can be found in a plural “reality” made up of a dialogic proliferation of voices, even that possibility is undermined by an abrupt and artificial ending at the level of story that stalls the comic movement in the disruptive phase, suggesting no reconciliation of disorder, and leaving the reader dizzied in chaos. *At Swim-Two-Birds* suggests that the excuse of reconciliation is not enough to cap the substantial amount of disorder generated by comic works, and the various forms of jokes in O’Brien’s novel certainly work in such a manner – i.e., here, jokes are not confined to situations in the story or the characters within it, but refer to aspects of the fiction-making process itself. Indeed, the comic subject in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is not so much a young man but the shape and substance of comic discourse itself – comic disruptions here certainly threaten the possibility of comic resolution. The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* does not seem to be in any prescribed situation throughout most of the

novel -- he does not have any serious dilemmas to overcome other than avoiding his uncle and managing to stay in bed all day.

One of the most important ways that O'Brien creates such disruption and ontological confusion in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be found in Patrick O'Neill's idea of "entropic comedy" and "entropic parody" that I have detailed in Chapter 1. At a simple level, we can see *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a "comedy of narration" (O'Neill 138) in how O'Brien humorously parodies the most basic conventions of the novel format itself. The substance of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for instance, will not be contained by the tight, conventional strictures of separate chapters. Though the novel starts off with the quite conventional heading "Chapter 1," the action explodes outwards from there, forever shaking off such formal devices. Later, I will also suggest how O'Brien parodies the *endings* of comic novels, but for now, we can examine other basic conventions O'Brien subverts in order to suggest a parody of the novel form -- such as playing with the very title of the book.

The title *At Swim-Two-Birds* comes from "the Middle-Irish romance, 'The Adventure of Suibhne Geilt'" (Mellamphy 17) that involves "the seventh-century Irish king Sweeney" who "throws St. Ronan's psalter into a lake and destroys his holy bell in an angry gesture of pagan disapproval to which he will owe his curse and his doom; Sweeney will be condemned to roam through the trees and shun human society" (Gallagher 10). Though O'Brien quotes and translates liberally from this story within his novel, he also slims a description of the action that occurs at "Swim-Two-Birds" into a mere mention of the name of the place:

After another time he set forth in the air again till he reached the church at Snamh-da-en (or Swim-Two-Birds) by the side of the Shannon, arriving there on a Friday, to speak precisely; here the clerics were engaged at the observation of their nones, flax was being beaten here and there a woman was giving birth to a child; and Sweeny did not stop until he had recited the full length of a further lay. (*At Swim-Two-Birds* 95)

“At Swim-Two-Birds” is, according to Anthony Cronin, “a literal translation of the place name Snamh Da En, one of King Sweeney’s resting places in the original Sweeney cycle” (97). According to Cronin, “that the author did not include a translation of the poem which Sweeney speaks there ma[kes] [the title] even more mysterious” (97). Within the context of a work like *At Swim-Two-Bird*, that title does seem quite effective. Since the idea that the title represents is noticeably absent within the novel’s pages, that title resounds with the metalinguistic toll of language exposed as an arbitrary, empty, signifier. O’Brien’s abuse of the convention that a work’s title should reflect its content undercuts the traditional notion of that convention’s being able to offer the reader some sort of a key to the novel, or be a shape-giver to the work as a whole. Readers who hope to discover authoritative meaning to *At Swim-Two-Birds* through the title, thus, will find out that the joke is on them -- that there is no ultimate answer.

On a more intricate (and specifically comic) level, O’Brien juxtaposes parodies of a number of works of literature, styles and conventions within *At Swim-Two-Bird* to create disruptive comic laughter through a kind of “comedy of narration” that shows how, since these styles and conventions all seem so disparate (sometimes even while

describing similar material), the generation of meaning has as much to do with form as content. While parody may be a typical comic tool, the specific content of these parodies is less important than the way O'Brien rubs all the incongruous styles and modes parodied against one another; the way he, so to speak, "thinks" them "through *one* concept" (Clark 145). That is, O'Brien "thinks" a stew of modes, genres or discourses through a *novel* which is, itself, a form of artifice that many informed readers would consider to be shaped in one over-riding mode -- be it realism, gothic or otherwise. Such a mode, genre or discourse, then, will present a "one-sided point of view" (Clark 145) of reality and O'Brien's juxtaposition of many forms of literature certainly defies and pollutes the strictures of comic discourse.

Incongruity (whose "object of amusement always involves something viewed as unusual or odd" (Martin 174)) is certainly part of what generates the disruptive laughter here. Such a powerful collision between so many disparate styles works to underline the fact "that the novel's claim to represent reality is fraudulent" (Clissmann 121); that any attempt at singular, objective representation is still going to be only a one-sided glance through one of many possible lenses. Mike W. Martin suggests that "the Incongruity Theory has the breadth needed to capture the enormous variety of things we are amused by" (many of which are metacomical aspects that O'Brien exploits within *At Swim-Two-Birds* and his other novels) from "amusement at unusual dress, grooming, and speech" to "amusement at Falstaff's departures from his society's ideals" and "puns, where one meaning of an expression deflects from another more suitable or normal sense of a passage" (175). "In short," Martin suggests,

without being vacuous, [the Incongruity Theory] allows for the many variations suggested in the OED's entry for 'incongruity': "(I) disagreement in character or qualities; want of accordance or harmony; discrepancy; inconsistency. (ii) Want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity. (iii) Want of harmony of parts or elements; want of self-consistency; incoherence. (175)

O'Brien's use of multiple parodies certainly creates such a "want of accordance or harmony" within comic discourse itself. According to Booker,

[t]he different plot lines and ontological levels of *At Swim* overlap and freely intermix, with characters moving easily among different texts and discourses. For example, Trellis borrows his characters from a diverse array of sources, causing characters from seemingly incompatible spheres to be thrust together in the same text. (33)

An example of this idea occurs within the narrator's novel-in-progress, where "the Pooka McPhellimey...and his antithesis the Good Fairy...travel across the countryside toward the Red Swan Hotel, where Trellis's character Sheila Lamont is about to give birth to a son," and they

encounter and are joined by several other characters, including the cowboys Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews (characters from Tracy's books), the folksy poet Jem Casey, and the mythical Irish king Sweeny. The resulting pilgrimage is thus composed of a mixture the heteroglossia

of which would have done even Chaucer proud. (Booker 33)

When the products of various processes of fiction-making are cross-pollinated in this manner, the resulting “heteroglossia” represents how novels, story-telling, and, indeed, any attempt at creation will generate more meaning that pushes the frontiers of our plural and continuously expanding “reality” further.

One such genre he parodies is, obviously, the traditional American staple of the Western, a genre whose main characters generally include cowboys, the folk heroes of American mythology:

One morning Slug and Shorty and myself and a few of the boys got the wire to saddle and ride up to Drumcondra to see my nabs Mr. Tracy to get our orders for the day. Up we went on our horses, cantering up Mountjoy Square with our hats tilted back on our heads and the sun in our eyes and our gun-butts swinging at our holsters. (75)

Though such a parody may already be mocking aspects of a particular genre, by juxtaposing such figures with Irish folk heroes (Finn MacCool) and the Irish landscape (here, Drumcondra), O’Brien also demonstrates the cultural specificity of certain genres. The laughter that is generated by such extreme incongruity may initiate a change in perspective in the reader (to one of disordered confusion) and the accumulation of such incongruity over the course of the novel makes it very difficult for a new, disordered perspective to be resolved by any authorial device. That is, it will be quite difficult for the reader to associate with any movement to a simple, higher ground (so to speak) by the end of the book.

To further the confusion and disorder, O'Brien expresses the artifice of conventions through juxtaposing parodies of specific (and incongruous) writing styles that suggest specific voices. An example of this technique occurs during the comparison the narrator makes between how his characters spend their day versus his own itinerary. Here, we have the narrator's own "*Nature of daily regime or curriculum*" (212) that is quite perfunctory in tone; the "*Comparable description of how a day may be spent, being an extract from "A Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences" from the hand of Mr. Cowper*" (213) which is quite formal, proper and parochial; and the "*Comparable further description of how a day may be spent, being a day from the life of Finn*" (214) which is characterized by elements of Irish mythology. The juxtaposition of these parodies further demonstrates that the substance of a work of literature is largely ordered, shaped and contextualized by tone, language and other conventions of a certain style, discourse, genre, etc.

O'Brien also frees traditional comic devices like puns and other forms of wordplay from the noose traditional comedies would tighten around them. As Shea notes, "[t]oo often we treat language as if it were a transparent medium, a window through which we see "things"" but "O'Brien's eccentric selection and combination of words demand that we conceive of language as an opaque, textured instrument of invention" (93). "Language," he says, "is not designed to communicate information so much as it is designed to call attention to itself as an activity" and "*At Swim* canvasses the texture of words and the variety of systems by which they might be combined, emphasizing the role of fiction as creative distortion" (93). By humorously bending

language out of shape, O'Brien disrupts our usual view of language and its operation, narrowing his focus on the creation of meaning to an even finer level.

The pun is an important tool for creating comic laughter, disorder and entropy within a comic work; is a metalinguistic means by which one can show how language is, like a novel, an arbitrary means of creating order and thus, helps assure that nothing will be contained in what I have dubbed a *metacomical* work.

Puns, for instance, help to break down linear narrative structures. According to Redfern:

Whereas an orthodox etymologist lists the meanings of a word over the centuries, the punster makes them coexist, as they actually do: the word contains its variant senses; all words are composite, polysemous. To twig etymological puns, you need to have one foot (or rather ear and eye) in one age and the second in another: the straddle position so characteristic of punning. (84)

That puns have such a non-linear nature suggests they can be used to crack language (or the way we normally regard language) open and let it gush forth pure possibility, much like the very narrative of *At Swim-Two-Birds* itself seems to explode outwards from "Chapter 1." "The key movement of the pun is pivotal," Redfern says. "The second meaning of a word or phrase rotates around the first one. Or branches off from it; puns are switch words, like pointsmen at a junction" (23).

A specific example of such anti-linear punning in *At Swim-Two-Birds* involves the "Good Fairy," a character who travels along with the Pooka to the Red Swan Hotel to

compete for the soul of Orlick Trellis. Of the Good Fairy, Hopper notes how

[i]t is essentially made clear that his voice is rather effeminate, and this vocal quality becomes the nexus of a homosocial discourse, playing deliberately on the ambiguities of both 'fairy' (magical spirit/homosexual) and the signifier 'queer' (defined again by the OED as 'strange, odd, eccentric,' or 'slang for homosexual'). (87)

Such a pun shows a compression of historical time into a continuum where the past and present both contrast, yet also exist simultaneously. Here, the older, and relatively innocent, connotation of "Fairy" exists with the more contemporary (and pejorative) usage. This pun mirrors the substance of *At Swim-Two-Birds* itself -- a fictional realm much like that of the "Keats and Chapman" stories, wherein a vast amount of temporal incongruity exists.

Puns, with their linguistic feet in different ages, also suggest the validity of applying the Incongruity Theory of laughter to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for "[l]aughter, and fresh ways of looking, alike depend often on the clash or merger between two universes" (Redfern 23). As *At Swim-Two-Birds*, like the "Keats and Chapman" stories, contains a sort of hyper-version of the Incongruity Theory (more than two styles are juxtaposed within the novel, for example) puns, similarly, do not have to feature only two meanings, but may feature several.

Another specific example of punning in *At Swim-Two-Birds* comes when the narrator runs into his friend Kerrigan on the street and decides to accompany him to the home of one Michael Byrne, "a man of diverse intellectual attainments [whose] house

was frequently the scene of scholarly and other disputations” (134). There, the narrator reads from his work-in-progress and

[i]n a moment of inspired, dreadful punning, he constructs two extraneous characters to threaten the stability of the plot. Shanahan and Lamont are almost shanghaied by ‘two decadent Greek scullions, Timothy Danaos and Dona Ferentes, ashore from the cooking galley of a strange ship.’ (Shea 85)

The names of these characters, Shea says, “recall an oft quoted passage from Vergil’s *Aeneid*” where “[v]oicing his suspicion of the Trojan horse, Laocoon exclaims, ‘*timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*’ (‘I fear the Greeks even when they offer gifts’)” (85). Such a “joke,” Shea says, “indicates a willingness to consider the sound of a word apart from its meaning”; that “the sounds ‘timeo Danaos’ have no *necessary* relationship with the concept ‘I fear the Greeks,’ just as the sound of the word ‘Greeks’ has no *necessary* relationship with the people who populate an Aegean peninsula” (Shea 85). Here, “Saussure would say that [O’Brien] is attempting to separate the signifier from the signified” (Shea 86). In this instance, O’Neill’s notion of “entropic parody” seems to be working at the level of language, decentring the authority of meaning by suggesting there is no hard and fast, authoritative relationship between signifier and signified save an artificially created one. In this example, we may have, to a certain extent, what O’Neill sees in *Finnegans Wake* -- namely a demonstration of how that novel is “parodic of language itself” (298).

