

NARRATIVE EMBEDDINGS

IN FLANN O'BRIEN'S *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

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"FRAME narratives" are narrative texts "in which at second or third level a complete story is told" (Bal, 1985: 143). The device of including a story within another story implies that one story, the embedded one, is subordinated to the one that frames it, and it always entails a change of enunciative level and/or a change of fictional level. In other words, an embedded narrative is a narrative told by a character in the first narrative who thus becomes a narrator, and/or a narrative that represents events other than the ones related in the first narrative. Therefore, the embedding may be either enunciative —implying a change of narrative level— or fictional —implying a change of represented reality— or both, and it may be reproduced and create further enunciative and/or fictional embeddings.

Embedded narratives form part of the literary tradition, as the *Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales* attest, and they have appeared in all periods and in different genres. Traditionally, the inclusion of an embedded narrative, which can be oral or written, has tended to be justified or motivated in a realistic way¹ so that the semblance of verisimilitude, the illusion of the "real," could be preserved, or at least parodied. Several devices have been used for this purpose, such as the gathering of characters

who tell stories to each other, dreams or hallucinations experienced by a character, or the discovery of written documents, either diaries or manuscripts. Frame narratives have continued to be written in the modernist and post-modernist periods, although now, and in accordance with the particular concerns of these literary movements, giving the illusion of reality has ceased to be a major preoccupation. On the contrary, it would seem that the previously solid narrative frame which contained the invented within the invented tends to get vaporous and boundaries are blurred in two different directions: those separating the frame and the framed and those separating the whole narrative text and the real world outside.

A further distinctive trait of many twentieth-century frame narratives could be that the figure of the editor who has found an interesting manuscript and wants to divulge it or the device of the character who tells a story are often replaced by the figure of a writer who includes the novel s/he is writing in the text, a writer that makes any intermediary redundant and directly vouches for the authenticity of her/his narrative. In this case, it could be said that, very often, the main interest of the narrative is the creative process itself, thematized through the figure of this diegetic writer, for s/he usually comments on the problems encountered in her/his task as creator. Frequently the narrative levels created in the text are not just two, frame and embedded narrative, but rather proliferate in a nesting of authors, narrators and diegetic worlds. The authorial and narrating stances and the diegetic world may be put *en abyme*, suggesting, as Patricia Waugh has remarked, "the possibility of endless repetition or circularity" (1984: 141-142). Jorge Luis Borges's "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" (*Ficciones*, 1944) provides a clear dramatization of a textual reflection *ad infinitum*, for in it a character remembers a version of the *Arabian Nights* in which one of the stories that Scheherazade tells is precisely the *Arabian Nights*, and consequently she remains forever trapped in her telling. According to Lucien Dällenbach (1977: 52) *mise en abyme* is an internal reflection which mirrors the totality of the work of art within which this internal reflection is included. In his study *Le Récit Spéculaire* (1977), Dällenbach devised a typology based on the structural level of reflection in order to account for the different realizations of the *mise en abyme*, which may reflect the enunciated or represented world, the enunciating or narrative process and the code, either narrative or linguistic. The concept of *mise en abyme* is then applicable not only to reflections of fictional worlds —fictional embeddings— but also to textual reflections —enunciative embeddings, that is, diegetic reproductions of the communicative structure of a narrative text.

Besides suggesting infinite regress, this multiplication of worlds, narrators and authorial surrogate figures may also indicate fragmentation and discontinuity, for the unity of the work of art is split up in a multiplicity of diegetic worlds and controlling subjectivities. It may also point towards the possibility of self-generation that a literary text has, or it may parody the conventions of the realistic novel by highlighting the fact that the narrative in question is an artefact. In any case, the effects achieved are multiple; they depend on the individual text and should be considered against the background provided by the whole text.

Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) could be seen as a case study for the question of narrative embeddings, for it presents different situations and poses a variety of problems and so it becomes a perfect example to illustrate and analyse the issue. In it, the proliferation of authors, narrators and diegetic worlds seems to have been taken to extremes and infinite regress functions as a vital element of the textual structure, acting as a mechanism which thematizes the creative process. Due to the structural complexity of the novel, and for reasons of space, I will concentrate my analysis on the written narratives present in *At Swim* rather than on the oral ones, which are justified and realized conventionally. My purpose here is to provide a narratological description of the narrative embeddings in this text without disregarding the ideological implications that such a structure posits.

1. FANTASY AND PARODY IN *AT SWIM*

At Swim has been studied both as an experimental text intent on undermining literary assumptions and as a literary fantasy. Both perspectives account for its subversion of artistic rules claiming to represent "the real," but while the consideration of *At Swim* as a novel which experiments with narrative techniques will seem quite obvious to any reader, its classification as a literary fantasy deserves clarification. According to Rosemary Jackson (1981), fantasy literature is a literature of desire, a literature which escapes the real and projects unconscious desires. It is grounded on the real but then undercuts it through the introduction of elements which are manifestly unreal and effect a destabilization of a previously solid and familiar world. Jackson considers that literary fantasies are the product of a certain culture, although at the same time they signal the limits of that culture and bring to light the

constraints that society exercises upon the individual subject. Fantasy is potentially subversive, for it attempts to dissolve the dominant cultural order, which is experienced as oppressive by the subject. Jackson's approach to fantasy is grounded on psychoanalysis and she characterizes fantasy literature as a literature of the unconscious, of desire and lack, a literature that endeavours to shatter the boundaries between self and other, rational and irrational discourse, or the Lacanian symbolic and imaginary. Seen in this light, I would argue that *At Swim* both is and is not fantastic.

The novel can be regarded, at least apparently, as an example of a frame narrative, composed not of one single text, but of several; that is, several stories are told and they are held together and contained within an autobiographical frame. These embedded stories—or rather narratives—are not fantastic in Rosemary Jackson's sense. More appropriately they would belong to the mode of the marvellous, for they are naturalized as pure invention, as figments of the autobiographical narrator's imagination. These narratives are imbued in folklore and magic, and the principle governing them would approximate to that of "anything goes." Yet they do not actually present a single marvellous diegetic world either, such as a fairy tale would do, but rather they juxtapose literary modes and elements from highly dissimilar worlds, modes and elements which are never allowed to merge, never allowed to impinge a sense of alterity on the reader's mind. In this mishmash, it seems to me that it is not the unreal that interferes with the real. On the contrary, I would say that it is the real that disrupts and breaks into the unreal by constantly undercutting the unfamiliarity or strangeness of the diegesis with prosaic situations or with dialogues in the most vivid colloquial language. Even though this reversal would still leave us in some doubt about the fantastic nature of these embedded narratives, a question that certainly deserves more attention than I can give it here, what is unquestionably fantastic is the structure of the whole novel. What is fantastic is the way in which *At Swim* consciously plays with narrative conventions and presents us with a fictional world ruled, not by conventions, but by the systematic transgression of these conventions.

