

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION IN FLANN O'BRIEN'S *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

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The manipulative potential of literature, and of art in general, as conveyor of ideological values, and hence the necessity to exercise some kind of institutional control over artistic practices was already acknowledged by Plato in the *Republic*. In the twentieth century, and more specifically within the New Critical, Formalist and Structuralist movements, there has been a tendency towards what Voloshinov (1986: 96) considered a fetishization of the work of art, a process whereby the object of study has been only the artistic or aesthetic structure and the social dimension and impact of the work has been disregarded. Inscribed in this general context, such a seminal study on narrative as Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1987) assumed that all fiction uses certain strategies to control the reader, but this control is seen as an ethical control that begins and ends with the aesthetic experience itself rather than as a power to shape or back attitudes and beliefs bearing upon the socio-cultural context<sup>1</sup>. Booth considered that there is an unquestionable and unique source of meaning that validates the ideological, moral and emotional content of a narrative. Although in his study he first referred to the author of the work as an unavoidable presence in and origin of the text, later on in that same study (1987: 73) he introduced the figure of "the implied author", a textual figure inferred from the artistic whole which can be defined as an ideal image of the writer that the latter creates in a specific work<sup>2</sup>.

The idea of the author as the origin and guarantor of the meaning of a text – and more generally, of any individual speaker as the source of meaning of her/his utterance – has been challenged by post-Saussurean linguistics and post-Structuralist critical theory. The linguistic theories of Émile Benveniste (1966) have been very influential in elaborating a more complex relationship between subjectivity, language and meaning. According to Benveniste, subjectivity, and thus the possibility of meaning, originate in language use or discourse.

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1.- In the "Afterword to the Second Edition" of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth (1987: 413-14) defends himself against the charges of conservatism and ahistoricity launched by Fredric Jameson by claiming that his project is deliberately transhistorical rather than antihistorical.

2.- Meir Sternberg's work *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978) is another interesting study of the strategies used to create and sustain narrative interest and to control the reader's distance, response and judgment. Although Sternberg also views the author as "the omnipotent artistic figure behind the work, incessantly selecting, combining, and distributing information, and pulling various strings with a view to manipulating the reader into the desired responses" (1978: 254), he seems more interested in analysing the mechanisms that enable the reader to interpret the text. In this, Sternberg's approach is reader-oriented but is still too formalistic since it lacks any consideration of the socio-cultural and discursive dimension of fictional texts and of language in general.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

C'est dans et par le langage que l'homme se constitue comme *sujet*: parce que le langage seul fonde en réalité, dans sa réalité qui est celle de l'être, le concept d'"ego". La "subjectivité" dont nous traitons ici est la capacité du locuteur à se poser comme "sujet". Elle se définit, non par le sentiment que chacun éprouve d'être lui-même (ce sentiment, dans la mesure où l'on peut en faire état, n'est qu'un reflet), mais comme l'unité psychique qui transcende la totalité des expériences vécues qu'elle assemble, et qui assure la permanence de la conscience. Or nous tenons que cette "subjectivité", qu'on la pose en phénoménologie ou en psychologie, comme on voudra, n'est que l'émergence dans l'être d'une propriété fondamentale du langage. Est "ego" qui dit "ego". Nous trouvons là le fondement de la "subjectivité", qui se détermine par le statut linguistique de la "personne" (1966: 259-60).

It is only in discourse that we can posit ourselves as subjects for ourselves and for the others through the contrasts that language, as a system of differences, establishes between "I" and "you". As Benveniste explained in his study on the nature of personal pronouns as formative of subjectivity (1966: 251-57), subjectivity cannot transcend the specific instance of language use or utterance and is liable to shift as the signifiers of identity in discourse reverse referents, as the 'I', former subject of the utterance, later on becomes the addressed 'you'. The subject thus constituted in discourse keeps changing position and is not a stable, coherent and autonomous entity.

In discourse, language is not a neutral and transparent medium but, as Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires (1988: 50) have argued, it always bears traces of culture and history and is ideologically loaded. The function of ideology in discourse would be that of concealing this linguistic and precarious construction of subjectivity (Belsey, 1980: 61) and to represent subjectivity as an essence and not as a process in which the subject occupies the different positions that different and often contradictory discourses offer. It is within this conceptualization of the relationship between language, subjectivity and ideology that Althusser's notion of "interpellation" can be applied to literary texts.

For Althusser (1971: 127-86), ideology is a system of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts) historically produced and socially functional. The function of ideology is to structure our perception of reality and to provide the frame within which we "live out" our relations to society. From his anti-humanist position, Althusser denies human individuals any essential unity, identity or autonomy. The performative role of ideology is precisely to cover up this lack of unity for the human subject and restore her/him to a transcendental sphere, which nevertheless exists only at an imaginary level. Ideology centres the subject, makes her/him experience her/himself as indispensable, free, unique and coherent, it binds and sutures the subject to the social structure and constitutes her/him by "hailing" or "interpellating" concrete individuals as concrete subjects (p. 173).

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!" (p. 174).

In this process of interpellation the individual recognizes that the policeman's words are in fact addressed to her/him and turns her/his head, and by this very act, having recognized her/himself in the words of the other, the individual becomes a subject.