Furthermore, since puns are a comic device, they work as a disruptive force not

just at such an intellectual level but also simply through their ability to generate laughter.

Redfern suggests that:

As for the receiver [of the pun] (who, like the fence for stolen goods, is in a fishy position) he often utters nervous laughter, uncertain whether or not to plump for the obscene or dangerous meaning, and afraid of being thought dense or prudish. If he laughs, he frequently becomes an accomplice in the assault on a taboo. (29)

As a result, puns are complicit in assaulting societal conventions, as well as linguistic ones.

With all of this disruption occurring, and with O'Brien's constant satirization of works that advocate or attempt to portray an objective, simple plane of reality and a single, stable level of authority, *At Swim-Two-Birds* suggests aspects of Menippean satire -- though O'Brien may, ultimately, be critical of that mode as well. This mode of satire, according to Booker, "contains by its very nature a diverse collection of competing styles and voices" and "tends to interrogate and satirize various philosophical ideas (usually in a highly irreverent way)" (1). Such a plurality of "styles and multiple ontological levels" serves to

remind the reader that there are many different ways of describing and perceiving reality, as well as suggesting that language is a rich and flexible tool for the evocation of reality that need not consist of a mere stream of clichés and stereotypes. (Booker 35)

Thus, authority and objectivity are also tempered by the "Menippean" aspects that Booker

discusses, such as “[t]he first and most fundamental characteristic of the carnival (and therefore of Menippean satire)” which “is its ambivalence”; that is, “different points of view, different worlds, may be mutually and simultaneously present without any privileging of one over the other, so that the different worlds can comment on each other in a dialogic way” (2). This idea also returns to O’Neill’s discussion of how entropic parody works to level authority in terms of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* where, again, “[t]he reader is constantly challenged to establish the relative validity of the conflicting authorial voices in the text to *create* an authorial and authoritative voice, and in the end can only admit the impossibility of the task” (294).

However, according to Joshua D. Esty, “[p]ost-modern readings of [*At Swim-Two-Birds*] have tended to overlook how the text holds its own anarchic possibilities in check” and how “[f]ormal and ontological play are [*sic*] contained, literally and figuratively, by a realistic frame story about the misadventures of the student-narrator” (40). He suggests that “in this way, the novel’s illusion of uncontrolled discursive layering is anchored by a comprehensible and referential sequence of events” (40). But Esty himself (at least in the context I am discussing matters) may provide us with a way out of such a difficulty, for his study also suggests that “[t]he novel’s multiple narrative planes in some ways serve to defuse its “dialogism” and that

the various languages of O’Brien’s generically mismatched characters do not so much encounter each other as pile up around each other. O’Brien deliberately eschews the formal coherence necessary for a true dialogic encounter among languages...Finn and Shanahan, for example, recite and

counter-recite rather than converse. (34-35)

He suggests that “[w]hen synthesis does occur, the results are unfortunate, as in Shanahan’s fusion of Jem Casey’s doggerel and Sweeny’s lyric” and that

[t]he force of the novel’s parodic mission, in other words, seems to be directed *against* a dialogic form that would in any way synthesize Irish voices. In its stead, the novel offers a catalogue of languages and styles accumulating in sequential, repetitive, and open-ended patterns that never quite coalesce or conclude. (35)

At Swim-Two-Birds is a work in which a *chaos*, not a synthesis of voices exists. This lack of a “true dialogic encounter” that would help maintain some kind of co-existence between authorities disrupts the comic process to a significant extent. *At Swim-Two-Birds* does not present “a model of the dialogic search for truth, by negotiated settlement” (O’Neill 57) -- it merely suggests aspects of one, but undermines such a settlement as well. This “comedy of comedy” (O’Neill 136) does not reconcile the disruption of its own internal mechanisms.

But still, *At Swim-Two-Birds* certainly *seems* to have closure. The novel presents not just one but *three* separate endings that try to bring the action of three separate stories to a close. There is the “*Conclusion of the book antepenultimate*” in which the narrator passes his courses and seems to reconcile with his uncle; the “*Conclusion of the Book, penultimate*” in which “Teresa, a servant employed at the Red Swan Hotel” (312), inadvertently burns Dermot Trellis’ manuscript that contains his son Orlick and the others plotting against him, thus saving Dermot’s life; and the “*Conclusion of the book,*

ultimate” which includes a kind of critical summary of all that has gone on before and whose tone is one of closure, but which also seems out of the realm of the previous narrator’s frame of reference and, indeed, seems to have been issued by some other mysterious narratorial force all together. Philip J.M. Sturgess argues that, in this final ending, we find

an immediate, spoken idiom of such confident and acerbic wit that it can hardly be equated with the student’s own, and thus displaces him at the last from his logical position of well-centredness and authority. But in displacing him it does not thereby substitute an even more well-grounded narratorial voice, since the essential characteristic of this voice is that it cannot with any certainty be assigned a place of origin. (258)

O’Brien has, at the novel’s end, suggested a further ontological level that has not been put forth before in the book and whose source is difficult or impossible to pin down. Like Dermot Trellis (whose fate we will soon see illustrated more graphically) this narrator, Trellis’ apparent creator, also has his authority decentred, and a true dialogue of all voices within the work seems destined for defeat by the existence of such anonymity and ambiguity.

This aspect that Sturgess brings forth is particularly important as it suggests a resolution to a difficulty McHale has with *At Swim-Two-Birds* not being one of the “[t]rue’ multiple ending texts” that “are obviously related to the forking-path narratives in which mutually-exclusive possibilities have been jointly realized,” such as “in Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” (109). McHale suggests that despite the variety of

endings and beginnings O'Brien's work contains,

[i]t is important to note, however, that they are interrelated *not* 'only in the prescience of the author,' but in the mind of the character-narrator, a dilettante novelist who writes novels to illustrate his own aesthetic theories...In other words, this multiplication of beginnings and endings occurs not in the 'real' world of this novel, but in the subjective subworld or domain of the character-narrator. (109)

One might certainly argue that such an objection is undercut by the final ending of *At Swim-Two-Birds* -- an ending that occurs in a "'real' world of the novel" that is *outside* the student-novelist narrator's "domain," and thus, there may be a forking path that leads us *out* of the world of the novel, even if we do not necessarily encounter any true ones on the way *in*.

Still, the two earlier conclusions do suggest subversions of comic reconciliation. Initially, it seems as though O'Brien is suggesting that all of the chaos introduced in the novel *can* be controlled, since the three story-lines are stopped and solved quite suddenly. Such a perfunctory ending as O'Neill suggests this one appears to be (261) is quite important to the metacomic novel that O'Brien has created, serving to defy suggestions that the comically-created ontological disorder can be resolved satisfactorily. This contrived resolution underlines the artificiality of the comic mode and the fact that disruption would reign, if not for the guiding hand of whatever story-telling consciousness is creating meaning and order in its own image.

Comic reconciliation is, at the best of times, a lid barely held down atop a

bubbling cauldron of disruptive forces that exist within comedies and that may, according to Frye, be resolved, at the level of story, in a “festive” atmosphere that, in turn, suggests some kind of tempered regeneration of life and hope for the future, both for the characters in the story and the reading audience on the outside who, themselves, crave order. Frye sees “[t]he images of chaos, tempest, illusion, madness, darkness, death” as “belong[ing] to the middle action of the comedy, in the phase of confused identity” and he remarks that “[i]t is at this point, the low point of the hero’s or heroine’s fortunes, as a rule, that the comic dialectic is formed” (137). While *At Swim-Two-Birds* appears to be little more than that disrupted “middle action,” it still seems as though the equivalent of such a dialectic is suggested within *At Swim-Two-Bird*, at that very moment when the narrator has his change of heart. He has been defying (in the form of numerous familial disputes with his uncle) an old order but seems to reconcile with and become *part* of that old order upon finding out that he has passed his exams (309). The narrator warms up to his uncle, a change the reader can see manifested in the shift in his descriptive tone: “*Description of my uncle*: Simple, well-intentioned; pathetic in humility; responsible member of a large commercial concern” (312). This representation gives a markedly different impression than an earlier one: “*Description of my uncle*: Red-faced, bead-eyed, ball-bellied. Fleshy about the shoulders with long swinging arms giving ape-like effect to gait. Large mustache. Holder of Guinness clerkship the third class” (11). This change in tone seems to manifest itself in the narrator’s work-in-progress, which ends with Trellis being miraculously saved and suggests that the narrator’s change of mind trickles down to the benefit of his characters (Asbee 34).

But although the narrator may represent youthful, reinvigorating energy, O'Brien does not suggest that his joining of that old order will help regenerate its ranks. Here, the younger generation is simply integrated into the status quo rather than reforming or renewing it. If a comedy is supposed to end with a marriage that suggests regeneration, there *is* the suggestion of a sort of a marriage here -- but one that certainly seems ironic in the light of traditional comedies. For instance, this "marriage" is of members of a young and an old order, not two exclusively younger figures. It is not a marriage filled with imagery of regeneration through propagation, but a "homosocial" (Hopper 87) one -- a "marriage" of two male characters. While this section need not necessarily suggest a mocking of sexual orientation, and O'Brien cannot necessarily escape condemnation for such tendencies (see Hopper's discussion of "Good Fairy" above), I am more concerned, for the purposes of this thesis, with how this marriage will not lead either to propagation or the "birth of a new society" (Frye 72).

With regards to "Shakespearean comedies" *At Swim-Two-Birds* also subverts "the renewing power of the final action [that] lifts us into a higher world" (Frye 133) in traditional comic works. O'Brien's text proves at odds with how

[i]n Shakespeare, as in all his contemporaries, the ordinary cycle of nature that rolls from spring to winter to spring again is the middle of three modes of reality. It is the ordinary physical world that, according to the theologians, man entered with his fall. Above it is the nature that God intended man to live in, the home symbolized by the biblical Garden of Eden and the Classical legend of the Golden Age, a world of perpetual

fertility where it was spring and autumn at once. To this world, or to the inward equivalent of it, man strives to return through the instruments of law, religion, morality, and (much more important in Shakespeare's imagery) education and the arts. (Frye 136)

But, again, we have a marriage in *At Swim-Two-Birds* that does not suggest "fertility," and we do not see the narrator return "through...education and the arts" to any higher ground. "Education" merely tempers rebellious energy, and what represents "the arts" here (*At Swim-Two-Birds* itself) is much more suggestive of our fallen world. Such irony undermines any suggestion that the structure of the novel might signal a new way of apprehending the universe -- that is, through an acceptance of reality being made of a synthesis of voices. While *At Swim-Two-Birds* may dangle that carrot before the reader, O'Brien yanks it back immediately.

Furthermore, there has been so much disruption and plurality created beforehand, the reader will not find an easy way back to the type of prelapsarian existence Frye suggests is the aim of comic movement. Here, we see how disruption has to be deliberately *forced* back, and in such an obvious, outrageous manner, it would be hard to argue that O'Brien is making any more than an ironic use of that device.