The overdetermination of *At Swim*'s textual level is expressed through a hyper-conscious play with conventions and works towards the underdetermination of the diegesis to such an extent that the world of actions and characters seems devoid of life, its vitality vampirized by the tremendous power of narrative conventions. In *At Swim* it is paradoxically the artificial world of Literature that breathes life into the novel. Yet, conventions appear to be present here only to be transgressed, but so much does the text flaunt

and display them that they bounce and come to occupy the foreground. The result is that transgression in *At Swim* represents the text's desire both to destroy and preserve conventions. The indeterminacy of the overall narrative structure together with the shifting nature and position of the various elements present in the text—two points that I will try to demonstrate through my analysis—results in transgression and confusion. However, confusion and transgression in *At Swim* are always heralded, are always signalled, not as random points of resistance, but as systematic normative points of reference. In other words, the text establishes transgression as its norm. This leads us to consider *At Swim* in the light of Linda Hutcheon's discussion of parody (1985: 76) as a "double-directed" discourse that presupposes both a law and its transgression, as an authorized transgression dominated by two contradictory impulses: a normative one that preserves authority and tradition and a revolutionary one that challenges norms. This contradiction is reproduced in the text in forms other than the purely parodic, a contradiction without resolution that ultimately transforms *At Swim* into a textual paradox which exists in the area that Rosemary Jackson reserves for fantasy literature (1981: 19), a paraxial area, a spectral zone of indeterminacy neither real nor unreal where the text moves between being and non-being. Yet I would like again to stress that this novel is fantastic, not so much in *what* it tells as in *how* it tells it.

The first page of the novel is enough for the reader to realize that this is not a conventional novel. The narrative opens with a heading in capital letters (*AS* 9) saying "CHAPTER I." There is nothing peculiar about it, for novels are conventionally divided into chapters. The fact is that no more chapters will be encountered. Then there follows a paragraph in which an "I" reflects on his "spare-time literary activities" (*AS* 9) and says that he finds no reason why a book should not have more than one beginning or one ending. He immediately offers examples of three narrative openings in three different paragraphs which are typographically separated and marked by headlines printed in italics. Later on the reader knows that the "I" is writing a novel and s/he may think that the openings belong to this novel, which is not the case. The so-called openings are not actual beginnings but an anticipation of three different narrative threads that will come together in the fiction the "I" is building. Moreover, the sequential nature of language precludes any possibility of technically having more than one beginning, which in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is none of the three that the "I" gives, but the very first words that the text offers, coming from this nameless "I." These are just two examples of

the many ways in which *At Swim* plays with —and displays— narrative conventions.

2. GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

As I have said above, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is, apparently, an example of a frame narrative where numerous stories are told and where, at any moment, a character is likely to turn into a narrator, the novel being the epitome of the well-known Irish passion for storytelling. The text presents, again apparently, a highly sophisticated stratification of levels, going down in a nesting of writers and narrators who belong to different fictional worlds, which would imply a vertical multiplication of enunciative embeddings combined with a vertical multiplication of fictional embeddings. The main relation that this novel seems to propound is, then, a vertical one of embedded embeddings with frequent changes both of enunciative hierarchy and fictional world. The writers and narrators in *At Swim* are, of course, diegetic and their narrative acts, the novels they write or the stories they tell, become, then, events in the fabula of *At Swim* but they simultaneously create further narrative texts in which other characters may write other novels and/or tell other stories. It is important to remark that this textual structure theoretically entails a hierarchy, a dependence and subordination of embedded narratives with regard to the narrative that frames them.

The frame or first narrative of *At Swim*, its primary level, consists in an episodic narrative in which a narrator tells the reader about his own life as a student at University College, Dublin. His life is spent in constant arguments with his uncle and in meetings with different friends, which he turns into occasions to discuss and get appraisals for the novel he is writing. In its condition of fictional autobiography of an artist, the frame makes parodic use of the compositional and thematic devices of a well-established genre: the *Künstlerroman*. At the same time, the episodic nature of the narrative, the student's confrontation with his uncle, who represents low middle-class values, and the student's own attitude, quite amoral and standing on the sidelines of socially accepted principles, point to another genre: the picaresque novel.

The student, then, is writing a novel and this novel represents the first, although not the last, embedded text encountered. Varied and singular offshoots will come from it, for the student's novel deals with another writer, Dermot Trellis, who, in turn, is intent on writing another novel. The

characters in Trellis's novel belong to very different stocks: some of them have been taken from a repertoire of traditional Irish literature, others belong to inexistent fictional works and the others can be considered representatives of the contemporary Irish working class. The alleged three separate openings in the student's novel precisely announce the three levels of fictionality from which the characters in Trellis's novel will come: Irish folklore, heroic bardic literature and realistic fiction in general. The speech of these characters parodies the style which would be most appropriate for their respective procedence and the juxtaposition of their different registers and their different idiosyncrasies, all presented at the same level, results in eccentricity and comicity. This combination of fictional worlds and literary discourses characterizes *At Swim* as a heterogeneous product and one potentially partaking of Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the *polyphonic novel* as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (1984: 6). Whether *At Swim* is trully polyphonic in a Bakhtinian sense is an issue that will be considered later on in more detail.

At some point or other most of the characters in the embedded narratives tell stories, and one of them, Orlick Trellis, who is Dermot Trellis's son, will write a further narrative. From what has been said so far, it may be deduced that *At Swim* is structured upon the Chinese-box principle, a narrative within a narrative, within a narrative, etc.² Thus, Orlick's narrative would stand at a third remove from the student's autobiographical account. Yet, things are never so simple in this novel and appearances are not to be trusted. A first complication arises from the fact that *At Swim* does not only present the well-known instance of a character who turns into the narrator of an oral narrative, although examples of this situation abound as well. What the reader gets from the outset is an *extra-autodiegetic* narrator (Genette, 1980: 245-248), that is, a narrator of the first or primary narrative who is also the main character in that narrative, and this narrator, as a character, becomes the diegetic author of an embedded written text. He is the author, not merely the narrator, and responding to a traditional notion of omnipotent authorship, he will do what he pleases with the materials that his narrative imagination creates. And he will cheat. The structural summary that I have provided accounts for the declared intentions of this diegetic author, but he himself will contravene them, for this hyper-controlling enunciating agency — extradiegetic writer and narrator of a fictional autobiography and diegetic writer and narrator of an embedded narrative— is the manifest main source of the multiple narrative transgressions that may be found in *At Swim*, overtly

as author of the embedded narrative and much more covertly as writer and narrator of the autobiographical frame. The other two figures, Dermot Trellis and Orlick Trellis, who are allegedly responsible for the embedded texts at a second and third remove respectively, act as authors too and not just as narrators. In its penchant for textual excess, *At Swim* reflects —and parodies— *ad infinitum* both the fictional communicative act contained in a narrative text, the act which involves a narrator and a narratee, and its empirical counterpart, the communicative act which involves an author and a reader. The nesting includes authors and readers, together with narrators and narratees.

3. THE NARRATIVE FRAME

The autobiographical account that seems to frame the student's novel is composed of eleven introductory pages (*AS* 9-20) followed by ten "biographical reminiscences." The beginnings of these reminiscences are typographically marked by separate headlines in italics, "*Biographical reminiscence, part the first*," "*Biographical reminiscence, part the second*," etc, and their endings are sometimes signalled, sometimes not, by phrases such as "Conclusion of the foregoing," "Conclusion of reminiscence." Several non-narrative texts —letters and extracts from other books— are also included within the reminiscences. Finally, the student's novel will be embedded in the frame, but only partially, for most of it will exist side by side with the student's autobiography, contradicting the apparent vertical structure of embedding.