In order to be successful, the process of interpellation requires the subject to take "as the reality of the self what is in fact a discursive construction" (Silverman, 1992: 21), a condition that Althusser seems to have taken for granted but which can be questioned<sup>3</sup>. This interpellation is carried out at an

3.- Althusser's elaboration of the concept of ideology has been contested, among others, by Terry Eagleton (1991: 136-53) and Colin MacCabe (1985: 107-8) for being based on a misreading of the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan. MacCabe, for example, argues that Althusser's theory has suppressed the Lacanian Other – the domain of language and the unconscious, fraught with desire and where the subject is constantly re-articulating her/his position – and has instead produced an omnipotent subject who is master both of language and desire: that is, whose consciousness is transparent to itself. In Althusser's monolithic account of subjectivity there is no possibility to theorize about the contradictions, instability and precariousness of the different subject positions produced by ideology and consequently, there is no possibility to account for the construction of subversive ideologies.

“imaginary” level – “imaginary” in the Lacanian sense – and its effects are analogous to the Lacanian “mirror-stage”, since both imply a structure of misrecognition<sup>4</sup>. The ultimate purpose of ideological interpellation for Althusser is to confirm the subject in the “naturalness” of the social structure and thus to reproduce the dominant relations of production, for the subject finally “misrecognizes” her/himself in the representation that the established order has proffered in its own interest.

Althusser views ideology as a system of representations which moulds certain images for the subject to identify with. Once these representations have been introjected, they will structure the subject’s experience of the world and will provide, so to say, the framework within which s/he will perceive and relate to the world. To conceive of ideology as a system of representations is to assume that ideology belongs in the realm of signs, that a semiotic dimension is inherent to it. The semiotic nature of ideology allows for an ideological interpretation of literary texts, since, as Catherine Belsey has put it:

[...] literature as one of the most persuasive uses of language may have an important influence on the ways in which people grasp themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live. The interpellation of the reader in the literary text could be argued to have a role in reinforcing the concepts of the world and of subjectivity which ensure that people ‘work by themselves’ in the social formation (1980: 66-67).

A narrative text interpellates the reader and addresses her/him by offering certain signifiers with which the reader may identify and thus posit her/himself as an identity, as a coherent “I” who transcends the discourse that is nevertheless signifying her/his subjectivity for her/him<sup>5</sup>.

The points of reader-inscription in a text can be multiple, and interpellation can work in different ways. There may be different strategies and different signifiers offered for the reader to identify with. It would be rather difficult to cite the possibilities available but several examples could be mentioned. Interpellation can be effected through the manipulation of language – rhetorical figures, imagery, style, repetition of key words or scenes –, through the handling of narrative conventions – chain of events, time, space, characterization, focalization, narrative voice –, and through the representation of certain socio-cultural discourses. The different elements, either linguistic, narrative or cultural, function as signifiers with which the text addresses the reader in an attempt to lure her/him by activating processes of identification that may bring about the reader’s libidinal investment in the text. Whether interpellation is effective or not is not just a question of the merits or proficiency of the text, for effectiveness also depends, to a certain extent, on the subject’s position within the social formation: on her/his sexual preferences, literary preferences, familial history and other factors. In Teresa de Lauretis’s words:

[...] the social being is constructed day by day as the point of articulation of ideological formations, an always provisional encounter of subject and codes at the historical (therefore changing) intersection of social formations and her or his personal history. While codes and social formations define positions of meaning, the individual reworks those positions into a personal, subjective construction (1984: 14).

Yet one of the effects of successful interpellation is that of transforming the reading process into a pleasurable experience<sup>6</sup>. In this respect, Cohan and Shires (1988: 172) have argued that more pleasure is obtained in the reader’s encounter with the familiar and orthodox, with the repetition of identifications that the reader has already experienced either in other texts or at previous points in that same text. This may account for the appeal that certain highly repetitive narrative schemes used in popular genres and subgenres have. It may also bring to the fore the role of narrative conventions as instrumental in triggering off processes of identification.

4.- For Lacan (1977), the imaginary is a psychic register composed of images which provide the basis for the ego to identify with. The assumption of the image effects a transformation on the ego, which takes the image, a fictive ideal image, to correspond with its subjectivity. That is why the identification is not a real recognition but a misrecognition that orients the ego in an imaginary, fictional direction.

5.- The notion of “suture”, discussed and elaborated within the field of film theory, is related in its function to the role of interpellation. For an explanation of the concept and function of suture and its applicability to narrative prose, see Cohan and Shires, 1988: 162-75.

6.- The connection between pleasure and meaning was the main argument of Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976).

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

The purpose of the following pages is that of investigating the ideological function of characterization in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939): that is, the analysis of the different subject positions encoded in the text's presentation and construction of its characters. My intention is to demonstrate that a departure from realistic convention does not necessarily lead to subversive and oppositional forms of reader-identification but may still be enforcing a traditional notion of authorship, a notion in which the figure of the author emerges as the omnipotent and omniscient creator and guarantor of textual meaning.

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According to Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., fictional characters are elements in a literary text "that structure conflicts for the reader" (1994: 105). Their function is also that of engaging reader identification and contributing to the text's rhetorical effect. This critic's conception of the reader's response to character is consonant with his main interest: to explain, through the psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism and libidinal investment, how the rhetorical aspects of a text manipulate and engage the reader, and provoke her/his libidinal investment in a literary work. Consequently, for Alcorn, narcissism is the hallmark of the reader's identification with fictional characters. In his own words: "Our response to character and our tendency to promote and reject identifications are extremely strong, and they betray our own need to have the perfect ego, to be as complete as we always want to be" (p. 112). But, how are fictional characters created? J. Hillis Miller's response is that a fictional character is made up of personality traits already familiar to the reader (1992: 69). He later on adds that the "impression of character" is culturally and historically dependent<sup>7</sup> and is "reinforced by powerful conventions and presuppositions about character within the public for whom a given novel is intended" (p. 95). A second crucial question in relation to fictional characters is that of their ontological status, their mode of being. Miller comments on the amazing fact that although readers know that there are no real people in novels and that fictional characters are just linguistic and cultural constructs, readers discuss fictional characters in the same way they discuss real people (p. 116). From a more formalist critical perspective, Patricia Waugh also refers to this latter paradox. In her view, fictional characters are linguistic signs and consequently their condition is that of absence, that of being and not being. They exist but only as reminders of the absence of what they signify (1984: 92). Fictional characters, like any other fictional object, are subject to the *creation/description* paradox (p. 88), which Waugh sees as the inherent condition of all fiction. This paradox may be explained as follows: any fictional text creates its own ontological context, a verbal context within which naming and describing amount to bringing into existence.