The rescuing of Dermot Trellis by Teresa presents a parody of the reconciling power of the author. Here, O'Brien is suggesting that any type of reconciling force, no matter how reasonable, is a kind of *deus ex machina* whose use stains the fingerprints of the author on his or her work. Many comedies, as Frye would argue, do seem artificial and require poetic license and a suspension of disbelief on the reader's part (124). Such

artificiality is made explicit in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where O'Brien certainly "does not [innocently] use God to underwrite his comic plots" (Frye 125) and where the ending is not like those of Shakespeare, whose

conclusion[s] [are] frequently ascribed to characters or powers who act as though they were agents of providence. In three of the romances a deity, Diana in *Pericles*, Jupiter in *Cymbeline*, and a hidden and off-stage Apollo in *The Winter's Tale*, brings about or is involved in the conclusion. (Frye 125)

The author-figures who try to transform disorder in *At Swim-Two-Birds* are quite humanly fallible. Frye notes that when a conclusion is "accomplished by a human being, as it is in *The Tempest* and *Measure for Measure*, that character has about him something of the mysterious aura of divinity, symbolized by magic or sanctity" (125). O'Brien, however, undercuts this idea of an author as having a higher power. As with the short story "Scenes in a Novel," we see here that authors are not omnipotent. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in fact, the reader sees what happens when an author's work and his ontological being are attacked by his/her own characters. In the ill-fated attempt that Dermot Trellis' characters, unhappy with the direction he impels them in, concoct to do away with Trellis, we see "Trellis...saved not by his own God-like powers, but by pure accident, further emphasizing the impossibility of the authorial control he so desperately seeks" (Booker 41). Furthermore, Booker's suggestion that "the characters cease to exist when the manuscript is burned, even as their creator continues to live," underlines the fact that "texts, once written, have an existence of their own independent of authorial control"

(41). The “inherent ambiguities” in the novel

place O’Brien in very much the same position as his creature Trellis -- always in danger that his text will revolt in the hands of readers, producing meanings far beyond, or even directly contrary to the author’s original intention... Amidst the sliding signification of *At Swim-Two-Birds* words can take on multiple meanings, characters can become figures of a variety of personages, and intertextual connections can lead in numerous directions. Which of these multiple possibilities will in fact be engaged by a given reader depends in large part upon the particular perspective and cultural background of that reader, factors which are clearly beyond authorial control. (Booker 42)

For instance, while holding different theoretical positions, Wolfgang Iser (1222, 1229) and Norman N. Holland (1236-1237) both suggest that readers creatively transform works of literature instead of reading them in the one way an author may have intended. Thus does the reader have a definite hand in further cracking authorial omnipotence with regards to *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The authorial power that brings movement towards harmony is certainly devalued in and by *At Swim-Two-Birds*. O’Brien’s “comedy of comedy” has not resolved “problems of *modes of being*” (McHale 10) but underlined them, and comic discourse itself does not face the happy ending of its pattern coming to fruition. In the end, we come back to McHale’s assertion that novels like this one represent “a reality” that “now more than ever before is plural” (McHale 39) or, as Ninian Mellamphy suggests,

while [*At Swim-Two-Birds*] exposes the inadequacy or adolescence of the shams of plot, plausibility, temporality and causality, the sham verisimilitude of realism and naturalism, it does not question to the slightest degree the truth of Henry James's assertion that the only reason for the existence of the novel is its attempt to imitate life, to show that humanity is immense and that reality has a myriad forms. No, this is its very purpose. (13)

Thus, if, as Wylie Sypher figures, "the comic spirit keeps us pure in mind by requiring that we regard ourselves skeptically" (252-253) then the metacomic spirit keeps us honest by pushing that skepticism further to undermine all hope for purity. O'Brien's text reminds us that we are stuck in that post-lapsarian weed-bank, and that any attempt at getting back to the garden of Eden should be viewed as just a mere bit of fun; a playful "self-evident sham."

Chapter Three: *A Rather Dark Pancake*

While critics may suggest that for his second novel Flann O'Brien has produced a less metafictional work (Cohen 57), *The Third Policeman* makes many of the same subversive attacks on traditional comedies that *At Swim-Two-Birds* does. But in this work, the entropic parody of comic discourse is created in a more subtle manner -- with most metafictional "signposts" (Hopper 113) pulled up and discarded, their significance "imbricated and embedded within the fabric of" (Hopper 14) the novel. In making his aims less obvious, in placing the signals that let the reader discover the "sham" of both the novel form and comic discourse beneath a traditional story-line, O'Brien has produced a more mischievously seductive comic work that draws the reader into its construct before fully exposing its "wires" (*The Third Policeman* 43) and dizzying him or her with a flurry of ontological creation that defies control.

As with *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman* provides an example of a metafictionalized comedy in which traditional comic discourse is interrogated and the traditional pattern disrupted by devices whose chaotic presence cannot be fully resolved by any reconciliatory mechanism. But obvious devices such as puns and parody are not as important or noticeable here as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and the jokes within *The Third Policeman* that create disruptive laughter and new ontological levels *seem* more confined to the story. Still, it is quite possible, I will suggest, to interrogate the metafictional aspects which O'Brien has built into the comedy of this novel and discover an entropic parody secretly tearing away at the guts of comic discourse beneath a thin skin of linear

narrative and regular chaptering.

To some readers, it might be difficult to see the comic side of *The Third Policeman*, given that the world of the novel is quite “macabre,” “hellish” and “tinged with the grotesque” (Mays 90). While Clissmann sees “[t]he embellishment of a sinister and nightmarish story with pleasant and amusing detail” as “prov[ing] how near is the vision of comedy to chaos and unreason” (180), she also posits that “[t]he comic *reductio* tends to lead to the world of the absurd...a world in which O’Brien was unable to live for very long” and which, she says, he felt was “unbearable” (181). In fact, according to Clissmann, “when he put *The Third Policeman* aside and rewrote it as *The Dalkey Archive*, O’Brien moved from the horrors of illogical abstraction and turned to the promise of accepted mysteries” (181). Nevertheless, I would argue that O’Brien’s *oeuvre*, as a whole, is too involved in questioning “accepted” norms for him to find such aspects of existence so extremely “unbearable” – indeed, another later novel, *The Hard Life*, does not embrace much in the way of “accepted” literary norms. Still, Clissmann’s observations underline the inescapable fact that the humour within *The Third Policeman* can be rather dark. On the other hand, Alan Warner asserts that “[e]ven if the ultimate effect is horrific, the style and manner of the book is comic. The reader is constantly surprised by the narrator’s encounters and conversations with the people he meets. The ‘funny-peculiar’ and the ‘funny-ha, ha’, blend into each other” (159). That is, the ironization of comic reconciliation at the end of the novel may be bleak but, placed in the context of a novel full of jokes and ludicrous images of sexualized bicycles and armies of one-legged men, that bleakness is not allowed to absorb all the humour. But despite this

humour, *The Third Policeman* (as I will expand upon later) certainly does suggest darker implications with regards to a metacomic vision than *At Swim-Two-Birds* seems to.

In *The Third Policeman*, the comic subject is not as *obviously* comic discourse as it is in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Here, the subject does seem, at first, to be the narrator and the series of difficulties he encounters within the world of the novel. This narrator, while not looking for “marriage” in the conventional sense, *is* involved in suggestions of ironized marriages that undermine comic reconciliation. But when the reader discovers, at novel’s end, that the narrator (who is never named, but whom Hopper refers to as “Noman”) has been dead throughout the story and thus, should not have access to paper, the reader must come to the conclusion that s/he is getting the story via the medium of the narrator’s explicitly literary consciousness itself. Therefore, due to the unconventional ontological state of the narrator, the novel’s artificiality will, ultimately, be foregrounded after all and things will suddenly become quite “self-evident.”

Basic examples of comic discourse are apparent in the text, too. While there might not be numerous incompatible parodies or styles rubbed together in as blatant a manner here as in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (though the footnotes, I will suggest later, do seem to function in a similar, if less obvious, way), there are more subtle examples of comic incongruity evident in *The Third Policeman*. One such example occurs where “Fox...declar[es] that he has taken some of the protagonist’s omnium to paper the walls of his own little police barracks” (Simpson 79) and feels the need to confess so. In this instance, according to Simpson,

so elaborate are Fox’s strategies (involving politeness) that they suggest

that he has made some enormous imposition on the protagonist...However, Fox's revelation, when it eventually comes, is no more than the rather trivial admission that he has used a negligible amount of the addressee's omnium supply for the equally trivial purpose of wallpapering his own police barrack. (79-80)

Because of the god-like quality omnium grants its possessor (Simpson 80), "the revelation that this 'unutterable substance' has been borrowed for the mundane purpose of interior decorating, is particularly banal" (80). This incident provides an example of what Clissmann calls "a hallmark of O'Brien's comic method" (167). Here, "[t]he supreme incongruity...is attained by [O'Brien's] presentation of...horrifying elements combined with the most trivial and ordinary concerns" (167). In this case, comic impact derives from a "banality" that generates a laughter based on the disruption of our normal perception of the dichotomy between the mundane and either the supernatural or the divine.

A similar example of incongruity occurs near the end of the novel, when the narrator undertakes an extended rant about what glorious achievements he could make with omnium. Such possibilities include "improv[ing] the weather to a standard day of sunny peace with gentle rain at night washing the world to make it fresher and more enchanting to the eye" and having a "sow [that] would farrow twice a day and a man would call immediately offering ten million pounds for each of the piglings, only to be outbid by a second man arriving and offering twenty million" (195-196). The narrator's reveries are interrupted by Fox, who approves of omnium because "[y]ou would not

believe the convenience of it...it is very handy for taking the muck off your leggings in the winter” (196). Subsequently, the narrator engages in another substantial rant wherein he works up an elaborate scheme to monkey-wrench the mechanics of eternity and make the lives of the other two policemen quite difficult (196-197). He is interrupted yet again by Fox, who reveals how omnium ““is a great convenience for boiling eggs...if you like them soft you get them soft and the hard ones as hard as iron”” (197). Here, O’Brien juxtaposes a representation of what different people do with knowledge -- the practical versus the impractical. Such a juxtaposition, then, reduces the ludicrous, god-like goals of the narrator to the level of “bum.”

Along with the (seemingly) straightforward comic aspects, *The Third Policeman* does, at first glance, seem to have a more straightforward narrative -- a more traditional story -- than *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The novel begins in a rather clear, linear movement; with what Hopper refers to as “a parody of the *Bildungsroman*” (116). This parody takes the form of a perfunctory recounting of the narrator’s childhood, the death of his parents, and his association with John Divney, the man entrusted with his parents’ property while he is away at school. Upon completing his education and returning home, and needing money to finance a book on the commentators of an eccentric scientist named “de Selby” whose theories he developed an interest in while at school, the narrator concocts a plan with Divney to rob and kill an old man named Mathers for his box of money (15-16). They do so, but Divney slips away with the box himself and hides it, and the rest of the novel describes the narrator’s subsequent efforts (in the rather strange county he finds himself in) to retrieve that box. While somewhat disturbing in its portrayal of a topsy-

turvey world, the continuing linear movement of *The Third Policeman*'s narrative makes the story easy to follow and seems to promise the reader that a neat conclusion of some sort is inevitable -- until the narrator's true ontological state is revealed.

But it is certainly possible to move away from the level of story to "a metafictional plane" where this novel can be seen as engaging in a rather narcissistic focus on its own processes. Hopper says that

the picaresque journey in *The Third Policeman* -- the 'bigger story' -- is a quest to discover the borderland between reality and fiction...Noman wavers between an awareness that he is a character trapped within a fictional order and his realist belief that he is a 'real-life' person.

Throughout the novel, Noman's hellish punishment is his growing realisation of the gulf between language and the 'real world' it refers to, and his awareness of the frame which contains him. (110)

Mathers' box "supposedly contain[s] enough money to allow Noman to publish his book on de Selby" and thus "represents a possible book" (Hopper 117). "Metafictionally," Hopper says, "the box...contain[s] a substance called 'omnium' (translated as 'omniscience'), i.e. knowledge" (117). That is, "[t]he secret of the black box," according to Hopper, "is that it is the book of knowledge" that can grant the narrator "the power to manipulate all the other puppet-characters of the text, including the other policemen" (149), thus establishing himself as a sort of "author-god."

In addition to representing a book, the box could also be a representation of the narrator's identity. According to Hopper, "Noman's loss of identity is intrinsically linked

to the black box” (Hopper 117) -- that is, all the strange things in the novel (including the narrator’s discovery that he “[does] not know [his] name” (*The Third Policeman* 32) anymore) begin to happen *after* he reaches for the spot beneath the floorboards in Mathers’ house where Divney claims to have hidden the box (*The Third Policeman* 24). In such a context, the narrator’s search for the box can represent a quest whose successful completion will end in a kind of marriage -- a marriage of the narrator with the knowledge of his identity. Such a marriage would restore order to him as well as giving a comforting sense of same to the reader.

There are many other blatant metafictional moments and aspects in the novel that show a concentration on the fiction-making process at work. There is, for instance, the narrator’s revelation of his wooden leg. It seems that he “met one night with a bad accident” and as a result, he tells us, “I broke my left leg (or, if you like, it was broken for me) in six places and when I was well enough again to go my way I had one leg made of wood, the left one” (10). Here, it is possible to

posit...that some other agent broke Noman’s leg -- ‘it was broke for me’.

If Noman is a character in a fictional world (unknown to himself at this stage) then we could say that his leg is broken because it suits the machinations of the plot -- later on Noman will meet Martin Finnucane, the leader of the ‘Hoppy men’, a gang of similarly handicapped bandits.