3.1. The autobiography

There are two points that I would like to make here in relation to the autobiographical frame. Firstly, that it purports to be *At Swim*'s representation of reality, a window on the real world outside through which the reader catches glimpses of the Dublin of the day and of different types who people it. This semblance of reality is reinforced by the fact that it poses as an autobiographical narrative, that is, a truth-telling narrative. However, the reader realizes that it is just a fiction, much in the same way as the student's embedded novel, although placed on the outer side of the text, in a

superior hierarchical position. This autobiographical frame, then, is just a textual disguise to stress the idea that the events told are pure fact. Secondly, I keep wondering what the narrative justification of this autobiography could be. In other words, what is the purpose of the telling? Why does this narrator want to talk about a period in his life when he was leading a dull and prosaic existence, nothing interesting or exciting happened, and nothing seemed to move him? In strict structural narrative terms, the answer could be that the frame mainly serves to provide a rhetorical foil for the student's wild novel while it also helps to anchor it and even exercises a repressive function of containment, preventing this wild narrative from spilling over and contaminating the autobiographical frame. Yet I would also argue that this autobiography provides a pre-text, a perfect occasion for the narrating subject to disclose his "talents," to turn outwards and become spectacle. Maud Ellman has related autobiographies to the myth of Narcissus, "the patron saint of autobiographers" and has stated that in autobiographical time,

the present folds back narcissistically upon the past, to seize the fading image of the self. Like the autobiographer, the narcissist longs to expunge the temporal and spatial difference that separates him from his image — yet he can only love himself because that self is severed from within. Time frustrates narcissism but sustains it, too, for the time in which the narcissist eludes his own embrace is the time which perpetuates desire. (1987: 370-379)

In narrative terms, the "difference" alluded to above translates into the temporal, spatial and psychological distance that separates the student as narrator and as character, that is, the difference between the "I" that writes the autobiography and the "I" that experiences the events. The autobiographer, like the narcissist, is intent on bridging that gap, while he also knows that, should both selves collapse, his identity would collapse too, for desire first provoked his writing, a desire to repeat his life actually masking a desire "for himself," which is always a desire for his former self. Now, desire always presupposes distance, difference, separation from the object of desire. Within this scenario, it is quite understandable that the autobiography should become a conflictive writing space where a subject may both fight to establish distance and work to circumvent it. It is my contention that *At Swim's* autobiographical narrator, and the text as a whole, manifest this contrary pull towards both distance and proximity, differentiation and undifferentiation, a centrifugal and centripetal force that

works in opposite directions and renders *At Swim*'s reduction to a monolithic interpretation impossible. In his paper "Fetishism" Freud elaborated on the function of the fetish in relation to the castration complex and found evidence that many fetishists present a divided attitude to the question of the castration of women. In these cases the fetish becomes the site where the male subject both negates and affirms castration so that two mutually incompatible assertions are held within it: "the woman has still got a penis" and "my father has castrated the woman" (Freud: 1977, 356-357). As Tania Modleski has stated (1991:119) the fetish in Freudian theory is the means "whereby a 'multiple-belief' may be maintained," a project that comes close to that of *At Swim*.

This contradictory and paradoxical movement towards both distance and proximity is structurally illustrated by the temporal relationship that the autobiographical frame establishes between its narrating time and the actual occurrence of events in the fabula. According to Genette's typology (1980: 217) the frame in *At Swim* would be a *subsequent* narrative without any indication of the temporal interval gone by between the two points — narration and action. The reader takes it for granted that the telling follows the events just because the past tense has been used. Yet, on further readings and due to the artful tone of the whole novel, several objections may come to mind. The least that could be said is that at certain points the situation is ambiguous. For a start, the conventional process of maturation of the *Künstlerroman* seems to be missing and there is a lack of psychological distance between student-character and narrator, which could be a consequence of a lack of temporal distance. Furthermore, there is a passage in the novel which favours ambiguity and questions the entire narrative situation of what purports to be a retrospective account of events. In this passage, the narrator tells us that one day he realized that he had lost some pages of his novel and began to speculate what would happen if he were to lose the whole of it. In principle, the missing pages belong to the novel that the present narrator wrote when he was a young student and so the novel forms part of his past and in his past it should remain.

With regard to my *present* work, however, the forty pages which follow the lost portion were so vital to the operation of the ingenious plot which I *had devised* that I *deemed* it advisable to spend an April afternoon —a time of sun-glistening showers— glancing through them in a critical if precipitate manner. (*AS* 60; my emphasis).

The mixture of present and past is quite confusing. He refers to the novel that he was writing in his past as his "present" work. Or is he creating it now, at the same time as he is inventing his biographical reminiscences? Undoubtedly, the use of present and past tenses in the same sentence and in connection with the same referent causes ambiguity and relational incongruities. On the one hand, these devices could be meant to strengthen the mimetic illusion, for they attempt to weaken the temporal and psychological distance between narration and diegesis and give the impression of immediacy, bringing the reader closer to the text. On the other hand, they also bring to the fore the aesthetic status of the narrative, its rhetoric and artificiality, and they destabilize the dividing line between the act of narration and the narrated world, between exteriority and interiority or between enunciating subject —the "I" that writes and narrates— and subject of the enunciated —the "I" inscribed in the text.

3.2. Non-narrative texts

The non-narrative embedded texts included in the autobiography are two letters from the narrator's tipster and several extracts from books as diverse and obscure as the *Literary Reader* by the Irish Christian Brothers, *A Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences*, *The Athenian Oracle* or *The Wise Sayings of the Son of Sirach*. This literary device, the inclusion in a narrative text of quotations from other texts, is known by the name of *intertextuality*³ and points to the dialogue that any text maintains with other texts. The effect that these interpolations create in *At Swim* is again double and contradictory. On the one hand, they help promote a feeling of immediacy and contribute to bringing the reader closer to the fabula, to making her/him believe that s/he is witnessing the development of the events and that the narrator is willing to share all the information he has with her/him. This effect is achieved through a *realistic* or *quasi-mimetic* (Sternberg 1978: 247) motivation for the introduction of the non-narrative texts. The diegesis itself justifies their presence, which is prompted by the characters' actions and is not the narrator's direct responsibility:

Wait till I show you something, I said groping in my pocket. Wait till you read this. I got this yesterday. I am in the hands of a man from Newmarket.
I handed him a letter.

Mail from V. Wright, Wyvern Cottage, Newmarket, Suffolk (AS 36-37)

Papers and periodicals were perused in a desultory fashion for some time. Afterwards Byrne searched for an old book purchased for a nominal sum upon the quays and read aloud extracts therefrom for the general benefit and/or diversion of the company.

Title of Book referred to; The Athenian Oracle

Extract from Book referred to (AS 102).

We find ourselves reading the letter at the same time as the character is supposed to be doing it. We participate in his action and have a feeling of simultaneity and closeness between the fabula time and our reading time. On the other hand, how is it possible that the narrator has *The Athenian Oracle* handy, such an old book which belonged to Byrne, just to offer us the precise extracts that his friend read out loud on that occasion? Once again, a pretence of *vraisemblance* is forcefully counteracted by the underlying artificiality and proximity rapidly gives way to distance. In the final analysis, the incorporation of these texts stresses the fact that a narrative can never reproduce a lived experience and that it is only a network of printed words. As Patricia Waugh has remarked (1984:112), the use of intertextuality is one way of reinforcing the notion that the ontological status of literature is different from that of the everyday world.