For a deconstructivist such as Miller, the notion of fixed selfhood is an illusion both in a novel and in real life (1992: 31). Yet, in realistic novels, the equation character-selfhood "is a noble error which is essential to the holding together of society, as well as essential to any coherent storytelling" (1992: 33). Belsey has also commented on the reader-oriented importance of characters in classic realism as instrumental in producing subjectivity, intelligibility and coherence (1980: 73). Both Miller and Belsey have the realistic or classic realist text in mind when they talk about characterization and both of them point out that these novels enforce but also deconstruct (Miller, 1992: 31) or test (Belsey, 1980: 75) the illusion of selfhood or the consistency and continuity of the subject.

*At Swim-Two-Birds* is a novel that escapes the representational limitations of classic realism and opts for a parodic and experimental narrative mode. Consequently, characterization is far from conventional and does not serve conventional purposes. To discuss Trellis, the Pooka or the Good Fairy as if they were our neighbours or acquaintances would seem rather out of place, simply because the novel makes it quite clear that they are not real, and this dehumanizing process includes the protagonist of the novel as well.

7.- The same idea is voiced by Cohan and Shires when they say that different personality traits may make a fictional character appear as an individual. However, personality traits and their differentiating effects "are not based on the psychological individuality or essence of a given character's 'human nature'; rather, traits cite a historical culture's assumptions of what qualities are recognizable as 'human nature' (1988: 72-73)".

## CONSTANZA DEL RÍO ÁLVARO

The protagonist of the novel combines the roles of narrator, focalizer and protagonist of the biographical frame, and he is also the author of a wild novel. A striking feature of *At Swim* is that it becomes extremely difficult to separate this textual figure according to the different roles that it performs. Furthermore, the student seems to be much more relevant as narrator than as character, and the reader gets to know him thanks to his narrative role, since there is a constant prevalence of narrator over character's speech in the autobiographical frame. This is the reason why, before considering characterization, I feel compelled to comment on the figure of the narrator, since he is the protagonist as well, and any reader will feel inclined to flesh this construct out and ascribe to it human characteristics and features.

For a start, the conventional distance and process of maturation that frequently distances an auto-diegetic narrator from his younger self – the critical and ironic distance that separates the narrator from the character – seems to be missing in this novel. Apparently, the narrator has not learned anything from his experiences so that the distance between narrator and character is minimal. Nevertheless, there is in the novel something that looks like a mock process of maturation. This process does not imply a gradual development of the character and it is not accompanied by any narratorial authoritative comment. It simply represents a sudden change in the student's relationship with his uncle which takes place towards the end of the novel (p. 215). One day the student returns home after having passed his final exams at University College, Dublin. He feels happy about it and meets his uncle, whom up to now the student has ignored, depised or argued with. The uncle seems to be pleased as well, and quite proud of his nephew. He congratulates him and gives him a watch as a reward. The student feels genuinely surprised at this spontaneous and generous gesture and for the first time seems to be sincerely moved, ashamed of his former attitude and unable to express what he feels. Nevertheless, the emotional charge of the situation is undermined by an ironic detail: the watch does not tell the right time. It marks five-fifty-four while church bells are chiming for the Ángelus. As can be seen, the psychological growth of the protagonist does not appear as a process but rather as an unmotivated action which has been trivialized and reduced to a minimum.

In his role as narrator, the student is a highly self-conscious narrator, a type of narrator defined by Wayne C. Booth (1952: 165) as one who intrudes in his novel in order to comment on his function as writer, thus acknowledging that his novel is a literary product. In *At Swim*, the narrator is a hyper-intrusive figure whose self-consciousness is mainly revealed in his manipulation of narrative conventions and of typography and spacing. The novel presents a broken and fragmentary surface, a layout which is meant to highlight the text's materiality and to dismantle the impression of a smooth and continuous narrative flow.

Throughout the narration, the narrating subject manifests a keen interest in the art of rhetoric and in the workings of language. He seems to like words and is fond of playing with their semantics and their phonology. Thus, his "book-money" (p. 37) is both the money that his uncle has given him to buy a book and the money that he will give to his bookie. He implicitly acknowledges a marked difference between written and spoken language, for example when the same episode, the physiological effects of a drinking expedition, is first narrated and then presented as spoken by the student-character (p. 23). The contrast between the narrator's pomposity and the character's colloquialisms could not be more striking. As narrator, his speech is convoluted and terribly pedantic. He seems to go round the meaning of words, refusing to express ordinary things in ordinary ways, forever trying to hold language at a distance, for maybe that is his way of keeping reality at bay. His cool and detached manner towards objects and people is best revealed in his peculiar descriptions, which appear to be very precise and to give quite a wealth of information. Nevertheless, this information is, more often than not, completely irrelevant and does not in the least help the reader get a deeper understanding of a character, of the narrative situation or of the diegetic world. It would seem that it is there just as the expression of the narrator's capricious and idiosyncratic ways.