This scene can then be read as an establishing shot. (Hopper 212-213)

Other metafictional scenes include where Pluck refers to MacCruiskeen as “a *comical man* [italics mine]...a walking emporium, you’d think he was on wires and

worked with steam” and says that “[h]e is a melody man...and very temporary, a menace to the mind” (78). Here, it seems as though Pluck is directing the narrator to MacCruiskeen’s fictionality (and thus, the narrator’s as well), and that they are all in a specifically *comic* fiction at that. J.C.C. Mays suggests that

[i]f we are at first reassured by the enormous burly forms of the policemen, we nearly choke, as the narrator does, when Sergeant Pluck taps his forehead to produce ‘a booming hollow sound, slightly tinny, as if he had tapped an empty watering-can with his nail’. In the end, of course, we realize it is true that he is only ‘a toy man’, just as MacCruiskeen is only ‘a walking emporium..on wires and worked with steam’. Little is clear about Fox ‘except his overbearing policemen-ship, his massive rearing of wide strengthly flesh, his domination and his unimpeachable reality’, yet he is the least credible. (94-95)

Interestingly enough, in the context of a novelist who seeks to undermine literary hierarchies, the most noticeable authority figures here, the policemen, are quite buffoonish.

Even more specifically, Sergeant Pluck’s numerous epigrammatical sayings (“‘That is a great curiosity...a very difficult piece of puzzledom, a snorter’” (58); “‘[I]t is a fascinating pancake and a conundrum of great incontinence’” (127); “‘It is nearly an insoluble pancake...a conundrum of inscrutable potentialities’ (158)) seem to refer to the mysterious nature of *this* novel itself, to the puzzle of its actual but hidden metafictional nature, and to the narrator’s “real” ontological state. Such epithets also present an

example of the language-play that Asbee discusses in the context of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where

the phrase 'a nice cup of tea' becomes extraordinary when it is used in conjunction with the word *paralysis*. 'Paralysis is a nice cup of tea' makes us stop and consider. It may provoke a smile, but if it is examined closely it becomes apparent that the phrase is meaningless and arbitrary. Spoken language that is common to us all, placed in the context of a self-conscious literary work, suddenly becomes strange. (116)

The novel also has a metalinguistic focus. In *The Third Policeman*, the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified and the plurality of language are also represented, but in more subtle ways than the out-and-out punning of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The narrator himself is bereft of a signifier, as evidenced in the scene where Sergeant Pluck fires a whole quiver of identities at him, none of which stick:

'Peter Dundy?'

'No.'

'Scrutch?'

'No.'

'Lord Brad?'

'Not him.'

'The O'Growneys, the O'Roarty's or the Finnehys?' (105)

Importantly, it seems as though the narrator *could* use any of these if he wanted to and thus, freed from the assumption that language is tied to reality, he is caught up in a comic,

yet also horrific, plurality where nothing can be fixed.

The instability of language is also demonstrated during one of the narrator's footnotes, where he discusses "Le Fournier, the reliable French commentator" who suggests that de Selby, when writing the *Album*, paused to consider some point of difficulty and in the meantime engaged in the absent-minded practice known as 'doodling,' then putting his manuscript away. The next time he took it up he was confronted with a mass of diagrams and drawings which he took to be the plans of a type of dwelling he always had in mind and immediately wrote many pages explaining the sketches.

(23)

As filled with unlimited potential as language may be, O'Brien suggests that it is, therefore, quite useless with regards to its basic function of representing reality. Another example of this difficulty comes in the aftermath of the accident where Gilhaney almost loses MacCruiskeen's wooden chest: "When MacCruiskeen found his tongue again he used the most unclean language ever spoken anywhere. He put names on Gilhaney too impossible and revolting to be written with known letters" (116). Later, when the narrator attempts to retrieve the box from Mathers' house he receives only a surprise instead: "I cannot hope to describe what it was but it had frightened me very much long before I had understood it even slightly" (24).

It is easy to agree that "[t]his novel portrays a world in a state of impossible flux, where language becomes an important poetry of improvisation" (Hopper 110). Little stability of any kind is suggested by *The Third Policeman*, and the instability of language

itself is reflected in the land in which the narrator moves; a land of plurality, where meaning is generated at the drop of a story. “Joe,” the narrator’s “soul,” claims that: *“Apparently there is no limit...Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and it will have to be believed.”* (88). The “reality” here is, literally, fluid, as Sergeant Pluck informs the narrator during a dissertation on “the Atomic Theory” (85), which Pluck suggests is manifesting itself in the world of the novel in strange ways:

‘The gross and net result of it is that people who spend most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles.’ (88)

Despite such problems, the narrator still attempts to use language as a tool with which he can build a solid plane of existence for himself. Despite these attempts, though, the narrator, according to Shea, “[d]ivested of a name..finds himself unable to distinguish his presence from that of the wind, various dogs, or even the American gold watch he claims to have lost. No name means no identity, no originality” (134). Shea asserts that

[w]henver someone proclaims his ‘blank anonymity,’ [the narrator] counter punches with meditative, charged metaphors that elicit further oral articulation. Words, which authorize his negation, become the means through which he attempts to mediate an existence. (136)

Pushing this position to a more extreme level, Shea suggests that “our questionable hero

responds to the news of his dissolution by composing a novel which amounts to his own obituary... tenaciously compet[ing] with all assertions of his absence” (137).

Consequently, the novel could represent the narrator’s attempt to fix order to his existence – an attempt that, I shall suggest, is undermined in a number of ways. This subversion of the authority of language can then be seen to suggest that novels contain nothing but themselves; are nothing but attempts to impose meaning, order, and a single ontological plane onto our shared existence, where there is none inherent.

While *The Third Policeman* conforms to McHale’s ontological requirements for a work of fiction to be considered postmodern, it also explores the modernist “dominant” (McHale 9) of epistemology. According to Booker, this novel “is above all else a detailed exploration (and deflation) of traditional Western epistemological systems like science, philosophy, and religion” (46). Booker calls *The Third Policeman* an “antiepistemological” (47) work, in the line of “numerous authors [who] have launched...demythifying assaults against the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment” (47). Such “assaults,” Booker posits, come from Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense” (46) which “suggests that the search for Truth and the quest for centres and origins that underlie the epistemological investigations of post-Cartesian Western philosophy are doomed to failure” (Booker 47).

The Third Policeman, though, with its rather unfixed world, can represent “a highly carnivalesque deflation of epistemological pretensions” (Booker 47). An example of such a deflation comes with the “‘Codex’...a manuscript” in which “not one word of the writing is legible” (*The Third Policeman* 150). Booker notes that

[t]here are also rumours that the ‘Codex’ may be a forgery, and to top things off, there are at least four different copies, each radically different from all the others, that claim to be the genuine original of the document... The ‘Codex’ thus functions...as a representation of the illusory nature of the ‘Truth’ so fervently sought by the inquiries of Western epistemology. But even when de Selby’s texts can be located and deciphered, it is still often difficult to ascertain their authenticity. (Booker 50)

This fiasco, and the “Codex,” also works as a representation of a “reality” that “now more than ever before, is plural” (McHale 39) and thus, “epistemological pretensions” of truth and reality are punctured. The disputations of the critics demonstrate how worlds are created, how multiple ontological planes are generated both by the writing of new works and by the reading of old ones, and certainly, in O’Neill’s terms, present an example of a “*decentred* discourse” (xiii). To keep up the novel’s disguise, O’Brien has set this metafictional motif in the story, within the narrator’s tale, rather than calling attention to it via glaring “signposts.”

If it is possible to see that “all systematic programs for the pursuit of knowledge inevitably lead to...invidious quests for mastery” in the narrator’s goal of publishing a “definitive de Selby index” (*The Third Policeman* 14), and in the fact that he “seems to have spent a great deal more time reading de Selby’s critics than reading de Selby himself” (Booker 52), such an obsession need not only relate to epistemology but ontology as well. Here, the behaviour of the narrator and the other scholars generates a proliferation of virtual de Selbys rather than focusing on or discovering a single one. The

fact

[t]hat Hatchjaw, Bassett, and their fellow scholars never succeed in solving any of the mysteries surrounding de Selby (or each other) is merely another manifestation of the futility of all quests for certain knowledge in *The Third Policeman*. The shenanigans of these hapless scholars are endless in more ways than one. Not only does their work fail to reach conclusions but it in turn generates additional work by meta-commentators (like Henderson, author of *Hatchjaw and Bassett*) whose work is similarly inconclusive. There is an implication that this process might spiral outward forever. The notes in *The Third Policeman* might be construed as a metacommentary on de Selby one level above Henderson, just as the essay I am writing now can be read as a metametacommentary one level above O'Brien. (Booker 53)

In a specific ontological context, the war between these critics serves to create a proliferation of possible worlds that are not resolved back into one again. Since de Selby only exists, at best, in his work and in the work of his commentators (whose "identities...are [also] called into question" (Hopper 196)), it is impossible to resolve *him* into a single "real" entity once again -- to peg either a critical or biographical truth to one "de Selby."

The storm that churns up this blizzard of ontological creation is brought into the work through one of the few obvious signposts O'Brien employs in *The Third Policeman* -- the numerous footnotes, regarding the narrator's interpretation of de Selby, that he

appends to his own narrative. It is important to point out, for this metafictional context, the “peculiarly literary quality” (Hopper 179) of footnotes; that

footnoting is an established branch of discourse that has a practical scholarly usage (citing influences, avoiding plagiarism, offering background information) and does not seem out of place within a text, albeit a fictional one. (Hopper 179)

But here, on the other hand, footnoting is not so much familiar as disruptive, snapping the linear movement of the reading process and rupturing the stability of the discourse. As a result, this feature may very well be the “most overt (and distinctive) frame-breaking device of the text” (Hopper 177). Hopper suggests that “in *The Third Policeman*, the author gradually dismantles the textual apparatus to a point where the footnotes and the text compete for space and signifying supremacy” (Hopper 180). Furthermore, “[t]he final footnote appears in chapter eleven and consists of 160 lines spread out over six pages; a sub-narrative demanding a completely separate reading from the main body of work -- in fact, for a while it *is* the main body of work” (Hopper 181). This “sub-narrative of the feuding critics gains its own momentum, seemingly independent of the text which spawned it” and “even acquires its own rhetorical mode, re-told in a style reminiscent of nineteenth-century gothic romanticism” (181).

The footnotes create additional meaning through the very act of engaging the reader. The reader “find[s] [him or herself] manipulating the physical text like a puzzle, jumping forwards and backwards through the novel’s spatial and temporal arrangements, improvising an order” (Hopper 182). Hopper also suggests that “[t]he footnotes *in toto*

constitute a thirteenth chapter” (185), a function that, he asserts, is allowed for “in chapter five when MacCruiskeen shows Noman his infinite series of chests” and “arranges thirteen of them ‘in a row upon the table’” (Hopper 185). This incident also contains a metafictional aspect that points to *The Third Policeman* itself -- specifically, when “Noman autocritically remarks: ‘These are the most surprising thirteen things I have ever seen together’” (Hopper 185). The significance of this extra chapter is also quite important to the operation of the novel, as

[t]he interplay between this internal thirteenth chapter (an allegory of reading) and the primary text (an allegory of writing), reflects the polyphonic composition of the novel’s language (i.e. self-cancelling and contradictory voices), and the vast range of secondary worlds (anecdotal digressions, cut-up narrative, dreams, etc.) [within this novel]. (Hopper 185)

Such a “polyphonic composition” creates great ontological confusion and decentres primary authority into chaos, creating an entropic parody of the “one-world” novel form in the process.

These footnotes also work to subvert sense in *The Third Policeman* in much the same way that the constant parodying in *At Swim-Two-Birds* destabilizes and decentres ultimate authoritative meaning and interpretation and, thus, they function here as key players in an entropic parody that pokes fun at the novel form’s ability to shape or suggest a single, stable reality. Here, “as the narrative of the margins unfolds not only is de Selby’s sanity doubted but his works are questioned by Hatchjaw...although Hatchjaw

himself might not exist either” (Hopper 195-196). In fact, “[s]o much is contradictory that nothing can be accepted at face value, and we are left with the possibility that the entire footnoted sequence is an imaginary confabulation; a fictive product of Noman’s unstable mind” (Hopper 196). If the footnotes simultaneously create multiple worlds while undermining the ability of an “authority” to control, solve or otherwise order them, they work in the self-conscious manner described by Hutcheon. She suggests that “the counter-pointed double-voicing” of “the index and commentary of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, the list of plagiarisms in Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, or the parodic footnotes in *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, or the tenth section of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*” all “[call] attention to the presence of both author and reader positions within the text and to the manipulating power of some kind of ‘authority’” (Hutcheon 88).