These embedded non-narrative texts bear a thematic relationship to the rest of the narrative. Several of them are heavily loaded with moral or religious tones, and would perfectly fit in the kind of novel —didactic and Victorian— that Dermot Trellis, a character in the student's novel, intends to write. Yet, they do not belong there, but form part of the narrator's autobiographical world, a world which is unethical and in which religion plays no obvious part. One of the extracts (AS 21) deals with the perils that the consumption of alcohol entails. Its tone is utterly apocalyptic, recalling *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in its description of the tortures to be suffered in hell. Another piece talks about "the fear of the Lord" (AS 96) and another one about the moral effects of "tobacco-using" (AS 209). In contrast, our student is a drunkard and a compulsive smoker and does not care about God at all. The irony is evident and the reader is compelled to distance her/himself from these texts, for they contradict the world created in the frame. What the inclusion of these non-narrative pieces brings about is a humorous and ironic effect achieved by sheer juxtaposition of styles and

mainly of moral and didactic literature set against the unifying narrative that the narrator provides.

4. THE STUDENT'S NOVEL

Narratology conceives of the narrative text as a hierarchical structure whose highest authority is the fictive author or the narrator of the first narrative. In *At Swim*, this authority is embodied by the student, who is the fictive author and narrator of his biography, its main character and the author and narrator of an embedded narrative. His subjectivity is, nevertheless, not diluted and diffuse because it has been split into so many stances but is ever-present and becomes the unifying focal point, the centre of the text. His evident reluctance to delegate responsibilities to other textual figures mirrors his will to power, his tyrannical and egotistic personality disguised under a layer of democracy. He wants to be inside his novel while pretending to be outside and only at the very end will his claim to control and total discursive mastery be overtly questioned. If formerly he has been characterized as a narcissistic figure, in epistemological terms his personality responds to the figure of the solipsist who translates the world, both real and fictional, into his own terms, for any conceivable thing starts and ends in his consciousness, which is perpetually doubling itself. In order to convey such a personality, the most suitable narrative voice and narrative situation are the ones present in *At Swim*, where the narrator can approach not only the objective world but also the subjective world of his imagination phenomenologically, and he is able to observe and manipulate not only external events and characters, but himself as well. Returning to Bakhtin's elaboration of the polyphonic novel (1984) and to *At Swim*'s relationship with it, I would argue that it is precisely the narrator's authoritative position that prevents the novel from being plural, polyphonic and dialogical. Although there is potential enough for it to be so, its fragmentary surface is filtered through a unifying and central consciousness. Moreover, this consciousness objectifies the characters, whom the reader never feels to be autonomous subjects, and objectifies their stereotyped discourses too.

Since the student is both narrator and fictive author he is endowed with divine privilege and authority and he is utterly self-conscious about the task he is performing. He is omnipotent and by definition he should be omniscient

too. In his biographical reminiscences he mentions the "prescience" of any author (*AS* 9), a power that he himself will lack, for he will alter the course of his narrative. As one reads *At Swim*, the impression is that the student's novel is not a finished product. The suggestion is that the student-author is writing a novel and the reader is witnessing this creative process, but for all the reader knows, the student will never bother to convert it into a conventional narrative. It should be remembered that the narrating time apparently follows the events, that is to say, the biographical reminiscences in which the writing of the novel is embedded. Consequently, the narrator of the frame, in retrospect, should be omniscient in his own right and able to offer us the final version of the novel that he wrote while a student. The fact that he does not do so may intimate that the whole narrative situation in *At Swim* is a fake, backing the previous suggestion concerning the questionable status of *At Swim* as a subsequent narrative and attesting to the text's determination to demolish the same barriers that it has created elsewhere.

4.1. Authors and Readers

The narrative that the student-author is writing will reach the readers in three different ways. Sometimes the extracts will be *quasi-mimetically* motivated (Sternberg, 1978: 247). Speaking in Genette's terms (1980: 227-231), the student-author, a character in the first narrative, turns into a diegetic author of an embedded narrative. Consequently, these extracts are included within the biographical reminiscences and are justified by the characters' actions. They take place as events in the fabula of the first narrative, and the narratee, the agent addressed by the narrator, is situated at the same narrative level as this narrator. In the case of *At Swim*, it is not so much a question of narrators and narratees as a question of authors and readers. The student-author will have his own character-readers. His friend Brinsley will feature prominently in this role. Sometimes the student-author himself will read aloud and Brinsley and/or other friends will act as listeners. On these occasions, which somewhat resemble the communicative situation established in an oral tradition or which, at least, are not as artificial as the private reading act, the listeners do not remain passive but interrupt the narrative with their own comments. The second way in which we learn about the embedded narrative is quite similar

to the one mentioned: that is to say, it takes place at the level of the fabula and from character to character/s. The difference lies in the fact that now the extracts will not be marked with headlines and will not constitute a separate text. The student-author will simply explain or summarize parts of the fabula of his novel, in direct speech and in the midst of a scene pertaining to the frame. The situation here is far more spontaneous. The diegetic narrator addresses a diegetic narratee and the narratee's feed-back and interruptions are more numerous. At one point, a group of friends will meet at Byrne's and the student will find occasion to entertain his attentive audience (*AS* 99-102). One of his narratees, his friend Kerrigan, will even make his own contribution to the narrative.

The two Greeks, I continued, were deaf and dumb but managed to convey, by jerking their thumbs towards the bay and writing down large sums of money in foreign currency, that there was a good life to be lived across the water.

The Greeks were employed, said Kerrigan, as panders by an eminent Belgian author who was writing a saga on the white slave question. They were concerned in the transport of doubtful cargo to Antwerp.

I recall that the dexterity and ready wit of this conversation induced in all of us a warm intellectual glow extremely pleasant to experience.

That is right, I said. I remember that they inscribed contours in the air by means of gesture to indicate the fulness of the foreign bosom. A very unsavoury pair of rascals if you like (*AS* 101).

In the cases exemplified above there are no signs of any transgression of narrative conventions and the exchange is easily naturalized. It would seem that the physical presence of the participants in the communicative act serves to curb any disruption and preserves the narrative hierarchy. But when it comes to "writing," where both speaker and listener are absent, "strange" things start to happen. It could be said that the autobiographical frame, as representation of reality, of physicality, represses the excessive and transgressive impulses of writing, thus backing the logocentric formulation of the opposition presence/absence or speech/writing, which as Jacques Derrida has argued (1976) privileges the first term over the second. Nevertheless, *At Swim* will gradually relinquish these claims and will find gratification in its own transgressive textuality.

As *At Swim* progresses, some extracts from the student's novel will appear interpolated between two biographical reminiscences and from page 103 onwards none of them will be framed by the autobiographical

reminiscences. It would seem that the student becomes increasingly absorbed in his novel—in writing—and loses interest in a reality which never truly had much interest for him anyway. In narrative terms, there has been a shift from inside to outside, from subordination to coordination, and the initially embedded narrative runs parallel to, and coexists with, the first narrative. To put it differently, the vertical relationship of subordination becomes a horizontal one of coordination, which means that if the student's novel is actually "embedded" in something, it is embedded in *At Swim*, exactly as the biographical reminiscences are. What passed off as a framed section in the middle of the "reality" of the student's life is revealed as independent from it or, in other words, the biographical reminiscences are as fictional as the student's fantastic novel.

