

'The Dismemberment of Orpheus': Flann O'Brien and the Censorship Code

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Abstract

One consequence of Irish censorship culture was that modernism almost passed Ireland by. By 1946 over 1,700 titles were proscribed on the grounds of 'indecent', including most of the leading international modernists. But if modernism was disallowed, postmodernism crept in through the back door, virtually unnoticed. At the start of the Second World War a trinity of Irish novels emerged which, in retrospect, mark the moment when high modernism began to drift, almost imperceptibly, into postmodernism: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). However, unlike Joyce or Beckett, Flann O'Brien never lived abroad. As a writer whose exile was interior, his textual strategies of silence, exile and punning are, by necessity, of a different order. In this respect, O'Brien's particular brand of postmodernism must be read in two interrelated contexts: in an aesthetic domain (a challenge to the conceits of high modernism); and an ethical domain (a resistance to the nativist hegemony of Irish censorship culture).

At Swim-Two-Birds, from one point of view, is a superb compendium of anecdotes; however, one may also see it as a comic map of Babel, an appalling and hilarious competition of narratives, the very clarity of which is illusory since when all (professedly) is told, the untellable becomes a reality. (Kilroy 1972, 301)

1. Introduction: The Dismemberment of Orpheus

Let us begin, in good poststructuralist fashion, with a paradox: *The Irish were postmodernist before they were modernist.* (Discuss.)

One consequence of Irish censorship culture was that modernism almost passed Ireland by. As Mr. Deasy says to Stephen Dedalus, Ireland was "the only country which never persecuted the Jews. Do you know that? No. And do you know why?... Because she never let them in..." (Joyce 1992, 44). Lest we forget, *Ulysses* itself was never officially banned in Ireland, simply kept out. In fact, most state libraries and bookshops maintained this unofficial ban until 1966: the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Revolution and the year of Flann O'Brien's death.¹

From the establishment of the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929, Ireland embarked on a policy of cultural protectionism—aptly described by Robert Graves in 1950 as "the fiercest literary censorship this

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side of the Iron Curtain" (cited in Adams 1968, 250). By 1946 over 1,700 titles were proscribed on the grounds of 'indecenty', including most of the leading international modernists: Beckett, Faulkner, Greene, Hemingway, Huxley, Joyce (for *Stephen Hero*), Kafka, Lawrence, Mann, Maugham, Moore, Nabokov, Proust, Scott Fitzgerald and Steinbeck, to mention but a few (Adams 1968, 240-3).²

In the meantime, if modernism was disallowed, postmodernism crept in through the back door, virtually unnoticed. By the start of the Second World War a series of Irish novels had emerged which, in retrospect, mark the moment when high modernism drifted, almost imperceptibly, into postmodernism: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939).

The question of where modernism ends and postmodernism begins is obviously a vexed and contentious one, and outside the ambit of this essay. Suffice it to say, for theorists such as Ihab Hassan, the blurred borderland may indeed be traced back to *Finnegans Wake*: "a monstrous prophecy of our post-modernity ... all the elements of post-modern literature crowd this 'novel': dream, parody, play, pun, fragment, fable, reflexiveness, kitsch ... the edge of pure silence or pure noise" (1987, xiv). Hassan appropriates the myth of Orpheus to personify this schism. The poet Orpheus represents the mythic unity between the word and nature. On the command of the envious Dionysius, Orpheus is torn to pieces by the frenzied Maenads: "the victim of an inexorable clash between the Dionysian principle and the Appollonian ideal which he, as a poet, venerated" (1987, 13). Orpheus is savagely dismembered but receives greater power and energy through his fragmentation, and goes on singing.

However, while we may well locate the first expressions of postmodernism in Irish counterrealism, it was an international rather than an indigenous tradition which was directly enhanced. As Richard Kearney has noted, until the 1970s Irish novelists "broadly conform to the structural requirements of classical realism, unflustered by the modernist problematic of fiction" (1988, 2). Indeed, by the end of the war the counterrealist experiment was effectively over: Joyce was dead, Beckett had abandoned Hiberno-English for French, and Flann O'Brien remained relatively unknown. The Irish novel at home—hemmed in by the isolationist policies of the Irish Free State—had returned to more insular forms which embraced a very cosy kind of realism, or as Myles na Gopaleen sneered: "stories about wee Annie going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals ... will-making, match-making—just one long blush for many an innocent man like me, who never harmed them" (1987, 103).