This narrator never tries to go beyond the surface the things and his is a world where human emotions become a rarity. Such a quasi-scientific approach to reality finds superb expression in the narra-

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

tor's discourse: demodalized, merely assertive, almost devoid of subjective locutions. His treatment of language as a plaything that he manipulates at will, his demodalized discourse, his neutrality towards all values, his external and unmoved approach to characters and events of his own life, all these factors place him at a distant position with regard to the reality which surrounds him. He is the ironist for whom the world becomes a show displayed for the benefit of a single viewer: himself. In psychoanalytic terms he can be characterized as a narcissist and in epistemological terms his personality responds to the figure of the solipsist who translates the world, both the "real" world of his biography and the fictional world of his novel, 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*, an auto-diegetic narrative in which 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<sup>8</sup>.

As a consequence of his self-centredness, the textual position that this narrator could offer to the reader remains sealed and impervious to the reader's demands and it could be said that there is no attempt to promote identification with the position of telling inscribed in the novel. Furthermore, this narrator can be defined as an unreliable narrator in that, as Booth said, he does not seem to speak or act in accordance with the norms of the work (1987: 158-59). That is, the position he holds is presented through the distancing prism of textual irony, and this fact undermines his authority as teller of the story.

The narrator of *At Swim* is presented as a dehumanized and unemotional personality who enjoys establishing contact with the reader by teasing her/him, by purposefully transgressing any conceivable narrative convention. There is the feeling that his only interest is to display his "talents", that he is constantly showing off and that the reader is there just to be baffled and overwhelmed by his unremitting wit and intellectual brilliance. Yet, the narrator's unreliability results, as stated above, in the undermining of his authority. In *At Swim*, the nameless student finally abandons his fictional project and completely disappears in the final section of the novel, where the pronoun "I" is no longer inscribed. Eventually, this figure comes to be perceived as an artificial construct, as a puppet in the hands of an "other", just as the characters that the student creates for his novel are puppets in his hands. Such a feeling is mostly enforced through the use of sustained irony. The student-narrator may well hold the position of the ironist in relations to his fictional materials or his own life. Yet irony is being cast on him too, something that he is unaware of, but the reader perceives. What I mean is that there is a forever-present but at the same time physically absent position which presides over the text and uses the narrator to assert its authority, thus eroding the latter's power.

Booth (1987: 158) argued that unreliable narration establishes distance between narrator and implied author and it is the latter that in these cases "carries the reader with him in judging the narrator". Catherine Belsey (1980: 78-79) has added that an unreliable first-person narrator constructs a position of knowledge for the reader since s/he appears to possess a "truth" that the narrator does not have. The knowledge of the reader is then superior to that of the narrating subject and is a knowledge that transcends the different textual stances. Identification here is not effected with the narrator but with this higher position, a transcendent position, which is the ultimate source of irony and of the narrator's unreliability. In unreliable narration the author and the reader share a knowledge that the narrator lacks and the reader's identification with the author confirms the transcendence of each and serves to assert their authority. Belsey remarked that the use of irony and unreliability "guarantees still more effectively than overt authorial omniscience the subjectivity of the reader as a source of meaning" (p. 79).

From what has been said so far, it may be inferred that the enforcement of subjectivity is a function of characterization that may be at work in *At Swim*, but this is done through the reader's rejection

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8.- The dramatization of solipsism in *At Swim* is consonant with the interests of other modernist works, such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* or Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*.

of the values that the protagonist, both as character and as narrator, embodies rather than through identification with them. As for the treatment of the rest of characters, the text shows an even greater lack of interest in psychological delineation and in processes of maturation. What is interesting is that characters emerge as creations, funny and witty creations, with the result that it is the wit, inventiveness and brilliance of the creator that ultimately engages the reader.

A more detailed consideration of characterization in *At Swim* may help reinforce the above statements. *At Swim* is a novel which experiments with narrative techniques and transforms narrative conventions, writing and the notion of authorship into its main interest. It is a metafictional narrative which is overdetermined as text and underdetermined as story. Textual excess manifests itself as a hyper-conscious play with conventions – as the rule of form over content – and works towards the minimalization 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. Quite logically, one of the conventions which is exploited, parodied and approached self-consciously is that of realistic characterization. At one point in the novel, Brinsley, the student's friend and critic, comments on his inability to distinguish between Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan:

The three of them, he [Brinsley] said, might make one man between them.

Your objections are superficial, I responded. These gentlemen may look the same and speak the same but actually they are profoundly dissimilar. For example, Mr Furriskey is of the brachycephalic order, Mr Shanahan of the prognathic (p. 161).

The student-author tries to prove that the characters in his novel differ from one another by giving a list of their traits and qualities, a list containing such differentiating "traits" as the characters' mannerisms, configuration of nose, underwear, favourite shrubs, dishes or flowers (p. 161). This list includes, among others, the following words and phrases: "brachycephalic", "nyctalopia", "palpebral ptosis", "hammer-toes", "deutzia" and "julienne". All the information provided is completely irrelevant for an understanding of the characters as human beings, and the list emerges as a catalogue of linguistic signs, the addition of which ultimately creates a fictional character who has no referent other than the words that create it.