This new horizontal relationship implies that there has been a change of fictional world, but the enunciating agency and hierarchy remain the same. That is, there was initially a textual split between a fictive author of an autobiography and his younger self—the protagonist of the autobiography who was also the author of a novel. However, this structural and psychological division into different narrative roles, into fictive autobiographer-character-author, threatens to collapse now. Once again, the boundary separating the inside and the outside has been transgressed. Yet it becomes difficult to abandon the idea that the autobiography actually frames the student's novel, probably because at the beginning it did frame it. What I mean is that saying that it does would be as inaccurate as saying that it does not, which forces the critic, in a way, to jump over the mere description towards a possible interpretation. And precisely because of this unsteady position between affirmation and negation, at this point the reader may pose the following question: "Who is the author of the novel within *At Swim*?" The character? The narrator? Or, maybe, neither of them?

Meir Sternberg has considered the narrative text as a dynamic system of gaps actualized by a reader who is engaged in a thoroughgoing process intended to reconstruct the fictive world that the text creates. This reader poses "such questions as, What is happening or has happened, and why? What is the connection between this event and the previous ones?" (Sternberg 1978: 50). It could be said that the student's novel does not fit Sternberg's definition. The reader can make such questions and answer them only to see that knowing the answers does not make any difference. Her/his curiosity and surprise do not so much spring from the events or from the way the information has been manipulated as from the lack of information and from the realization that the importance of the fabula has been diminished in

favour of other aspects. The narrative may attract the reader's interest, but s/he will be more interested in knowing how the student-author —if it is still believed that he is actually responsible for this narrative— handles his materials, how he manages to transgress conventions, than in knowing what happens to Trellis and the rest of characters. The text itself makes it quite clear that the student's novel would appear utterly odd and eccentric—in fact impossible— were it not viewed as a foil for the biographical reminiscences, exactly in the same way as the biographical reminiscences act as a foil for the student's novel, for it is difficult to understand one without the other and their existence is intimately linked. At the beginning it seemed that the student's novel was subordinated to the biographical frame. Then both narratives appeared to coexist independently at the same textual level but, as the reading process goes on, they come to be interdependent, for, in the last analysis, they form a unity, like the two sides of a coin, and they together create a single diegetic world: that of *At Swim*. Yet, let us suspend our disbelief and consider the student's novel on its own, while trying to unravel the relationships that it establishes with the other narrative texts theoretically subordinated to it, that is, with Trellis and Orlick's manuscripts.

4.2. How many embedded novels are there in *At Swim*?

At Swim-Two-Birds resembles a maze of two-way corridors which link its different layers, but the boundaries are crossed so often that establishing the number of embeddings that there exist becomes somewhat problematic. Some critics have pointed out (Clissman 1975: 95; Imhof 1985: 14) that Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* provided a model for the narrative structure used in *At Swim*. It seems that the apparent multiplicity of embedded narratives and the proliferation of authors were prompted by a paragraph in Huxley's novel where Philip Quarles reflects upon the possibility of a novel in which a novelist is writing a novel in which a novelist is writing a novel and so on *ad infinitum* (Huxley, 1963: 409). *At Swim* attempts to actualize Quarles's reflections, the result being a narrative in which constant attention is drawn to the compositional method, to some framing devices which are indeed deceiving.

A narrative text may opt for a very complicated structure which combines enunciative embeddings —changes of narrative level— with fictional embeddings —changes of diegetic world— and establishes

relationships of subordination as well as coordination among the different levels, enunciative and fictional. Even so, if the changes have been marked, are justified and follow the logic of the real, an attentive reading should be able to expose the narrative structure of the work. But this is not the case with *At Swim*, which provokes critical disagreement and confusion. Some critics talk about number of "books" or "novels" (Clissman 1975: 84; Imhof 1985: 14; Mellamphy 1985: 142), while, for example, J. C. C. Mays (1973: 85) refers to the existence of different "plots" or "narrative threads," a concept which is not equivalent to that of "novels." Anne Clissman (1985: 84, 147) finds four books or narratives —the frame narrative, the narrator's book about Trellis, Trellis's book about sin and Orlick's manuscript. She considers that these narratives are structured *en abyme* and she later on adds a fifth narrative level composed of Finn, Sweeny, the Pooka and Shanahan because she thinks that these characters are more independent of any of the narrators in the book than the rest of characters, an argument which is questionable. John Mays (1973: 85) mentions three main plots or narratives: the story of the narrator himself, his ventures into the legendary world of Finn and Sweeny and his incursions into the fictional world of Dermot Trellis. Mays's description seems accurate enough to account for the number of plots or narrative threads, although I would add a fourth thread formed by the folklore world of the Pooka and the Good Fairy. In any case, it sidesteps the question of the frequent structural transgressions that can be found in the text. Moreover, the establishment of independent fictional words is somewhat problematic, as I will try to show later on. If the reader believes what the narrator of the biographical reminiscences says, we have the four books mentioned by Anne Clissman; however, the relationships among them will not actually be what they seem to be. For a start, the student's novel is not totally dependent on the purported frame, and this sole fact completely breaks down the textual structure *en abyme*. The analysis of the relations established for the rest of the alleged levels will also reveal to what extent there is a discrepancy between what *At Swim* says and what it really does. It could be said that the text is always divided within itself. In Derridean terms, the text differs from itself and consequently its meaning is forever deferred, caught in this play, in this parodic, paradoxical, paraxial, fetishistic and narcissistic movement that implies a double and contradictory statement which is never resolved. Let us first consider the textual link between the student's novel on Trellis and Trellis's novel on sin.

4.3. The student's novel and Trellis's novel

The novel that the student is writing deals with a certain Mr Trellis, a publican who owns the Red Swan Hotel. He is a weird man, an odd moralist, and lives with his woman servant, Teresa. Mr Trellis wants to write a novel on sin, on the eternal conflict between good and evil.

In his book he [Trellis] would present two examples of humanity —a man of great depravity and a woman of unprecedented virtue. They meet. The woman is corrupted, eventually ravished and done to death in a back lane. Presented in its own milieu, in the timeless conflict of grime and beauty, gold and black, sin and grace, the tale would be moving and a salutary one (*AS* 36).

These are Trellis's initial intentions as reported by the student. For that purpose Trellis borrows and/or hires some characters from the Irish literary tradition and others from already existent fictional works —existent according to *At Swim*, though not in reality. Finn MacCool is a "true legendary" Irish hero and Mr Paul Shanahan and Mr Antony Lamont are characters created by Mr Tracy, himself a fictional writer of cow-boy stories. Yet, the protagonist of Trellis's novel, John Furriskey, is to be so villainous and wicked that no existent character fits his figure and Trellis must create him *ab ovo et initio*. He literally does so in a humorous scene which parodies Stephen Dedalus's equalling of the artist to the God of creation. Trellis also creates the Pooka Fergus MacPhellimey, "a species of human Irish devil endowed with magical powers" (*AS* 61). As for Peggy, Furriskey's potential victim, it is not clear enough whether he hires her or creates her too, but, as Peggy is a domestic servant and "in order to show how an evil man can debase the highest and the lowest in the same story" (*AS* 61), Trellis creates another woman, beautiful and refined, named Sheila Lamont.

It would seem that *At Swim* rejects traditional novelistic conventions, although it does not opt for utter chaos but establishes its own particular norms, norms which actualize the student's literary theories as he himself has expressed them in one of his biographical reminiscences (*AS* 25). It is, to say the least, remarkable that a text which is split into an autobiography and a fantastic novel should simultaneously subsume a fictional universe, the student's novel, where there is no difference whatsoever between fiction and reality, that is, where at any moment a sign may suddenly become its referent.