The narrator himself must represent an important puzzle-piece of the novel’s metafictional structure -- since, obviously, the reader is getting the story through him. Cohen suggests that “[w]e have, as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a unnamed narrator” who “has written a scholarly volume on a fictional *savant* named de Selby” (60). *The Third Policeman*, though,

has been crafted to resemble a personal memoir to accompany the narrator’s ‘de Selby Index’ as a sort of companion-piece. Everything about the telling of the story assures the reader that it was written well after the events described, for it has been filled with afterthoughts, backward glances and an amazing progression of footnotes on de Selby and his commentators. (Cohen 60)

Consequently, “[t]he reader will be more alarmed when...he discovers that the narrator has unknowingly been dead since the twenty-third page of the book,” which means that “[t]he book...has been written by a corpse, and one who only knows one thing for certain: that he lives” (Cohen 60). Cohen also insists that, “[f]inally, the circular nature of the ending takes away all possibility of the text having been written by the narrator” and “[t]he reader” discovers that s/he “has been ‘outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters’” (Cohen 60).

This example makes it evident that *The Third Policeman* presents a much subtler metafiction than *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for

[i]nstead of denying realism, as many Post-modernists have done, O’Brien in *The Third Policeman* uses the type of illusion associated with realism, slowly stretches the reader’s suspension of disbelief as the situations grow more bizarre and then exposes the illusion and the impossibility of the narrative. (Cohen 60)

The Third Policeman “does what *At Swim-Two-Birds* could not; it forces the reader to confront the text as text, but also draws the reader into its shabby tyrannical realism” (Cohen 60).

Basic conventions of the narrative process are undermined here as well. With regards to “the possibility of the text having been written by the narrator,” Asbee ponders “[w]here and when...is the story told?” (55). She suggests that “the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* writes in his stuffy bedroom” but wonders

[f]rom what position or perspective does the narrator of *The Third*

Policeman tell his story? It is impossible to say: it is written in the past tense, but the narrator's memory is limited and seems to become more so...Ultimately, all that can be said is that there is no provision in the text for the "space" from which the story is recounted. (55-56)

Narrative space (as well as narrative authority) seems to be decentred in *The Third Policeman*. Then again, one could also suggest that no more provision of space is required than the novel itself -- at least, as I shall explain, in a metafictional case such as this one.

It is possible to see the narrator as coming close to discovering his fictionality and thus, escaping the clutches of his creator. Hopper asserts that *The Third Policeman* represents the narrator "flickering between an awareness that he is a character trapped within a fictional order and his realist belief that he is a 'real-life' person" (110). His "hellish punishment is his growing realisation of the gulf between language and the 'real world' it refers to, and his awareness of the frame which contains him" (110). An example of this assertion, Hopper suggests, can be found in the experience that the narrator has during his trip to "eternity"; "[t]here are no suitable words in the world" (*The Third Policeman* 139) with which he can recount it fully. During this trip, he encounters "objects" (139) whose "appearance, if even that word is not inadmissible was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable. That is enough to say" (140). Hopper suggests that

[t]his is a meta-narrative description (i.e., a narrative which refers to itself and its own procedures), dramatised by Noman's struggle for meaning in

his own life. The problem of even describing this problem of description, in itself defies description -- 'there are no suitable words' -- yet paradoxically, he must use words to describe his wordlessness. In the end he concedes defeat: 'that is enough to say.' (110)

Despite such possibilities, the narrator never quite attains such an awareness and, thus, remains *imprisoned* in fiction. If the words on the page represent the (explicitly literary) consciousness of the narrator, then it seems possible (if a bit fanciful) to see that the narrator is not just "trapped within a literary machine" (Hopper 120) in general, but is trapped within the leaves, caged between the covers of the physical copy of *The Third Policeman* that the reader is holding in his or her hands. Each copy of the book is *haunted*, in a sense, by the narrator, whose aphysical literary consciousness has been imprisoned there by his creator, the once-vaunted "author-god."

In that case, one may wonder, is O'Brien suggesting the omnipotence of the author-god after-all? Is he playfully changing his position from *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where authorial omnipotence is undermined? Then again, perhaps the reader can, in a sense, free the narrator through the act of reading, by engaging the novel and its substance, and by interpreting that substance and, thus, releasing the narrator (the novel's main character) from the sterility O'Brien has locked him into. Upon engaging *The Third Policeman*, the reader may then be, so to speak, possessed by interpreted versions of the ghost -- and any number of ghosts may result depending on how many people read the novel.

The metafictional "flux" that parodies aspects of the novel form here also

undermines the comic tradition and the comic novel itself. Metacomically, *The Third Policeman* (like *At Swim-Two-Birds*) underlines the artificiality of the traditional comedy's reconciling force and "renewing power that lifts us into a higher world" (Frye 133). Such quests for ordering as are suggested by notions of "Truth" and "centres" are certainly part of the reconciling mechanism of traditional comedies, and any investigation of such can have more bearing on postmodern ontological concerns (where "truth" is pluralized) than epistemological quests that seek to realize a single "truth." *The Third Policeman* not only fails to suggest any movement to a higher world -- it contains a proliferation of "secondary worlds" (Hopper 118).

Still, *The Third Policeman* does tantalize the reader with several possibilities for closure, as well as suggestions of stability and authorial omnipotence. There is, for example, the narrator's encounter with Fox, the "third policeman" himself. During this encounter, "[i]t seems to the narrator that everything has been explained" and, of course, "[h]is mind likes such an all-inconclusive pattern as that suggested by the policeman and his use of omnium" which "offers [the narrator] complete and terrible power over the policeman and his erstwhile associate in crime, John Divney" (Clissmann 178). With omnium he can "do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to [his] powers save that of [his] imagination" (*The Third Policeman* 195). But still, while this revelation may suggest a resolution to all the strange occurrences, in the creating force of omnium there exists, paradoxically, a representation of the *pliability* of "reality," which concurs with the multiple ontological levels created throughout the novel.

Traditional comic reconciliation is also undermined in *The Third Policeman*

through the ridiculous “marriage” of the narrator and his bicycle: “I felt once more comfortable in mind and body, happy in the growing lightness of my heart. I knew that nothing in the whole world could tempt me from the saddle on this occasion until I reached my home” (*The Third Policeman* 200). Though “[t]he theme of marriage is re-enacted in the love affair between Noman and the female bicycle,” Hopper suggests that “this is set up only to be strategically abandoned; after all, Noman is dead and his loved one is a bicycle” (151). This ironic marriage certainly suggests a symbolic defeat of the power of traditional comedies.

Hopper also finds

[a] possible closure [in] the revelation of Noman’s death, but what pulls it back from the brink of realism is the final circular loop: Noman is dead but it is a living death of infinite regress, destined as he is to cyclically re-enact his adventures for eternity...Noman had hoped to escape the limits of the final pages by running away with the female bicycle, but now that hope had faded. (151)

It is important to note that “although the end of the book certainly takes us back, it does not return us to the novel’s opening” (Asbee 52). But O’Brien does suggest that the pattern will repeat from *this* point on *ad infinitum* for the narrator (and now for Divney as well), just as the “secondary worlds” (Hopper 118) of stories and realities in *The Third Policeman* explode out forever, before even being engaged by the readers, who will bring further levels of meaning to the novel.

There is yet another sort of marriage suggested here, when the narrator and

Divney are “wedded” together in a shared fate: “I heard distant footsteps on the road behind me...It was John Divney. We did not look at each other or say a single word. I fell into step beside him and both of us marched into the police station” (205). This “marriage” defies the traditional comic kind by not leading to any regeneration or a movement to the idealized higher world the endings of traditional comedies suggest. Indeed, here is a more brutally frank subversion of comedy than *At Swim-Two-Birds* presents the reader with. *The Third Policeman* showcases a movement to a *lower* world than the ordinary, fallen world human consciousness inhabits -- a movement to Hell rather than Eden, let alone Heaven. Thus is the lack of reconciliation in *The Third Policeman* certainly represented in an explicitly darker light than in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Comic reconciliation is also undermined in *The Third Policeman* through O’Brien’s ironic use of aspects described by the Relief Theory of laughter. According to Nelson, there is a connection between this theory and traditional comic discourse; that is, “[i]t complements the medieval formula, where comedy begins with dangers or difficulties and ends with their resolution” (7). O’Brien’s novel suggests both a use and possible ironization of that theory and thus, subverts the ordered closure offered by such “relief.” Asbee notes that

when O’Brien implies that the events of his novel are endlessly doomed to repeat, and his protagonist must go through the business of trying to understand his surroundings, lose that understanding, and begin again and again, the writer is appealing to what may be an unconscious horror in us all. There is a clear distinction between the comfortable, repetitive,

remembered patterns on which we build our lives and the unbidden system that threatens to take us over. (54)

At this point, the narrator's destiny and existence is taken over and readers can see "[a] curious illusion...created, for when we reread *any* novel, we embark on a hauntingly familiar journey of complication and crisis with the hero, who always, as we read, has to undergo the process of education once more" (55). Here, comic reconciliation never comes. The disruptive stage is forever. Relief is denied in a very dark manner.

It is also possible to see, by contrasting them with *The Third Policeman*, how "conventional" novels rarely leave their protagonist in exactly the same situation as he or she was at the outset" (Asbee 55). Indeed, at this novel's end, the final marriage possibility (between the narrator and his identity) is also subverted. At the end of such conventional works, "[t]he main character is usually older and wiser, if nothing else, and these are precisely what O'Brien's protagonist is not" (55). In this case, the parody of the *Bildungsroman* that Hopper suggests is at work in the novel is completed, and the comic need for a "change of heart on the part of those who have been obstructing the comic resolution" (Frye 133) is undermined -- that is, there can be no change on the narrator's part if he is condemned to repeat a specific pattern for the rest of his existence. This ending, then, can also suggest a refutation of dialogism -- the circular structure of the novel provides a negation of any form of dialogical synthesis, since all the disruption generated throughout the novel is fated to be born yet again.

But what about the fact that a sort of common sense and logical order is restored to the reader when it is revealed that the narrator has been dead throughout the novel, and

the mysterious goings on possibly accounted for by his not being in the corporeal world? Is the representation of a plural reality in *The Third Policeman* finally accounted for by the context of the narrator and story being placed in the afterlife and not on earth? These strange occurrences might not be possible in our world after-all, but surely could be so in the afterlife. O'Brien himself suggested that "[w]hen 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" (*The Third Policeman* 207). This problem may be answered in ontological terms; that is, by suggesting that no resolving of ontologies into one is possible in *The Third Policeman*, but that every attempt to do so leads only to a proliferation of *more* levels, and, if as Clissmann suggests, the narrator is being punished for committing a crime for de Selby and this hell conforms to de Selby's theories themselves, then this hell is a symbolic existence reserved for those who try to pin things down to an ultimate truth or ontological level. Booker says that

O'Brien's text shows that the Enlightenment project of gaining a complete understanding and domination of nature through the resources of human reason is a futile one. *The Third Policeman* reflects many of the concepts and concerns of modern physics and philosophy, though its main force may be to parody the attempts of such human endeavours to grasp a reality that is unknowable. (64)

The narrator's hell is thus an expression of the "true" plural nature of "reality" and a condemnation of him to its confusion -- the very state such individuals try to deny and

solve away. Again, *The Third Policeman* seems darker than *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where the status quo is merely exposed as sterile, not condemned to Hell.

The ultimate joke in this “fascinating” yet certainly dark “pancake” may be that, behind all the masks, Brian O’Nolan saves himself from a fate similar to that of the narrator of his novel. Indeed, Booker cautions “that *The Third Policeman*, like all of O’Brien’s work, contains a great deal of self-parody as well” and “O’Brien thus avoids setting up his own work as substitute for the authorities undermined in his book” (64). *The Third Policeman* is a novel about pure, unencumbered creation that goes on, like the narrator and his tale, for eternity.

Chapter Four: *On Piss and Vomit*

Many critics seem to mistake *The Hard Life* for a very straightforward comic work – and perhaps understandably so, since the novel lacks the blatant “signposts” evident in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and even the less-obvious nods present in *The Third Policeman*. But despite the fact that this novel puts forward the most traditional, linear narrative and contains the least foregrounding of the three I am studying, *The Hard Life* still contains potent metafictional jolts that underline the ways in which the novel form is certainly a “sham.” This novel is also charged with the energy of a comic incongruity generated both by the collision of a number of competing discourses and by a juxtaposition of the sacred and the sacrilegious that represents a clash between all that is comic and all that seeks to topple the authority of that type of discourse. The subversion of comic discourse here, however, is not quite as dark as in *The Third Policeman*.