What I wish to argue here is that Flann O'Brien's particular dismemberment of Orpheus must therefore be placed in two interrelated contexts: in an aesthetic domain (a challenge to the conceits of high modernism); and an ethical domain (a resistance to the nativist hegemony of

postcolonial, Catholic Ireland). Unlike Joyce or Beckett, O'Brien never left Ireland, and so his strategies of silence, exile and punning are, by necessity, of a different order. As a writer whose exile was interior, O'Brien's post-modernist fiction—"the edge of pure silence or pure noise"—might usefully be explored in the light of its relationship to Irish censorship.

2. The Hard Life (of Censorship Culture)

By 1941 Flann O'Brien had written three of the most innovative novels of the Irish canon, yet had received very little public acclaim: *At Swim-Two-Birds* was still relatively obscure; *The Third Policeman* (composed 1940) remained unpublished until 1967, a year after his death; and *An Béal Bocht* (1941), by virtue of its Gaelic mode, was marginalised as inaccessible (it was eventually translated as *The Poor Mouth* in 1973). These circumstances would adversely affect the quality of his later work, *The Hard Life* (1961) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).

As a strategy to meet his publishers' horizon of expectations, O'Brien's shift to a more realist representation in *The Hard Life* is understandable—Longmans had previously refused *The Third Policeman* on the grounds that he "should become less fantastic" (Cronin 1989, 101). The nearest *The Hard Life* gets to the Irish fantastical tradition is its Swiftian fascination with bodily functions, which was part of the squalid design intended to provoke the Irish Censorship Board into banning his novel. To this end, O'Brien invented a character called Fr. Kurt Fahrt, and as he wrote to his friend and editor, Timothy O'Keefe, "The name will cause holy bloody ructions. It will lead to wirepulling behind the scenes here to have the book banned as obscene...." (Cronin 1989, 214). As Anthony Cronin remarks: "Nearly every professional Irish author had a book banned and [O'Brien's] gleeful anticipation of the prospect makes it clear that he was anxious to join the club" (1989, 214–5). O'Brien intended to appeal any subsequent banning order in court, protesting that it was neither obscene nor blasphemous, and thereby expose the ethos of the Censorship Board as archaic, sectarian, and lacking in aesthetic acumen.³ In any event the book was *not* banned, much to O'Brien's disappointment, but what is more important is the degree of strategic textual manipulation, which goes well beyond scatological naming.

The Censorship of Publications Act (1929), which still operates (with amendments),⁴ provides for the banning of literature on three basic grounds:

1. Any book or writing which is deemed to be "in its general tendency indecent or obscene";
2. If such writings advocate "the unnatural prevention of conception" (amended by the Health Act of 1979) or "the procurement of abortion";
3. Or if such material devotes "an unduly large proportion of space to the publication of matter relating to crime".

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There were obvious semantic difficulties in defining such relative concepts as 'indecent', so guidelines were established which defined it as "suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave" (Carlson 1990, 3–4). The key word, in practice, was 'sexual', for anything signifying even the remotest sexual content was dubbed indecent, and thus liable to be banned. Paradoxically, this obsession with sexual censorship in itself seems fetishistic; as Frank O'Connor—himself a victim of censorship—has noted: "there is a more than casual affinity between the pathological censor and the pathological pornographer" (1962, 39).⁵

O'Connor's point is well made. In January 1937 Leslie Montgomery, a previous opponent of censorship, was appointed to the Censorship Board. A month later he resigned in despair, and issued the following statement, which outlined the actual mechanisms of censorship:

The books are sent to the Minister by private objectors ... A permanent official marks, by writing folio numbers on a card, passages that he thinks come under the Act ... It is nearly impossible to report on 'general tendency' after reading the marked passages. Even when one reads the book through afterwards one is under the influence of the markings. (cited in Adams 1968, 72–3)

From this moment on, Flann O'Brien—himself a high-ranking civil servant—would have known that he was, literally and figuratively, a 'marked man'. Nonetheless, writers will always find ways of circumventing censorship through imaginative processes of invention, euphemism and circumlocution, or by resorting to encoded discourses which substitute signifying symbols for what is forbidden. Indeed, some writers may positively thrive from writing within such restrictive parameters, refining their use of language by giving a cutting-edge to the commonplace.