This means that all the characters Trellis has gathered, and some other characters who seem to appear out of the blue, have a real life and can exist and act in the same narrative text and in the same structural —hierarchical— position as their creator. Language, whether oral or written, has the power to bring to life and materialize situations and people. Consequently, the appearance of some characters is justified because at one point or another, they have been mentioned or have formed part of a story told by another character. Likewise, the characters lead their own lives and have their own wills. Trellis controls them only when he is awake, but the moment he falls asleep they are free to act as they please. And they do not approve of Mr Trellis's plans for them, which provokes their rebellion and triggers off Trellis's fall. The characters' final vengeance against Trellis is carried out through his own son, Orlick, who writes a story in which his father suffers atrocious tortures and is finally tried for his crimes. Following the rules of this fictional universe, Trellis actually suffers the tortures and most of the characters who have appeared so far feel happy enough to participate in Trellis's torments. At this point, this wild narrative becomes entangled with the student's biographical reminiscences, for its hasty and abrupt ending acquires significance in relation to the events in the student's life.

Furriskey, Shanahan and Lamont are determined to execute Dermot Trellis by writing his death. Just then, the text shifts fictional world and we move to the last biographical reminiscence to see the student coming back home. He has passed his final examination and feels happy about it. He meets his uncle, who congratulates him on his success and gives him a watch as a reward. The student feels genuinely surprised at this gesture and for the first time he seems to be sincerely moved. Nevertheless, the irony could not be missing and is subtly conveyed by a wily detail: the watch does not tell the right time. It marks five-fifty-four while church bells are chiming for the Angelus. Immediately afterwards we get the resolution of Trellis's narrative. Teresa, Dermot Trellis's servant, enters her master's room, finds it empty, decides to tidy it up and stokes the fire with none other than the pages of Trellis's novel which are lying scattered on the floor. Her act means the end of Furriskey and company because the narrative that sustained their existence has been consumed by the flames. It also means that Trellis's life has been spared as a consequence of the student's final reconciliation with his uncle. It is quite obvious that the uncle and the despotic Trellis both represent figures of authority against whom the student in the biographical reminiscences and the characters in Trellis's novel rebel, but it is also true that Trellis is the

student's projection, one of the narrative masks that he uses to exercise his will, and it is only natural that Trellis's life should be spared.

This sudden ending could be explained through its relation to another event in the fabula of the biographical reminiscences, to the fact that the student has passed his exam and the academic year has come to an end. This interpretation brings in the transtextual dimension of *At Swim*, which takes a parodic form here. It has been repeatedly said that *At Swim* parodies Joyce's fictions, mainly *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*.⁴ Both partake of the *Künstlerroman*, their main protagonists are highly aware of language and they are presented as solipsists to the core. The references to *A Portrait* in *At Swim* are constant and accounting for the multiple allusions would constitute a complete study in itself. Yet *At Swim* manages to spare us such a long task. In *A Portrait* (1928: 238) Stephen Dedalus snaps at his friend Davin: "—Do you know what Ireland is?— asked Stephen with cold violence. —Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow." *At Swim* responds as follows: "Professor Unternehmer, the eminent German Neurologist, points to Claudius as a lunatic but allows Trellis an inverted sow neurosis wherein the farrow eat their dam" (*AS* 217). The subversion of terms that the concept of parody implies could not have been better exemplified. It is true that Flann O'Brien's novel can be said to provide answers for many of the questions concerning aesthetic creation that *A Portrait* had raised, but the tone, the ethos, is completely different and it could not be otherwise, for in *At Swim* the irony is double. If in *A Portrait* the butt of irony is Stephen, in *At Swim* it is *A Portrait*. Art and Literature play an important role in both novels, but their consideration can never be the same. Stephen pictured the artist "forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being" (*AS* 196). The student-author in *At Swim* is a lazy bed-ridden creature unwilling to transcend or dive under the surface of things. The mystic quality that Art seems to have for Stephen turns into "spare-time" activities which entertain the student during the academic year. He starts his novel at the beginning of it and consequently, once it has come to an end and he has attained his goal, why should he not do away with his novel?

But returning to the question of the relationship between the student's novel and Trellis's novel, I would like to remark that the student-author explicitly refers to Mr Trellis's novel as if it existed within his own novel:

Further extract from my Manuscript on the subject of Mr Trellis's Manuscript on the subject of John Furriskey, his first steps in life and

his first meeting with those who were destined to become his firm friends; the direct style. . . . (AS 49).

The reader is told that Dermot Trellis wants to write a novel on sin and that for that purpose he hires some characters and creates others. The student-author says so, and he also relates the plot devised by Trellis. Yet, that is everything the reader will get about Trellis's narrative, for the student will never hand over to this new author. Dermot Trellis will always be referred to as "he" and his actions or intentions will always be reported, as the following example shows.

Extract from Manuscript where Trellis is explaining to an unnamed listener the character of his projected labour:.... It appeared to him [to Trellis] that a great (AS 36).

The headline says that Trellis "is explaining" something. The situation, nevertheless, would be better described as "I will now narrate how Trellis explained something." The present tense of the headline, indicating a direct speech situation and thus the presence of a speaker, is contradicted by the past tense of reported speech which signals his absence. The reader will never get a word coming directly from Trellis and no change of enunciating agency will be effected, which means that there is no enunciative embedding either. The problem is that Trellis's novel both exists and does not exist. I mean that it exists in so far as the world in which Trellis moves does, but it is not "his" novel, nor "his" world. It is the novel and the world of the student-author although he pretends that it belongs to Trellis. It is precisely this ambiguous status that gives rise to confusion and has provoked the following remark:

It is often difficult to ascertain whose is the speaking voice in all of this. One narrative level often shades into another. In the account of the multi-clause colloquy between the Pooka and the Good Fairy, is it Trellis or the narrator who is writing? (Clissman 1975: 86).

I would answer that it is the narrator of the biographical reminiscences, for the enunciating agent, the voice that narrates, is exactly the same and only one that will be found throughout the novel, and I mean the whole text. Even though in *At Swim* there are three different authors writing their manuscripts—four indeed, if we take into account the biographical reminiscences—and this would imply the existence of different narrators, whenever a narrator

shows up, his voice is the one heard in the student's autobiography. All the narrators will betray the same peculiarities in their descriptive manner, providing a wealth of information which is, nevertheless, irrelevant. They will show the same detachment towards the contents of their narration and will linger on the more sordid aspects of life, often concentrating on physiological functions though approaching the escatological in an unordinary, quasi-scientific way.

All the narrators are highly aware of the workings of language and of rhetoric, an awareness which is passed down to some characters as well. The narrator of the biographical reminiscences realizes that his talk has been "forced, couched in the accent of the lower or working classes" (*AS* 24). Immediately after his birth, Furriskey is startled by his own voice, which has "the accent and intonation usually associated with the Dublin lower or working classes" (*AS* 49). The Good Fairy takes pains to count the number of subordinate clauses that the Pooka has used in a sentence (*AS* 110) and Orlick announces that he will pierce Dermot with a "pluperfect" tense (*AS* 168). The narrator of the biographical reminiscences foregrounds the artificiality of his narration by frequently interrupting it with descriptive asides marked with headlines, a stylistic peculiarity that, curiously enough, Orlick will also use in his manuscript. These are some examples which attest to the fact that the different authors are but their master's spokesmen, or else scapegoats for his aggressive impulses, but, in any case, they are completely lacking in consciousness, in that internal projection so fundamental in Bakhtin's conception of the polyphonic novel. A unitary consciousness and a self-duplicating voice link this text and hold it together, becoming a forceful integrating element which fights against the surface fragmentation. Furthermore, this cohesive drive will not stop just with "voice" and will act at other levels, mainly at story level, knitting a pattern of echoes that traverse the whole text, whereby it would seem that the text, responding to its narrator's onanistic tendencies, conducts a love-affair with itself.