The story-line in *The Hard Life* is unremarkable -- it involves the narrator, Finbarr, and his brother, Manus, both orphans who come to live with a buffoon of a relative named Mr. Collopy and his daughter, Annie. Finbarr’s role in the action is largely passive; he simply relates the humorous exploits of his brother’s get-rich-quick schemes; the various theological disputes that occur between Collopy and Father Fahrt; and Collopy’s life-long cause (the true details of which are hidden from the reader for most of the book) that ends in disaster. But upon closer examination, Finbarr takes on a much more significant role, for while he is not involved in much of the action itself, while he experiences no comic difficulties in his own life, all the action within the novel

is channelled to the reader *through* Finbarr, making him representative of the machinations of comic discourse.

But such a banal narrative as *The Hard Life* contains has lead critics to dismiss the novel as somewhat less than powerful and subversive. Clissmann suggests that it “presents O’Brien’s most normal picture of reality” and shows an “increasing tendency to use pedantry as a comic device to ‘pad out’ his books with a large amount of factual detail” (272). She also dismisses the novel for its presenting “too one-sided a vision of squalid reality” -- a notion which seems ironic in the context of ridiculous characters with blatantly ludicrous names like “Father Fahrt,” and the unstable vision of “reality” *The Hard Life* actually suggests.

Tess Hurson contends that “*The Hard Life*...is...the least appealing of O’Brien’s works” (119) and that it “suffers not only from the absence of an intrinsically interesting plot, but from the absence of any compensatory order of discourse” (122). This absence of order may certainly exist in *The Hard Life*, for the comic discourse that the humorous aspects of the novel are part and parcel of is ultimately undermined here as well. But I would not suggest that the book necessarily suffers for it -- rather, O’Brien’s work seems to *thrive* as it moves towards such an “absence” of authoritative, stable discourse.

Shea takes a more in-depth approach to this novel and the complex possibilities within it. He asserts that “*The Hard Life* masquerades as a tame, straightforward novel even as it explores how discourses collapse” (142), and that “[t]hrough its pose as realistic fiction...[it] rebukes the reader looking for authenticity in the novel” (151). In Shea’s terms, it is easy to identify aspects of entropic parody at work within *The Hard*

Life. He suggests that, here,

[O'Brien] works with readily recognized fictional patterns in order to dismantle them. The text suggests that the mimetic novel -- which attempts to simulate our daily world even as it rivals and augments it -- is most inauthentic precisely when readers accept it as 'realistic.' (143)

Thus is "[n]arrative' ...in fact faked, with *The Hard Life* exposing itself as a series of scenes loosely linked by cardboard character development" (Shea 143).

In this subversive context, it is important that *The Hard Life* is structured as a sort of memoir (a form of literature generally seen as containing an authoritative account of something):

As a conscious narrator [Finbarr] can describe, judge and comment on things from an emotionally uninvolved distance. This accounts for the finished nature of the judgements, for the clarity of the synthesis of experience, for the coherence of the pattern. (Clissmann 274)

But despite Hurson's assertion that "[t]here are no indications, no clues, that might provoke the reader into viewing the characters as fictions within fictions" and that "Finbarr is...only too reliable" (125), I would argue that the reader is actually introduced into this story on a rather pointed metafictional note -- though one that is offered to the reader in a subtle manner that may prevent its implications from being immediately realized. This metafictional context is first suggested when Finbarr, in describing a conversation between himself and Manus (whom he generally refers to as "the brother"), concludes "[t]hat's merely my recollection of the silly sort of conversation we had.

Probably it is all wrong" (12). This metafictional "wink," as opposed to a "signpost," is repeated later in the novel, when Finbarr admits that

[t]here is something misleading but not dishonest in this portrait of Mr. Collopy. It cannot be truly my impression of him when I first saw him but rather a synthesis of all the thoughts and experiences I had of him over the years, a huge look backwards. (16)

Here, O'Brien demonstrates that any story-telling/story-recounting venture cannot represent an accurate "reality" -- even a work of "non-fiction" involves ordering and becomes, thus, a discourse fraught with invention. Consequently, *The Hard Life* seems to present a fiction within a fiction after-all: Finbarr, a fictional character, admits the fictional aspects of his memoir.

Whereas the narrator of *The Third Policeman* tries to use "[w]ords...to mediate an existence" (Shea 136), Finbarr is upfront about how false is the existence he gives the reader. Hurson may be concerned that "*The Hard Life* suffers, however deliberately, from the lack of authorial interference, and the price of the author's withdrawal is a novel with no meaning, no pattern," one that "refuses fictionality" (120), but I would suggest that, obviously, there is much interference and ontological tweaking involved in this novel -- if not from O'Brien directly, then certainly on the part of his narrator. The purpose of such interference is to, as O'Neill might say, "decentre the discourse." If, in *The Hard Life*, "[t]here is no attempt, as there is in *A Portrait of the Artist*, to illustrate the developing consciousness and linguistic power of the child" and so "Finbarr is telling the story when he is much older and makes no attempt to think back to the kind of

perception and language he would have had as a boy of five,” then it is certainly possible to suggest that “Finbarr is...a highly conscious narrator who is telling his story not, like Stephen Daedalus, experiencing his life” (Clissmann 273-274). Such a context helps the reader recognize that s/he is most definitely reading a foregrounded fiction – reading about a character who is, to a large extent, involved in re-constructing his own past.

There are several other instances wherein Finbarr foregrounds fictionality. At one point, according to Booker, “[t]he narrator admits that his recollection of” his younger life “is probably inaccurate (he was only five at the time), and describes the period as a gap in his life, ‘a sort of interregum [*sic*], lacuna or hiatus” (89). In another instance, Finbarr ends the description of his familial relation to Collopy with the *caveat*: “[i]t is seemly, as I have said to give that explanation but I cannot pretend to have illuminated the situation or made it more reasonable” (20). While this point might not suggest outright fictionality, it does certainly show that the story is not a clear representation of a life delivered through an unfiltered lens. Here, Finbarr happily decentres his own authority over “truth.”

Not surprisingly, Finbarr is a constant, inescapable presence in the scenes he describes – though a very subtle one. Most of the descriptions, for instance, of Collopy and Father Fahrt debating on religious topics in Collopy’s kitchen are prefaced by Finbarr situating himself within their presence, ostensibly attending to his studies: “The brother and myself were at the table, struggling through that wretched homework...Mr. Collopy was slumped in his cane armchair...In an easy chair opposite was Father Kurt Fahrt” (31). This context does change near the end of the novel, when Collopy, Father Fahrt and

Manus travel to Rome without Finbarr: “And so they sailed away. How did they fare? That peculiar story was revealed in dispatches I received from the brother, and which I now present” (127). As a result of Manus’s letter within the fiction of Finbarr’s tale, the narrator’s distance from “reality” is made greater still and the reader is presented with a further nested narrative and another ontological level.

There are a number of subtle metafictional breadcrumbs scattered throughout the novel that underline Finbarr’s literariness. There is his astute, educated observation of a dismal, rainy day -- it makes him think “of Wordsworth and his wretched ‘Pathetic Fallacy’” (58). Later, in a brief conversation between the brothers, Manus comments to Finbarr that “I believe that you are a bit of a literary man”; Finbarr responds: “Do you mean the prize I got for my piece about Cardinal Newman?”; and Manus replies, “Well, that and other things” (149). Both of these examples point to Finbarr’s explicitly literary consciousness, and go some distance towards undermining Asbee’s criticism that, as a narrator, Finbarr “is...less interesting than his predecessors, being neither a writer nor dead” (84). Dead, no. A writer -- most certainly.

In the context of narrative space, then, the reader need not imagine Finbarr delivering this account verbally to a number of eager listeners as Conrad’s Marlow might, but that s/he is receiving his *written* account. Therefore, this novel, unlike *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, does not necessarily contain a representation of a pure literary consciousness but the tangible product of one. *The Hard Life* does not give us Finbarr’s consciousness in an unfixed stream, but showcases his representation of how consciousness orders the details of one’s existence.

Similar to *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, *The Hard Life* parodies the novel form through a detailed dissection of language. Booker argues that “even the ostensibly ‘pedestrian’ style of *The Hard Life* still shows concern with language of a kind that belies the usual picture of O’Brien as a writer who gradually turned away from the reflexive concerns that so centrally inform *At Swim-Two-Birds*” (104). O’Brien underlines the idea that names are basic units of fiction making when, near the end of the novel, the reader is presented with an illustration of Collopy’s gravestone, with only his surname carved into it (150), and learns that neither Finbarr, Manus, nor Father Fahrt know Collopy’s *first* name (151). Although they subsequently discover that it is “Ferdinand” (153), the initial lack draws attention to Collopy’s fictionality. That is, the reader takes it for granted that Collopy has a first name but that, for one reason or another, it just has not been revealed to him or her, and the name on the gravestone seems to be a joking reminder of that fact. Collopy is, first and foremost, a figure in the imagination of this narrator, and until Finbarr divulges Collopy’s first name, he has none.

The fact of the narrator’s name (for, unlike the forces that seem to preside over *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, this narrator does have a name) is quite important itself. This firm identification seems to help establish distance between the author and the narrator by rounding out the character of “Finbarr” and marking him as a separate entity from “Flann O’Brien” the author. In opposition to the crisis of identity experienced by the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, Finbarr’s existence seems grounded and thus, in turn, suggests a solid relationship between signifier and signified. This stability, though, is deceptive (perhaps made so consciously on O’Brien’s part) since it

certainly does not infect the rest of the novel with notions of definite order and stability.

The linguistic function of names and words is also suggested through Finbarr's relation of the family history:

Mr. Collopy was my mother's half-brother and was therefore my own half-uncle. He had married twice, Miss Annie being his daughter by his first marriage. Mrs. Crotty was his second wife, but she was never called Mrs. Collopy, why I cannot say. She may have deliberately retained the name of her first husband in loving memory of him or the habit may have grown up through the absence of mind. (19)

Mrs. Crotty's retention of her previous husband's surname suggests that names (and, by extension, words in general) are quite arbitrary. The name "Crotty" has not necessarily been made part of her essential being through the sacrament of marriage -- she may have just grown used to its being affixed to her, like a piece of cheap jewellery.

The discussions between Collopy and Father Fahrt also emphatically point out the arbitrariness of language. Shea suggests that

[t]he novel centres...on the pedantic verbal tennis matches between the uncle, Mr. Collopy, and the neighbouring German priest, Father Kurt Fahrt, S.J. Their respective 'pedestrian styles' compete and interact, building networks of discourse which ironically affirm the absences they seek to counter. (143)

These discourses themselves are quite "self-evident shams." Booker notes that

[a]lmost all of the language in *The Hard Life* is...without the backing of

any firm conviction. For example, Fahrt's defenses of Catholicism are just as mechanical as Collopy's attacks. His rejoinders to Collopy's arguments consist largely of empty phrases like 'You exaggerate,' 'Oh...dear,' 'I wouldn't say that the story is quite so simple as that,' and 'Hold on a moment now.' (93)

Booker also notes that "Father Fahrt's discourse seems to consist largely of memorized, prefabricated arguments and quotations," and since these "are further undermined by the fact that his memory is often unreliable" (93), he also represents the inherent emptiness of language. In these debates,

[e]ach voice displays a prominent, easily recognizable manner of selecting and combining words. Collopy's sound is that of cliché-ridden, vituperative 'Paddy Whack'...[His] moral modest proposals are littered with folksy Irish expressions such as 'pishrogues,' 'goraways,' 'looderamawn,' 'gobshite,' and 'smahan.' Father Fahrt's field of discourse flaunts the well-known Jesuitical dodge. He deflects Collopy's onslaughts with memorized catechistical responses, banal metaphors, and his Order's own brand of 'rigorous' logic. (Shea 145)

These debates between Collopy and Father Fahrt do not really seem intended to be productive in any way, for,

[a]lthough the two assume they converse, each ultimately talks to himself, trying to assure and invigorate an existence enclosed by claustrophobic formulations. Their friendly disputations traverse the same old ground

wearing, not a path, but a trench which determines the course of their counsel as it walls in their horizons. (Shea 145)

These debates exist as platforms from which two competing discourses can be launched, never to be synthesized. Such a failure of dialogism harkens back to Esty's criticism of *At Swim-Two-Birds* that I have discussed earlier and is used here by O'Brien to a similarly chaotic end.

In fact, in *The Hard Life*, "[a]ll communication remains inconclusive and functions metaphorically like Mr. Collopy's ceramic liquor receptacle," a "crock" or 'a squat earthenware container, having an ear on each side, in which Kilbeggan Distillery marketed its wares. The Irish words for whiskey -- *Uisge Beatha* -- were burnt into its face. This vessel was, of course, opaque and therefore mysterious; one could not tell how empty or full it was, nor how much Mr. Collopy had been drinking.' (Shea 146-147).