According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, characterization can take place in two different ways (1983: 59). The character may be either directly defined by the narrator, or else, her/his traits may be indirectly presented, displayed and exemplified through action, speech, etc. The two types of characterization are found in *At Swim*, although the intention is never that of delineating individuals and the text is never concerned with giving characters any measure of psychological depth. Accordingly, characters are always approached from the outside and described much in the manner of Sterne's "hobby-horsical" character drawing: Dermot Trellis only reads green books and spends too much time in bed. Shanahan is a compulsive story-teller and the cowboy Shorty Andrews is always ready to shoot any living or moving creature. Furthermore, certain objects are associated with certain characters: the Pooka and his pipe, the Trellises's and their pimples, etc. The impression the reader gets is of stereotyped characters and behaviour, of mechanical responses to similar stimuli.

Indirect presentation of characters is carried out mainly through their speech. Shortly after his birth, Orlick is candidly impressed by the wonders of a world where "everybody has a different face and a separate way of talking" (p. 146). Orlick's observation is ironic while not completely false. He utters it because, in nearly no time, he has been able to hear different characters talk in highly dissimilar styles. Yet every character does not have her/his own style, but rather several characters share the same speech peculiarities. Thus, the characters are grouped – the Pooka and the Good Fairy; Finn and Sweeny; Furriskey, Lamont, Shanahan and Peggy, etc. Their speech parodies the style which would be the most appropriate for the kind of fiction – folklore, heroic bardic literature and realistic fiction in general – and for the social class they belong to. In *At Swim*, the characters' language – and characterization in general –, rather than serve the purpose of individuation, is instrumental in introducing diverse literary, cultural and social discourses, thus contributing to the carnivalesque dimension of the text.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

The juxtaposition of the characters' different registers and idiosyncrasies, all presented at the same level, is a source of humour and eccentricity. The text shifts from Shanahan or Slug Williard's colloquialisms, to the Pooka's civilities and courtesies, to Finn's archaisms and to Orlick's stilted style.

But the soul, the ego, the *animus*, continued Orlick, is very different from the body. Labyrinthine are the injuries inflictible on the soul. The tense of the body is the present indicative; but the soul has a memory and a present and a future. I have conceived some extremely recondite pains for Mr Trellis. I will pierce him with a pluperfect.

Pluperfect is all right, of course, said Shanahan, anybody that takes exception to that was never very much at the bee-double-o-kay-ess. I wouldn't hear a word against it. But do you know, this tack of yours is too high up in the blooming clouds. It's all right for you, you know, but the rest of us will want a ladder. Eh, Mr Furriskey? (p. 168).

In the student's novel, characterization also serves comic and parodic purposes, mainly in the use made of legendary figures belonging to Irish lore: Finn MacCool, the Pooka and the Good Fairy. Finn MacCool, the legendary huge and beautiful warrior, leader of the Fianna, becomes an old and rambling man whom the rest of the characters nickname "Old Timer" and "Mr Storybook". The narrator says about him that "though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development" (p. 9) and refers to him as "old greybeard" (p. 62) and "droning dark-voiced Finn" (p. 88). In this respect, Stephen Knight has said that O'Brien opts for this presentation of Finn "probably because of the antiquity of the legend in a piece of O'Brienish literalism" (1974: 109)<sup>9</sup>.

The Pooka and the Good Fairy offer further examples of the use of traditional figures in unexpected roles. In Irish lore, the Pooka is a mischievous spirit, an animal spirit who leads travellers astray. Charles Squire (1975: 247) traced its origin to the Scandinavian elves and differentiated it from the fairies, descendants of the early Gaelic gods and goddesses, the Tuatha Dé Danann (p. 403). There seem to be some discrepancies, though, as for the nature of these two figures, for Wäppling considers that pookas and fairies are complex characters who can be both good and evil (1984: 85-88). Even though this may be so, in *At Swim* the Pooka is initially introduced as "a member of the devil class" and the fairy is the "Good Fairy". The two characters would seem, then, to represent the powers of evil and good respectively, and they are used to introduce a folklore motif: the fight between these powers over a human soul, a battle won in this case by the Pooka. He may well be a conventional instrument of evil, but in *At Swim* he is presented as the epitome of civility, politeness, patience, moderation and consideration, always trying to avoid possible conflicts by soothing quick tempers or hurt feelings. On the other hand, he is the one chosen by Orlick as the agent who will inflict unbearable physical pain on Dermot Trellis. The narrative reaches here a most striking sadistic vein, whose viciousness and cruelty is toned down precisely by the humorous counterpoint offered by the Pooka's politeness. Even while tearing off Dermot Trellis's nipples with his nails, the Pooka does not lose his composure. While his defenceless victim lies on the floor, covered with blood, the Pooka may say to him:

To forsake your warm bed, said the other [the Pooka] courteously, without the protection of your heavy great-coat of Galway frieze, that was an oversight and one which might well be visited with penalties pulmonary in character. To inquire as to the gravity of your sore fall, would that be inopportune? (p. 177).

The effect on the reader may be comic but only partially so, for the detailed account of the tortures suffered by Trellis and, above all, the relish with which they are exposed, turns this section into a macabre and disturbing tale whose implications O'Brien would later explore in *The Third Policeman* (1967)<sup>10</sup>.

9.- It seems that there were two Finn traditions in Gaelic literature, different in form and spirit: an oral tradition representing Finn as a comic old man and a learned or manuscript tradition where Finn appears as a hero and prophet (Eva Wäppling, 1984: 32). Vivian Mercier also argued that the burlesque treatment of Finn and the Fianna, originated in the oral tradition, was transferred to written literature in late tradition (1962: 31-32). One of the arguments of Wäppling's study (1984) is that, although initially the Finn character in *At Swim* is the comic giant of oral tradition, in his role of teller of the Sweeny story he changes into a sad, tragic hero.

10.- Although *The Third Policeman* was published posthumously, it was written shortly after the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.