I have tried to demonstrate that the purported change of enunciating agency between the student's novel on Trellis and Trellis's novel on sin flickers in an indeterminate zone between being and non-being. Trellis both is and is not the author of a novel, but, what about a change of fictional level? Since there is no clear structural distinction between both narratives, can we talk about a change of represented world? In fact, *At Swim* will be structurally composed only of two narrative spaces: that of the biographical reminiscences and that of the student's novel, the latter being a magical space resembling a heterotopia, a world in which different literary traditions are

juxtaposed to finally collapse in a unidimensional space which lacks any depth. It is true that there are proper fictional embeddings—and enunciative embeddings—in the stories that some characters tell, precisely because their stories will correspond to their respective fictional domains. Thus, for example, Finn will introduce the world of the Irish sagas with Sweeny's story. Yet this world was already present, in a way, just in the mere presence of Finn, and mainly in his discourse. The fact that the different characters in the student's novel belong to different literary traditions creates this confusion between fictional worlds and fictional embeddings, the former overlapping the latter. Several fictional worlds are represented but all these different worlds will eventually come to coexist in the student's novel and if Sweeny's existence was formerly dependent on Finn's narration, which represented both a fictional and an enunciative embedding, later on Sweeny, his misfortunes and his world will form part of a fragmented though unique space. Again, what started off as a vertical relationship of subordination becomes a horizontal one of coordination—or rather juxtaposition—and again, the existence of different fictional worlds cannot be fully affirmed or denied because of the interaction and fluidity which exist among them.

Dermot Trellis will never be an autonomous author. However, the crew of characters who, always according to the first narrator, will feature in Trellis's novel are granted independent existences and private lives, which means that they appear to jump the barrier that separates their "imagined" world from the "real" world of their creator, and I say "appear" because, if that barrier does not really exist, if Trellis's novel is not an autonomous narrative, how can these characters jump a barrier not represented in the text? And yet, they appear to jump it. The student's novel reaches a point where what seems to be a narrative transgression, that is, a denial of the structural demarcations that determine positions in a text, cannot be fully considered as such but cannot be disregarded either. Gérard Genette has stated (1980: 234) that this specific transgression of barriers—when it is a real transgression—is a rhetorical figure called *author's metalepsis* by the classics and it "consists of pretending that the poet himself brings about the effects he celebrates." Any transgression of the barriers, either enunciative or diegetic, that a text builds represents a *metalepsis*. Metaleptic jumps may take different forms, but always involve a confusion between sign and referent, reality and fiction, and they do away with the logic of a text that wants to preserve the illusion of reality. They flaunt the artificiality of art by undoing the hierarchy between outside and inside, high and low, narrating subject and narrated object.

The starting-point of *At Swim*'s apparent and real *metalepses* is what Patricia Waugh (1984: 88) has defined as the *creation/description* paradox, an inherent condition of all fiction. Any fictional text creates its own ontological context, a verbal context within which naming and describing amount to bringing into existence. *At Swim-Two-Birds* pushes this idea to its limits and actualizes it, effecting a *reductio ad absurdum*. The characters, then, become real people, lead their parallel lives, refuse to play the roles ascribed to them and plot against the despotic Dermot Trellis. The status of Shanahan, Lamont, Furriskey, Finn, the Pooka, etc. is a curious one. They are supposedly characters in Dermot Trellis's novel and that is the only justification for their presence in the text. However, they are not cast in such roles but as people living on the same ontological level as their creator. Some of them will perform oral narrative acts, mainly Shanahan, Finn and Orlick, and their narratives will favour real *metalepses*. Finn relates Sweeny's story, then Sweeny jumps from this story and becomes a character in the student's novel alongside Finn and the rest. Shanahan mentions Jem Casey and Casey makes his entrance. Orlick's manuscript is perhaps more interesting to comment on for it presents another example of an author writing yet another story and a written narrative offers a more complex stratification of levels and may pose more structural problems than an oral one.

4.4. Orlick's manuscript

Orlick starts writing his manuscript surrounded by Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan. These characters constantly interrupt Orlick's text because they do not approve either of his methods or his style, and their multiple objections slow down the manuscript's progress. It is true that the reader now gets Orlick's narrative directly, which would imply a change of enunciative level, but it is also true that this change passes unnoticed due to the fact that the narrative voice recalls the student's in every respect. Consequently, it is difficult to forget that the same agency is actually behind the scene and Orlick cannot be considered an author but just the student's mouthpiece, a puppet in his hands. In any case, the characters' interruptions bring about frequent transitions from the student's text to Orlick's manuscript, transitions which are not signalled and thus may be regarded as metaleptic. Orlick's creative act follows the student's "transgressive norms," and the conventions underlying the creation/description paradox are laid bare again. The

transgression gives rise to humorous situations. Orlick leaves the room for some minutes and Shanahan suggests taking up the story in the meantime, which he does, resuming Orlick's narrative orally in his own colloquial and lively style. Thus, in Shanahan's version, Dermot Trellis and the Pooka, whose discourses have always been grandiose, radically shift register. Furriskey and Lamont contribute to this oral narrative as well, and the three of them decide that the Pooka should metamorphose Dermot Trellis into a rat and himself into an Airedale terrier, "the natural enemy of the rat from the start of time" (*AS* 182). The student relates how, on hearing Orlick coming back, Lamont manages to put things back as they formerly were:

Noises, peripatetic and external, came faintly upon the gathering in the midst of their creative composition and spare-time literary activity. Lamont handled what promised to be an awkward situation with coolness and cunning.

And the short of it is this, he said, that the Pooka worked more magic till himself and Trellis found themselves again in the air in their own bodies, just as they had been a quarter of an hour before that, none the worse for their trying ordeals (*AS* 183).

Nothing could have been easier.

Orlick's manuscript provides further examples of displacement of characters. The Pooka and Dermot Trellis exist in the student's novel but they go down one step and become part of Orlick's story. The final turn of the screw comes when Orlick decides to include Furriskey, Shanahan and Lamont in his narrative, cast as Justices of the Peace. Now that these three characters are present in Orlick's manuscript at the same time as they are witnessing what purports to be the actual creative process of that same manuscript, that is, now that they simultaneously belong as characters in two different enunciative levels, the text marks the difference of level by highlighting the materiality and artificiality of Orlick's narrative, a written narrative occupying a certain physical space in which a finger may be inserted.

Proceeding on a carpet of fallen leaves and rotting acorns they [the Pooka and Trellis] had not travelled a distance longer in length than twenty-six perches when they saw (with considerable surprise, indeed) the figure of a man coming towards them from the secrecy of the old oaks. With a start of pleasure, the Pooka saw that it was none

other than Mr Paul Shanahan, the eminent philosopher, wit and raconteur.