Shea says that "[c]onversations here amount to comic 'crocks' -- impaired, mysterious, opaque vessels which hide an interesting emptiness inimical to words" (147). If words, the basic building materials of a novel, can be placed in such a context, then the stability of all novels is called into question here.

The Hard Life's "rudimentary plot" itself "is used primarily by O'Brien as a framework within which to conduct various explorations of the use of language" (Booker 86) and

is ...an extended allusion to Joyce, being based on a Mr. Collopy's dedication to his plan to institute a series of public restrooms for women in

Dublin. This plan derives itself in an obvious way from Leopold Bloom's remark as he passes a public urinal for men in *Ulysses* that there '[o]ught to be places for women.' (Booker 86)

In this sense, *The Hard Life* shows that words can be rabid generators of meaning as well as cheap baubles. Here, the reader sees a single word generating a whole new literary world -- an aspect that also underlines the lack of individual authority a given work of literature might have.

An interesting metacomical moment is set within these disputations -- a scene involving Collopy, Father Fahrt and the "truth." Collopy claims that he, himself, "revere[s] truth" and argues that Fahrt "is fond of truth, too, provided it is the truth you like, the truth that suits your book" (78). Fahrt believes that "[t]ruth is truth" (78), and thus represents ontological certainty while Collopy, even if he does not mean to do so, suggests the idea of a plural reality here. Shea points out that "[t]he context and comportment of learned disputation is wonderfully deflated by imaginative, gratuitous details" that Collopy employs, "such as 'a woman without a knickers,' 'red hot nails,' and 'unfortunate Jewmen'" (145). He suggests that

[t]he use of these particulars (clichés and barely signifying) seems to free Collopy from any stultifying adherence to fact. And his frenetic irreverence progressively builds on itself with cadences like 'something of the kind' generating deferential ambiguities like 'up where-you-know.'
(145)

The massive increase in weight that Collopy later suffers due to a

misinterpretation of language is also symbolically representative of the chaotic nature of both language and reality, suggesting that neither is a stable authority, and thus can meaning be generated on and on *ad infinitum*. That is, *The Hard Life* suggests a further, more *dangerous* trait of language. The state of flux that characterizes language can make words into potentially lethal weapons, as is evidenced by Collopy's weight gain. This health problem has its roots in the note that Manus sends along with the "Gravid Water" that is supposed to cure Collopy's arthritis. In it, he instructs Finbarr that the proper "[d]ose" is "one t-spoonful three times daily after meals" (113). Finbarr interprets the sign to mean "tablespoon" (117) and as a result of receiving an over-dose of a medicine that, had it been "properly administered" should have caused "a gradual and controlled increase in weight and thus [caused] a redevelopment of the rheumatoid joints by reason of the superior weight and the increased work they would have to do" (119), Collopy grows quite obese quite quickly. In a grotesquely comic scene near the end of the novel, Collopy crashes through the upper level of a concert hall to his death (143). This basic comic example of a confusion of signifiers that leads to tragic consequences reveals the arbitrariness of language and its potential for causing chaos.

In addition to that suggested by the Collopy/Fahrt debates, a similar dissection of language occurs in Manus's "academy," which "is designed to effect a complete commodification of knowledge, reducing it to a mere series of facts that can be mass-marketed in convenient packages" (Booker 94-95) and is based around a series of pseudo-treatises that are, themselves, parodies. Manus's first book, titled "THE HIGH WIRE" (*The Hard Life* 46), is ostensibly about "wire-walking" (48) and contains simply

“straightforward” (48) instructions, but also a convoluted “Forward.” Booker finds that a passage such as ““It were folly to asseverate that periastral peripatesis on the *aes ductile*, or wire, is destitute of profound peril not only to sundry *membra*, or limbs, but to the back and veriest life itself”” is given “in an academic language that is preposterously ‘high’” (95). Of Manus’s prose, Finbarr notes that “I do not know what it means and I have no doubt whatever that the brother’s ‘clients’ will not know either” (*The Hard Life* 47-48) – and, according to Booker, it is “no wonder, because this stilted discourse means virtually nothing” (95). Language is exposed as quite useless with regards to establishing a firm level of reality.

The Hard Life is also characterized by a powerful example of comic incongruity generated by the scatological comedy around which much of Collopy’s quest (and much of the other action) is based. Such incongruity helps contextualize this “comedy of narration” into a metacomedy.

While Hopper refers to the novel’s “schoolboyish vulgarity” being “largely a consequence of O’Brien’s hidden agenda – an attempt to provoke the Censorship Board into slapping a ban on the book, thus earning him (he hoped) a certain regenerative notoriety” (50), such “vulgarity,” I would argue, is quite important in creating metacomical incongruity within the novel. That “O’Brien...wrote to congratulate the publisher on its production of the book,” saying, “[i]t is precisely right that elegance should attach to a volume which contains a treatise on piss and vomit” (Asbee 84) underlines O’Brien’s intentions to create a mix of the foul and the holy. Such a juxtaposition attacks the authority of the Church and, by extension, undermines the sanitized, Christian ending of

traditional comedies that showcase a “renewing power” that “lifts us into a higher world and separates that world from the world of the comic action itself” (Frye 133). O’Brien’s “vulgarity” keeps things in *this* world.

Clissmann would agree that there is an example of comic incongruity working here. She asserts that

[t]o a great extent, the comedy of *The Hard Life* stems from its concentration on the basic functions of man set side by side with his intellectual pretensions...In the book, O’Brien illustrates the same view of man as an ugly and ludicrous animal as had Swift. This is clear in the presentation of Father Fahrt, the subtle Jesuit, a casuist, a philosopher who bears (in English, at least,) a ridiculous name and who is first seen scratching wildly at various sections of his anatomy. (280)

Similarly, Booker suggests that incongruity manifests itself in *The Hard Life* in the way in which

Collopy and his confederates in this project continually refer to their object of concern by such euphemisms as ‘it’ or ‘what-you-know.’ This satire is not unimportant because it suggests that an unrealistic disgust with the physical realities of life makes conditions in Dublin less pleasant, especially for women. It is also highly ironic, given that the text is laced with scatological references, despite the daintiness with which the central topic of women’s urination is avoided. It is, in short, silly to attempt to deny that such physical functions cease to exist because all of us

participate in them every day of our lives. (88)

For Booker, “*The Hard Life* frequently effects that kind of juxtaposition of the ‘low’ and the ‘high’ that is the central characteristic of the Menippean carnival” and contains “mixtures of disparate discourses” that “may be the very multiplicity of voices in the text that leads Clissmann to find that [the novel] lacks coherence” (101). In Booker’s opinion, the novel “consistently effects a Rabelaisian juxtaposition of excremental imagery with presumably lofty spiritual ideas” (102) – though this juxtaposition will work to create an ending not entirely sympathetic with a Menippean Satire. Indeed, we do not see a synthesis of voices but a violent explosion of them by the novel’s final, vulgar image.

This juxtaposition runs rampant throughout the novel, even at the level of character. Booker suggests that

O’Brien’s subtle association of the church with ‘filth’ inheres particularly in his depiction of Father Fahrt, an ambassador of spirituality who is frequently associated in *The Hard Life* with the physical. When we first meet Fahrt he is scratching frantically at his back due to an apparent attack of psoriasis. And later we find Fahrt indulging in the physical pleasures of both tobacco and alcohol. (102)

Comic incongruity and metacomic disorder are also apparent in *The Hard Life* in a version of the literary theory propounded by the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* – that “[t]he entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required...The modern novel should be

largely a work of reference" (*At Swim-Two-Birds* 33). This idea manifests itself in *The Hard Life* in Manus's shady, pseudo-literary endeavours. Manus, Finbarr reports, "was trying to flood Britain with a treatise on cage-birds, published by the Simplex Nature Press, which also issued a Guide to Gardening, both works obviously composed of material looted from books in the National Library" (57-58). Finbarr goes so far as to refer to "the National Library" as Manus's "private mine" (69).

Manus's own designs become more ambitious and, at a symbolic level, his attempts to control a variety of incongruous discourses become more ambitious as well. In an effort to further his educational empire, he moves to London to start up the "LONDON UNIVERSITY ACADEMY" that teaches everything from "Boxing" to "Astronomy" to "Sheep Farming" (100) with an over-reaching, specific goal; that is, "aim[ing] at the mass production of knowledge, human accomplishment and civilization" and fighting "ignorance and non-education, or mis-education" (102). Manus, by trying to subsume all of these incongruous materials into one "Academy," into one fat discourse of his own making and control, represents other authorities which O'Brien has targeted, including the symbolic function of marriage in comic discourse.

Hurson agrees that Manus's technique seems to resemble that put forth by the narrator in O'Brien's earlier novel (126), but also feels that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*

the borrowings are organised into an original design which estranges them or, as Pound would say, makes them 'new.' The excerpts from the *Conspectus of Arts and Natural Sciences* are kept short for the very good reason that they are informative rather than imaginative and do not offer

any sustained potential to the creative imagination. (126)

She asserts that “Manus goes no further than this informative sort of discourse and the curriculum of the Academy and the general ingenuity of his scams is [*sic*] correspondingly impoverished” (126). But that outcome may simply work to underline the idea that one cannot successfully attempt to subsume a variety of discourses into one profound “truth,” and that this Academy is as useless at maintaining a single, viable, stable authority as, for example, any literary form. The Academy, therefore, represents both the meaning-generating power of language as well as a chaos of voices over a chorus.

Still, Hurson feels that, with regards to Manus,

O’Brien might have drawn his character from a more sharply satirical angle, or with greater psychological depth. He might have filtered a stream of consciousness through him, or employed his more characteristic blend of the homely and the outrageous. As it is, Manus is remote without being truly distanced, rapacious without being truly villainous, a kind of local ‘chance’, a minor figure, perhaps only too realistic to satisfy any set of fictional conventions. (126)

But I would argue that much of the point of *The Hard Life* is that Manus *has not* been created in any of these ways. He works quite nicely as an undermined authority figure and spouter of useless discourse whose presence points to the subversion of comic reconciliation we find at the end of the novel.

The ending of *The Hard Life*, in fact, features quite a brash denial of comic

discourse. When Manus puts it to Finbarr that “[i]n my opinion...half your own battle was won if you decided to settle down. Tell me this much: have you ever had wish for Annie?” (156), Finbarr answers by finishing his whiskey and then going to the washroom where “everything inside [him] came up in a tidal surge of vomit” (157).

Hurson suggests that at the end of the novel, we find “a...mismatching between what we might call cause and effect” -- that Finbarr’s “reaction...seems...quite out of proportion to the immediate provocation” (124). However, this ending does seem entirely appropriate since it provides an example of the incongruous juxtaposition of filth and holiness writ throughout the novel: it works as a blatant rejection of everything that the ending of a traditional comedy should suggest to maintain comic discourse.

Furthermore, this vomitous pseudo-conclusion also represents Finbarr’s inability to contain all the discourses and worlds he tries to work into his tale. Whereas Collopy symbolically reacts to the power of language by bloating with its products, Finbarr (unable to contain it or, perhaps, knowing that to try to contain it is rather unhealthy) reacts by exploding. He neither demonstrates an ability to synthesize voices nor aligns positive, regenerative imagery with the act of marriage. This scene also recalls *At Swim-Two-Birds* in that, here, O’Brien underlines the artificiality of perfunctory comic conclusions -- the blatantly simplistic ending of a character inheriting money and riding off into the sunset of a new marriage is undermined by Finbarr’s defiance of Manus’s suggestion.

Manus proposes this marriage in the first place, Booker suggests, out of economic concerns -- “when he learns that Annie will have a comfortable regular income as a result

of her inheritance from the recently deceased Collopy” Manus “suggests that perhaps Finbarr should consider marrying Annie as a source of cash” (Booker 96). Booker is unsure “whether the strength of [Finbarr’s] reaction results from a revulsion at Manus’s unscrupulous suggestion or from a horror at the thought of being married to Annie or both” (96). Of Annie herself, Booker notes that

[a]ny marriage she makes is unlikely to bring her genuine fulfilment, as marriage -- like other potential sources of spiritual and emotional growth in the Dublin of *The Hard Life* -- is a degraded institution that echoes the degraded condition of Irish life in general. (98)

Booker obviously feels that O’Brien is undermining marriage, since he asserts that “[f]or...O’Brien, the impossibility of successful creative self-constitution through marriage is only one aspect of the general inability of the citizens of Dublin to develop positive and dynamic images of themselves” and that, in this representation of Ireland, the reader finds a nation in which “parents are either missing or ineffectual, government authorities are corrupt and incompetent, the church is selfish and indifferent” (99).