## CONSTANZA DEL RÍO ÁLVARO

The Good Fairy is conventionally allied with virtue and good, and yet this spirit appears as an unfriendly, reactionary, fussy and hot-tempered creature. Its touchiness, together with its invisible nature and the indeterminacy of its sex, becomes the butt of multiple jokes which run through three different scenes – the journey through the forest (pp. 103-38), the card game at the Red Swan (pp. 138-48) and the mock-trial scene (pp. 193-206) – thus establishing a link between them. While the characters wait for Orlick Trellis's birth, Shorty suggests playing a hand of cards. They play for money and the Good Fairy seems enthusiastic about the idea. Slug Williard asks the angelic voice the following question, a tricky one indeed: "How are you going to take the cards if you have no hands and where do you keep your money if you have no pocket, answer me that, asked Slug sharply" (p. 139-40). Plain common-sense.

The first narrative in *At Swim* – the autobiographical frame – purports to be the text's representation of reality, a window on the real world outside through which the reader catches glimpses of contemporary Dublin 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, characterization is not a major concern in this frame-narrative. The student's friends act as companions in his nocturnal wanderings, or else, provide an excuse for the expansion of his literary theories and pursuits. Brinsley is given more attention since he becomes the student's main critic and narratee within the novel, but he is not a developed character either. Speaking in general terms, it could be said that these characters are used as mouthpieces for certain literary and cultural attitudes which are ironically exposed as clichés but never questioned. The most relevant example is the student's uncle. He represents the conventional and conformist assumptions of the Irish lower-middle class: mystification of the importance of higher education, hard work as the key to success in life, blind acceptance of Irish Catholicism, sterile and absurd nationalism, etc. The student's rejection of these values is a passive and escapist one: alcohol, sleep and his novel become his only concerns. He retreats from the real world and adopts the position of a hostile and silent observer (pp. 34, 44, 49). In fact, the first sentences of *At Swim* are quite telling in this respect:

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities (p. 9).

The novel begins with an inward move and the protagonist enters a state of hibernation which signifies his rebellion against and rejection of society. Nevertheless, his attitude is "vacant", just a pose staged for the gaze of an "other", as his preoccupation and self-consciousness about the expression in his eyes and face reveals, and the promise of depth cued in this opening paragraph will remain unfulfilled. The axis of perception set up in this opening paragraph calls to mind Freud's narrative of the vicissitudes undergone by instincts (1984: 113-37). In his consideration of the development of the pair of opposites scopophilia/exhibitionism (pleasure in looking/pleasure in being looked at), Freud differentiated three stages:

- a) Looking as an *activity* directed towards an extraneous object.
- b) Giving up of the object and turning of the scopophilic instinct towards a part of the subject's own body; with this, transformation to passivity and setting up of a new aim – that of being looked at.
- c) Introduction of a new subject to whom one displays oneself in order to be looked at by him (p. 127).

As can be seen, an initial stage of active scopophilia is replaced by a passive exhibitionist one which is, according to Freud, a narcissistic formation (p. 129), and implies the turning round of the instinct upon the subject's own self. This second stage calls for the introduction in this perceptual scenario of a new subject which replaces the narcissistic subject and with which the latter identifies. In *At Swim*, the position held by this new scopophilic subject is filled in by the student's friends and ultimately by the reader. Although Freud's account may, in my opinion, answer for the perceptual structura-

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

tion of the protagonist's psyche in its relation to the outside world, there is also a sense in which his position is not as passive as visual exhibitionism would imply. In *At Swim*, what is eroticized and fetishized, and thus functions as sexual organ, is the protagonist's mind, although not his thoughts and feelings but his imagination shaped as the fictional novel he is writing. The opposition active looking/passive being looked at, thus overlaps the pair passive reading/active writing. It is interesting to remark that the pattern of relations established between the student and his diegetic narratees mirrors the position of the author of the novel and its readers. In the last instance, *At Swim* is a narrative advocating a notion of the author as ultimate origin of the meaning of the text. The reader is, to some extent, a rival to be taken by surprise and beaten, but also a collaborator in that her/his presence as voyeur is absolutely necessary for the text to exist in the terms it has set.

A further feature of characterization in *At Swim* that works against the individuation of characters is the fact that they seem to merge into one another. This merging is not effected on a one-to-one basis. That is, there is no character who fully stands for another character, but rather, a single trait may link a figure to another figure and another trait relate her/him to a different figure. Thus, the student, Byrne and Dermot Trellis share their fascination for sleep and beds, while the student, Dermot and Orlick are fictional writers. But Dermot also recalls the student's uncle, for both are moralists and figures of authority. Punishment and torture associate Dermot Trellis and Sweeny. Dermot Trellis and Orlick Trellis share surname and pimples. Orlick echoes the student in that they both make a frustrated attempt to rebel against authority. As Stephen Knight has remarked, the Pooka borrows some of the most famous traditional attributes of Finn, such as his ability to perform magic by sucking his thumb (1985: 97). Finally, starting with the student himself, the novel presents different observant and silent figures, hidden in the dark, humorously epitomized by the hidden orchestra which entertains the audience in the mock-trial scene (pp. 195-96).

The artificiality and linguistic basis of character creation in literary works is voiced by Finn when he complains about his literary treatment in the hands of poets and story-tellers:

Small wonder, said Finn, that Finn is without honour in the breast of a sea-blue book, Finn that is twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller's book-web. Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story? (p. 19).