Shanahan at this point inserted a brown tobacco finger in the texture of the story and in this manner caused a lacuna in the palimpsest (*AS* 185).

Orlick himself will remain outside his narrative and whenever he is mentioned the reader also knows that the text has gone back to the first narrator's discourse. In it, the characters get tired of the procedures in Trellis's trial and decide that it is high time they finished him off, but they will not be allowed to get down to business for at that precise moment the last biographical reminiscence breaks in.

5. THE ENDINGS

On the first page of the text (*AS* 9), the narrator offered three fake beginnings for his novel. *At Swim-Two-Birds* will have three false endings as well, a triadic structure again reproduced in the last three words of the text, "good-bye, good-bye, good-bye" (*AS* 218). The first ending closes the biographical reminiscences and its headline reads as follows: "*Conclusion of the book antepenultimate. Biographical reminiscence part the final:*" (*AS* 208). With it, the figure of the student as fictive author of his biography and as character leaves the scene. The second ending marks the conclusion of the student's narrative: "*Conclusion of the Book, penultimate:* " (*AS* 215). Here the figure of the student as author of a novel exits. If there had been a relationship of enunciative embedding between both narratives, the first one to leave would logically have been the student-author, while the biographical reminiscences would have closed the whole text, actually framing it. The highest enunciating agency that the reader has known so far and who has been playing God throughout the text has disappeared in his three roles: narrator of the biographical reminiscences, character in these reminiscences and author of a novel. There should be no one left to go on writing or narrating, but the text has not reached its end yet: "*Conclusion of the book, ultimate:*" (*AS* 216). We may ask ourselves who is responsible for this last section, the section which ends the novel entitled *At Swim-Two-Birds* and puts the final full stop to it, and the answer is anything but easy.

The passage is deliberately cryptic and enigmatic, both its style and contents mirroring its subject-matter, which seems to be the always shifting dividing line between sanity and insanity. This narrating voice also recalls the student's and it is a voice that "knows," that refers to Sweeny and Trellis, that reproduces sentences spoken by the Pooka and that, in my view, is trying to draw a conclusion while evincing the impossibility of doing so. It is precisely its pensive comments and its attempt at interpretation that distinguish it from the detached and pompous manner of the student, and confer upon it an air of solemnity and transcendence completely missing in the biographical reminiscences and in the student's novel. More significantly perhaps, and contributing to this air of transcendence, the "I" has completely withdrawn in this final passage and the voice seems to have no physical origin within the text. Kaja Silverman has elaborated on the theological status of the disembodied voice-over in film and has said:

In other words, the voice-over is privileged to the degree that *it transcends the body*. Conversely, it loses power and authority with every corporeal encroachment, from a regional accent or idiosyncratic "grain" to definitive localization in the image. (1988: 49)

Silverman is discussing film here, but I would argue that the effect is analogous in a written narrative which has shifted from the overwhelming presence of a unitary consciousness signified by the first-person pronoun to this coda where such presence is transformed into a voice coming from above, hence not immediately present in the text.

Are we to consider that this final enunciating agency is the actual master of *At Swim*? Is this passage the real frame, formerly veiled by the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, of both biography and novel, of life and fiction? Or, is it just the mature narrator of the biographical reminiscences musing about his creation? Or the student's epilogue to a novel he never finished? What is clear is that this passage rounds off the whole text and adds to the reader's perception of it. In a way, the passage overtly shatters the mimetic illusion sustained through the biographical reminiscences by introducing a voice which seems very close to that of a real author, thus revealing that the communicative situation represented is a fake. In this light, the two main narrative spaces comprised in the text share fictional status. One purports to be an autobiographical account, objective and transparent, and the other a fantastic tale but, however different, both are fictions devised by an "other." Literary conventions vary from mode to mode and from genre

to genre, but once these conventions are laid bare, the common core is revealed.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to demonstrate that the narrative structure of *At Swim* is deceiving and manifests itself, not as a stable and finished entity, but rather as a fluid process throughout which the various elements keep shifting position. If we concentrate on the narrative embeddings and separate the text into its two main components, that is, autobiographical frame and student's novel, the relationship between both can be illustrated by means of a syntactic analogy. At the beginning, and responding to a vertical embedding, the relationship would be hierarchical, similar to the relationship of dependence that is established between a main clause and its subordinate. Later on both parts are placed side by side in a horizontal independence whose syntactic parallel would be that of two coordinate clauses. As the reading process goes on and both worlds get increasingly entangled, independence gives way to interdependence. To put it differently, these two coordinate clauses keep being coordinate while simultaneously there is the suggestion that both are subordinate to a superior design. It is precisely their interdependence that signals the presence of a master-plan, a totality that is composed of both and neither of them, that includes yet transcends them. This transcendence is explicitly signified in the text by the cryptic final section, the final full stop that announces silence.

The shift from initial subordination to subsequent coordination between the two narratives is quite in accordance with the general purpose of this peculiar novel, which, in my view, is the simultaneous erection and demolition of barriers. If the project of the text is to exist in a zone of indeterminacy, it is quite understandable that it should choose to replace subordination with coordination, for the former is always much clearer in its relational proposals, while the latter very frequently implies that it is left to the reader to decide what the actual relationship is.

Taking up two of the main points of my analysis, the excessive awareness of narrative conventions that *At Swim* presents and the two contrary pulls towards distance and proximity or differentiation and undifferentiation that preside over this text, it is my contention that both

express the text's abandonment of a conventional narrative logic and its choice of a para-logic, the prefix "para" representing what the text simultaneously affirms and denies, an alternative logic whose purpose and effect are analogous to those of the erotic fetish. I have said before that *At Swim* relinquishes narrative linearity and progress in favour of textual excess, thus developing spatially rather than temporally and becoming spectacle rather than narrative. In its condition both of fetish and of spectacle the text is subject to a process of objectification which transforms it into a sexual object, a process which I have initially ascribed to the narrator's narcissism but which I would like now to extend to the text as "an other's" creation, an other who uses the student-narrator in the same way as the student-narrator uses Trellis and Orlick, an other that in its narcissistic desire feels compelled to create its own double and finally fulfils this desire in the transcendence of the final section, where an imaginary unity of fictional and flesh-and-blood authors is achieved. a

NOTES

1. I do not mean here that all literature before modernism was realistic, but that the strategies used to introduce embedded narratives almost always responded to the logic of the real.

2. According to Mieke Bal (1977: 62), this structure, which she calls *encadrement*, involves a simple subordination, either of characters or of action. She distinguishes it from the structure of *enchâssement*, which entails a double subordination, of both characters and action: the action in the embedded narrative determines and is determined by the action in the first narrative. The *Arabian Nights* provides the paramount example of *enchâssement*. In any case, my analysis will try to demonstrate that the initial subordination of the student's novel to the biographical reminiscences turns into a relation of coordination.

3. Gérard Genette (1982: 7-12) has devised a typology for the different relations that a text can establish with other texts which precede or follow it. The general phenomenon, the textual transcendence of the text, is called *transtextuality* and is defined (1982: 7) as "tout ce qui le met en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes." Genette distinguishes five forms of transtextuality. *Quotation*, *plagiarism* and *allusion*, all of them widely used in *At Swim*, are expressions of the most explicit and literal modality of transtextuality: *intertextuality*.

4. Anne Clissman (1975: 100-115) has drawn interesting parallels between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and both *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*.

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