In painting such a bleak picture, O’Brien’s novel seems very much involved in an Irish tradition that regards marriage and reproduction as not the most attractive subjects. Vivien Mercier, in discussing how “macabre humour” is used in Irish literature, suggests that it becomes “a defence mechanism against the fear of death” (76). According to Mercier, such humour “seems a very imperfect mechanism in the death-obsessed work of Samuel Beckett” but “[o]n the other hand [feels] that [Beckett’s] grotesque humour often fully bears out [her] theory that such humour ‘serves as a defence mechanism against the

holy dread with which we face the mysteries of reproduction” (76). She suggests that, in some of Beckett’s writing, “one laughs in self-defence against the uneasy suspicion that sex has betrayed everyone into at least remotely comparable absurdities. Much of Joyce’s humour at the expense of sex, particularly in *Ulysses*, has exactly the same effect” (77).

Furthermore, she asserts that

[w]hen these absurdities are found tolerable at all by Irishmen, they are found so primarily because they serve that greater end, the perpetuation of the human race. But to a number of Irish Manicheans -- including Beckett, Swift, and Shaw -- they are *not* tolerable. Irish lovers live in constant terror of being laughed at, and, if it be true that the Irish in Ireland are a vanishing race, at least part of the blame must lie with their national sense of the grotesque. (77)

Perhaps O’Brien (though not necessarily a Manichean) can be added to that list, for in *The Hard Life*, one of the most (traditionally) sacred rituals of humankind is linked with some of the foulest, and the progenitive imagery that could be associated with a story-concluding marriage is noticeably absent. However, I have argued that O’Brien has created this link for symbolic reasons, not necessarily because he has difficulties with sexuality. Furthermore, his humour here is certainly not as dark or “macabre” as in *The Third Policeman*.

What *The Hard Life* delivers is a mocking of the holiness and regenerative power of marriage found in comic discourse. Here, as in his other works, reconciliation is subsumed to the perpetuation of O’Brien’s humorously defiant vision of “reality.” But

although *The Hard Life* suggests what a sham is the consciousness aspired to by traditional comic discourse, such traditions are not condemned to hell here; merely reduced to the level of “piss and vomit.”

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to draw comparisons between metafiction and comedy within the context of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, and *The Hard Life*. While comic discourse, by its mere existence, inevitably produces both a specific world divorced from what we normally view as "reality," and literary works full of disruptive laughter, O'Brien's metafictional comedies draw on and push these details to their limits, undermining the easily understandable reality that conventional comic reconciliation attempts to resolve disruption into.

O'Brien's works can be discussed in the terms one of his own narrators suggests: that "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity" (*At Swim-Two-Birds* 33). Metafictions expose the mechanics of the story-telling process to reveal the artistic means by which one creates characters and narrative substance, as well as the means by which an author attempts to control those characters and that substance -- and, ultimately, control reader reaction and interpretation as well. Within a comic context, metafictional techniques both underscore the desperate lengths authors go to in an effort to control meaning, and suggest how useless those measures are in the first place. The purpose of O'Brien's metafictional comedies is not necessarily to comment on social aspects of the sacrament of marriage but to show how shambolic is the ultimate artistic aim of comic discourse -- that is, he underlines how the suggestion of stability in both the chaotic world of the comedy and in our plural reality at large is a nice but rather naive concept. O'Brien, to put it bluntly,

makes a joke of comedy itself. Comedy, traditionally, includes the notion that an absolute sense can be made of life, despite the paradoxical disorder wrought through the fabric of its discourse by its own humour-generating mechanisms. O'Brien's laughter, however, has no sense of comfort tied to it, and largely means dislocation, not reassurance. While traditional comic discourse is both subversive as well as conservative -- seeking to regenerate, but not to overthrow -- O'Brien's novels merely overthrow. Furthermore, as some of the critics I have cited suggest, he does not seek to build a new empire in the ruins of an old one. Instead, in the words of McHale, he shows "how...postmodernist fiction" represents the "pluralistic ontological landscape" (39) evident in twentieth-century life. McHale says that "it is precisely by foregrounding the skeleton of layers...that postmodernist fiction achieves its aesthetic effects and sustains interest, in the process modelling the complex ontological landscape of our experience" (39). In such a context, the positive, stable views of comic discourse seem blissfully simplistic.

But, as I have discussed in an earlier chapter, one might want to suggest that a new paradigm could be presented by O'Brien's comedies -- a dialogic way of comprehending "the complex ontological landscape of our experience." That is, one could suggest that the "marriage" in an O'Brien comedy is a synthesis of a variety of voices, a chorus of them. However, as I have also previously suggested, O'Brien defies even that possibility -- and in a variety of ways from novel to novel.

If O'Brien's novels present an "entropic parody" of a traditional comedy and reveal the "sham" that is comic discourse, the degree of the "sham" and the

foregrounding of entropic parody differ amongst the three novels I have discussed. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is O'Brien's most outrageous novel -- the work in which "metacomic" means the running of traditional comic discourse through its own disruptive processes and not allowing that disruption to ebb and "marry" itself out of existence via a representation of simple, one-dimensional portrait of reality. Here, we have a comic vision that is subversive and suggestive of chaos but perhaps more playful than pointedly nihilistic. In *The Third Policeman*, the reader ultimately sees fiction and comedy run against much the same metacomic sword as in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but without the metafictional aspect tearing at "reality" from page one. But in *The Third Policeman*, the chaos is more sinister attack than playful brawl. The metafictional aspects are even less foregrounded in *The Hard Life*, the entropic parody harder to discover and seems, in fact, to have been left buried within the novel's pages by critics unwilling to turn over the few stones necessary to unearth them. Nonetheless, authority is subverted in *The Hard Life* -- where Finbarr himself gives full evidence of the "sham" he is about to perpetrate. This novel, however, is characterized by neither the dark terms of *The Third Policeman* nor the more playful sense of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a novel more focused on mere subversion than outright condemnation. In *The Hard Life*, O'Brien employs a brand of toilet humour that, as cheap as it may seem, certainly works in the context of the specific authorities he is attempting to undermine.

It can be difficult to justify an academic treatment of Flann O'Brien, as his works suggest an enjoyment in taking the piss out of the academic world and out of those who try to dissect things, whether they are works of literature or scientific phenomena, etc.

Also, matters tend to get tricky in a postmodern paradigm since, if one climbs back up the ontological chain, “Brian O’Nolan” himself may not have believed in such a chaotic reality as his novels suggest. Indeed, Cronin suggests that “O’Nolan was born a Catholic and he remained one throughout his life” (114). Cronin feels that “[i]f [O’Nolan] had any doubts about the faith in which he was brought up, they were on Manichean grounds”; that is, “somehow, perhaps the balance of good and evil in the universe as we know it had been disturbed in favour of evil” (114). Cronin asserts that “[o]ne of the most remarkable things about Brian O’Nolan’s writing is the way this view of the dominance of evil coincides with and reinforces the innate nihilism of the comic vision” (115) -- though it seems as though Cronin himself is getting at something more like a metacomic vision here than the traditional “comic vision.”

Still, the question can be raised: Should these novels be read within an explicitly *moral* framework? I think it is quite easy to argue against the necessity of such a reading, for, even if “Brian O’Nolan” was a committed Catholic (though a Catholic whose “own brand of Catholicism” contained “dark deterministic tendencies” (Cronin 190)), with all the persona- and position-shifting he undertakes, there is no reason to believe that “Flann O’Brien” should be regarded as a mouthpiece for O’Nolan’s supposed morality. In view of O’Nolan’s use of many masks and facades, he more than willingly invites such a reading. The vision in these novels is so shifting, so playfully undermining when it comes to traditional concepts of language, narrative, authority and literature in general that one cannot help but find more than small traces of postmodernist aspects in his work. Therefore, and despite what the author might have wanted, those involved in the

dissection of literature will find such possibilities -- be they offered as mere literary games or not -- quite irresistibly tantalizing. As much as he might scorn them, O'Nolan's novels give academics plenty of substance to play with.

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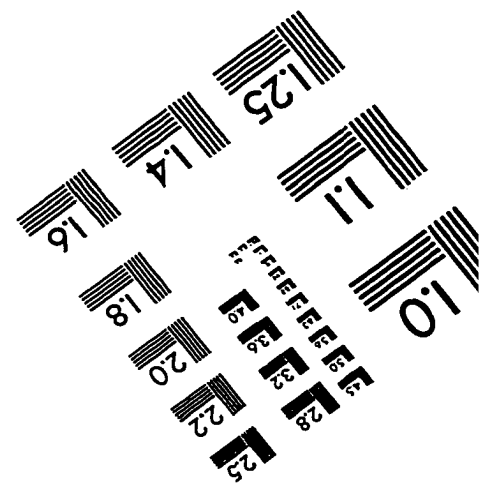
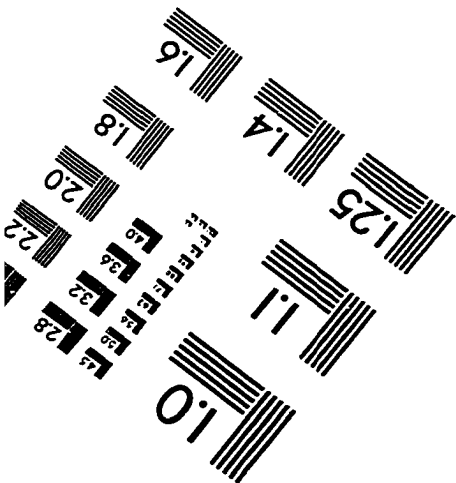
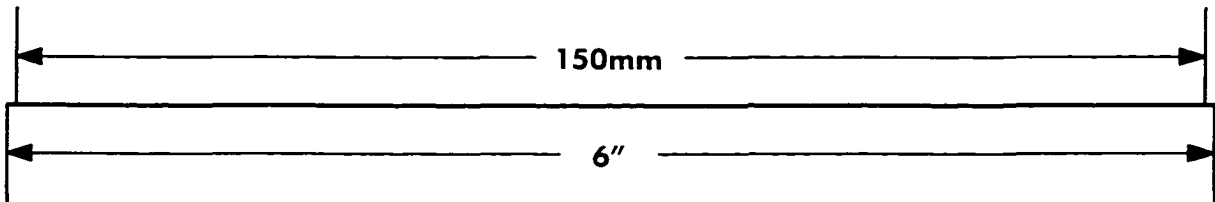
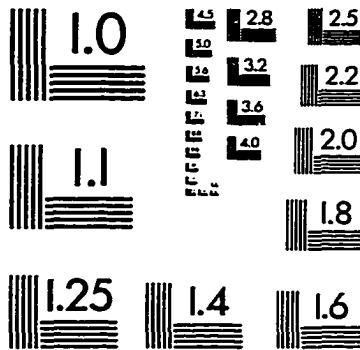
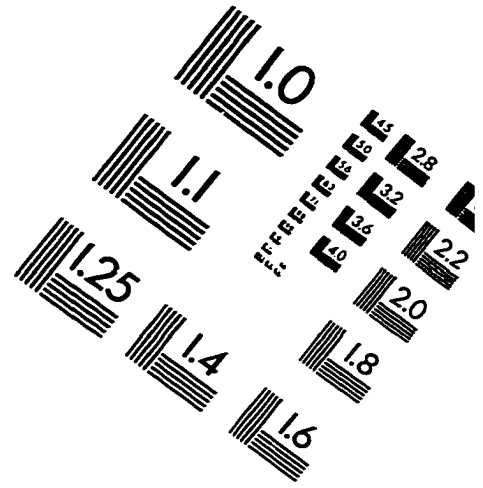
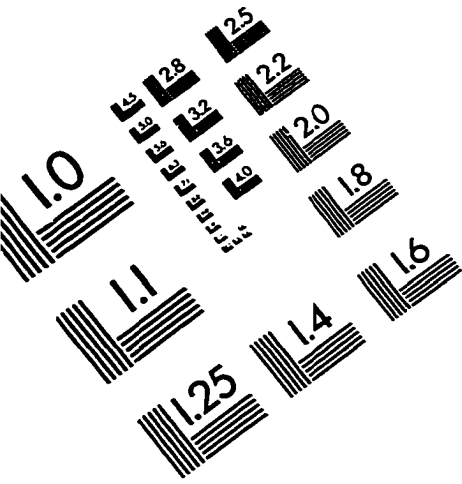
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