As can be seen, Finn laments ill-treatment by authors, and his words express a feeling of entrapment, of a sorrowful existence confined to and unavoidably entangled with the black marks and white spaces created by written words<sup>11</sup>. It is remarkable that the student himself should earlier have voiced a similar idea when describing his ability to "insert" his reflection in between the words advertising a brand of ale on his mirror (p. 11).

An analysis of characterization in *At Swim* should not end without a commentary on the theory of "aestho-autogamy", the "dream of producing a living mammal involving neither fertilization nor conception" (p. 40). The theory is introduced in an extract from the press in which the merits of its invention are ascribed to Dermot Trellis. The advantages of this procedure are numerous: with it, the cumbersome fact of pregnancy is disposed of, it does away with the process of bringing up children and allows for the creation of individuals with the physical and psychological traits required for success in life. As is explained in the novel, aestho-autogamy "is a very familiar phenomenon in literature" (p. 40) and is the operation that Dermot Trellis uses in the creation of the protagonist of his novel, John Furriskey<sup>12</sup>. Trellis creates his character in a humorous scene which parodies Stephen Dedalus's

11.- At another level, Finn's complaint is also a defence of the spontaneity of oral tradition as opposed to the artificiality of written tradition.

12.- Dermot Trellis's novel on sin conforms to the student's literary theories exposed on p. 25 in the novel. Thus, Dermot borrows and/or hires some characters from already existing fictional works: Finn MacCool is a 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 existing character fits his figure and Trellis must create him "*ab ovo et initio*".

equalling of the artist to the God of creation. Aestho-autogamy amounts to the literalization of the set phrase "creation of character", which is thus reduced to the absurd, since its purely metaphorical value is exposed. More interesting, perhaps, is the underlying analogy established between three phenomena: the act of childbirth, the act of literary creation and the act of divine creation. A long-established metaphorical equation in patriarchal western culture, that of childbirth and literary creativity, here acquires literal significance. The metaphor can be read as disclosing the desire that men have always had of appropriating women's procreative function, which can be a source of confinement but also of power. Although it may be argued that literary creativity can be both a male and female domain, in the context of *At Swim* it is quite clearly a male prerogative. Furthermore, the image of an author as procreator, denying any female participation and usurping the maternal role while continuing to exercise the paternal one, is expanded to encompass the idea of the author as God, a process whereby the female is used as an intermediary stepping-stone between man and his ultimate ego-ideal: God. The literalization of this metaphor in the novel renders it absurd and comic and favours the reader's denial of its contents, thus disavowing the underlying anxiety that brought it to light.

A further consequence of aestho-autogamy is the fact that the cast of fictional characters that Trellis has gathered for his novel have a real existence. They 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. Since they do not approve of Mr Trellis's plans for them, they cunningly keep him asleep by drugging him. In their "free" time the characters completely subvert the plot Trellis has devised for them<sup>13</sup>. Thus, Furriskey, instead of viciously assaulting and raping Peggy, falls in love with and marries her, the couple run a sweet-shop and entertain Shanahan and Lamont in their happy home. Their rebellion triggers off Trellis's fall. The characters' final vengeance against him 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 that govern the fictional universe of the student's novel – a universe where language, whether oral or written, has the power to bring to life and materialize situations and people – Trellis actually suffers the tortures, and most of the characters who have appeared so far feel happy enough to participate in his torments. As can be seen, *At Swim* provides a parodic and metafictional commentary on the ontological status of fictional characters – and of fictional worlds in general – by transforming their linguistic referentiality into real referentiality.

Literary aestho-autogamy is a narrative transgression, a denial of the structural demarcations that determine positions in a text. In this case the barrier transgressed is the conventionally unbridgeable one between an author and her/his fictional creation. Gérard Genette stated (1980: 234) that this transgression is a rhetorical figure called "author's metalepsis" by the classics and which "consists of pretending that the poet himself brings about the effects he celebrates". The starting-point of this metalepsis is Patricia Waugh's "creation/description" paradox mentioned above. Aestho-autogamy is a metafictional device that calls attention to the problem of referentiality in fictional language, to the fact that "in fiction the description of an object brings that object into existence" (Waugh, 1984: 93). What is humorously attempted in *At Swim* is to collapse the distinction between fiction and reality, between a fictional object, which is a linguistic sign, and a real referent. This confusion between sign and referent does away with the illusion of reality that any text would want to preserve. It flaunts the artificiality of art by undoing the hierarchy between outside and inside, narrating subject and narrated object, author and fictional world.

From a different perspective, the idea that language may actualize a verbal universe and transform its ontological nature from fiction into reality, may, in *At Swim*, stem from the Irish satirical tradition.

13.- Fictional characters who are aware of their own fictionality, who communicate with their author or rebel against him/her have mainly been exploited as a metafictional device from modernism on. See, for example, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Unamuno's *Niebla* (1914). E. M. Forster's study, *Aspects of the Novel*, provided critical ground for the rebellion of fictional characters when he referred to the "spirit of mutiny" and the desire to become real people and escape confinement that characters feel (1990: 72).

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

As Mercier said, Irish satire originated as magic and was believed to have the power "to inflict actual physical harm on its victim" (1962: 145). As Freud argued in "Totem and Taboo" (1985: 53-224), magic is the technique of animism, the system of thought prevalent among primitive men. According to Freud, magic is based on misinterpretation, on mistaking ideal connections for real ones, or the order of ideas for the order of nature. It is characterized by an overvaluation of mental processes, of psychical reality over factual reality, and follows the principle of the "omnipotence of thoughts" (p. 143). Freud established an analogy between the successive stages in the development of men's view of the universe and the phases of an individual's libidinal development (p. 148). The first stage, the animistic one, would correspond to the narcissistic libidinal organization prior to the Oedipus complex, a stage marked by primitive men's attribution of omnipotence to themselves and by auto-eroticism in the individual. Freud also affirmed that the overvaluation of thoughts in animism implied a sexualization of mental processes (p. 147). It may be argued that, in *At Swim*, omnipotence has been ascribed to language, rather than to thoughts. Yet, as has been said above, the mental life of the protagonist is shaped in this novel as his literary creation, which is then displayed and exposed for the characters and the reader to contemplate. It may also be argued that, in any case, animism, magic and omnipotence of thoughts would govern the student's novel and that this attitude is being dismissed through irony. Yet the verbal pyrotechnics exhibited throughout *At Swim*, the fact that the student and his world do not escape the air of artificiality that pervades the whole novel, and the fact that the invisible and transcendent presence of a creator other than the student is constantly being felt, lead me to say that the author also – and quite paradoxically – participates in the animistic and narcissistic systems that he condemns in his protagonist.

Freud related the animistic view of the universe to obsessional neurosis and said that the principles of omnipotence of thoughts and intellectual narcissism have survived in the constitution of neurotics (p. 147). For his part, J. Hillis Miller has stated that the "madman misinterprets himself and other people according to false literalizations" (1992: 33). False literalizations are implied in neurosis, animism, magic and also in *At Swim*, a text in which madness is inscribed as well: the wild and mad novel the student writes, the madness of Sweeny and Trellis, and, above all, the enigma of insanity thematized in the last fragment of the text, "*Conclusion of the book, ultimate*" (pp. 216-18). This is the section which ends the novel entitled *At Swim-Two-Birds* and puts the final full stop to it. The passage is deliberately cryptic, both its style and contents mirroring its subject-matter, which seems to be the always shifting dividing line between sanity and insanity. The narrating voice 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 seems to be trying to draw a conclusion. It is precisely the attempt at interpretation that distinguishes this voice from the detached and pompous manner of the student, and confers 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. Up to now, the narrative has been dominated by the presence of a consciousness signified by the first-person pronoun, and in this coda such presence is suddenly transformed into a voice coming from above, hence not immediately present in the text. I would argue that this voice seems very close to that of a real author, thus revealing that the autobiographical frame is also a fiction devised by an "other". Intellectual narcissism and sexualization of mental processes can be initially ascribed to the student-narrator, but they also govern the production of the whole 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 projects onto this double what he rejects in himself, thus disclaiming any responsibility for any neurotic symptoms to be found in the text. The analogy author-God, which was mocked in relation to the Trellis author-figure, is, I would contend, the one really supporting the whole edifice of *At Swim*.

\* \* \* \* \*

I began the study of characterization in *At Swim* by quoting Alcorn, for whom the two main inter-related functions of fictional characters are that of promoting reader identification and that of contributing to the text's rhetorical effect. In the novel under analysis there is no textual interest in the delineation of characters as individuals, in presenting figures providing an illusion of human subjectivity in which the reader may find a model or a mirror for her/his own self. On the contrary, *At Swim* parodies realist characterization by enhancing the nature of fictional characters as conventional and linguistic constructs. Characters, then, always emerge as creations, and not the creations of the narrator of the novel, for he also partakes of the same artificial and mechanical dimensions and is as subject to the distancing and cancelling effects of textual irony as the rest of narrative elements. I would argue that this text interpellates the reader from this transcendent ironic position, the position of the artificer, of the deft creator of an elaborate design. This is the position with which the reader is encouraged to identify throughout, the position that displays creativity and wields authority and power, the position that may offer the reader pleasure and the illusion of a consistent and continuous subjectivity.

Characterization – a narrative convention which can powerfully induce reader identification – does not serve that purpose in *At Swim*, since it does not provide the ideological illusion of a stable, coherent and autonomous subjectivity. Rather than cover up the precariousness and discursive nature of subjectivity, what the novel does in its treatment of characterization is to reveal such precariousness, together with the artificial and linguistic construction of the subject. However, the text's refusal to perform the ideological task at the level of characterization, a task which in Belsey's words would be "to present the position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable" and to smooth over "contradiction in the construction of a position for the reader which is unified and knowing" (1980: 90), does not imply the absence of such unified and knowing position of privilege. This position is not located in any single voice or figure physically present in the text but it provides an ironic discourse which invades all these voices and figures. It is physically absent but forever present, like the God of creation, implicitly telling the reader how s/he should approach the texts<sup>14</sup>. As Belsey has said: "Irony is no less authoritative because its meanings are implicit rather than explicit" (1980: 72). This diffuse stance establishes the kind of relationship the reader is to have with the novels, and, consequently, it is a position that attempts to guide and control the reader's response. This is the position occupied by the author of the novel, not that of the "real" Brian O'Nolan, but that of Flann O'Brien as he appears inscribed in *At Swim*<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, the view of artistic creation to be inferred from this text, in spite of formal experimentation and metafictional play with traditional notions of authorship, is paradoxically a view of the author as the ultimate source of aesthetic unity and textual meaning.

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14.- In this respect, Miles Orvell has commented on the ability of each of O'Brien's novels to create its own world, ruled by its own physical characteristics and formal properties, where the readers' knowledge about fiction and their expectations are defeated at every page (1985: 102).

15.- Brian O'Nolan's fondness for the use of pseudonyms and for the creation of *dramatis personae*, his conception of the self as divided and of literature as self-reflective, indicate the presence of an ironic consciousness indebted to the tradition of Romantic irony.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF CHARACTERIZATION

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