3. *At Swim-Two-Birds*

In March 1939 the Longmans Green publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* first appeared. After six months it had sold only 244 copies, by which time Longmans' London warehouse was bombed during the Blitz, and the book sank into obscurity for over twenty years. Longmans had accepted the novel on the strength of a report from its proof reader, the novelist Graham Greene, who wrote: "It is in the line of *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*: its amazing spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously as it were, all the literary traditions of Ireland..." (cited in Jones 1978, 31). Although *At Swim-Two-Birds* was hailed immediately as a masterpiece by several established writers (including Joyce), the general critical reception tended to condemn the work as inferior imitation. Sean

O'Faolain, one of the leading Irish realists, seemed to sum up the general consensus when he commented that the book had "a general odour of spilt Joyce all over it" (Cronin 1989, 92). *At Swim-Two-Birds* had a small re-issue on the American market in 1951, but not until the MacGibbon and Kee edition of 1960 did it get a more favourable critical response. Since the Penguin edition of 1967 it has become one of the most celebrated works of the Irish canon, and something of a case-study in scholarly debates on metafiction.

There are three main levels in this novel that overlap, and which are used mainly for their comic/ironic interaction. The barest description of plot is that it is a book (by Flann O'Brien) about a man writing a book (a nameless student narrator) about a man writing a book (Dermot Trellis). The framing story involves the student's attempts to write a novel. The hero of the student's novel, Dermot Trellis, is himself writing a "clarion-call" to the Irish people on the consequences of sin, and has some peculiar notions—inherited from his student creator—about textual composition. While Trellis finds it necessary to create a villain and a heroine he cannot be bothered 'creating' any other original characters. In collaboration with another imaginary author, William Tracy, Trellis plagiarises from a diverse range of genres, populating his text with such diverse characters as the Pooka, Finn McCool, cowboys extrapolated from paperback Westerns, and the mad King Sweeney, hero of the medieval Irish romance *The Frenzy of Sweeney*.

Trellis keeps these characters locked up in his hotel, but empowered by the principle of "aestho-autogamy" they move independently of him when he sleeps. Trellis creates the beautiful Sheila Lamont in order to have her seduced by the evil Furriskey, believing that the moral authority of his work would only be digestible if it contained a decent dollop of "smut" (O'Brien 1967, 35). However, Trellis himself grows obsessed with Sheila, and rapes her. He then kills her off to cover up his crime, but not before she gives birth to their son, Orlick. Orlick is persuaded by the other characters to exert a bizarre Oedipal revenge by writing his father into a courtroom drama, and Dermot Trellis goes on trial for crimes against literary humanity. The whole affair literally goes up in smoke when Trellis's maid accidentally burns the manuscript of his novel, thus allowing the student narrator a convenient way of closing *his* text.

Rape and sexual assault become ongoing leit-motifs in the story. (It seems significant that while the male characters are allowed to resist their authorial design, the female characters never resist their gender stereotyping.) In fairness to O'Brien, he does subvert certain male mythologies on the level of the *fabula* or story. The narrator and his male cronies, despite their harassment of women, never actually get to meet any—channelling their energies into gambling, playing billiards, and sheltering in that bastion of Irish patriarchy, the pub. Sexually frustrated at not conquering any 'real'

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women, they vent their frustration by collaborating with the composition of the narrator's sub-pornographic and violent fantasies. Consequently, this all-male 'collaboration' becomes shrill with anxiety, or as Wayne Koestenbaum describes the process in general: "certain desires and dreads follow in the double signature's wake: hysterical discontinuity, muteness, castratory violence, homoerotic craving, misogyny, a wish to usurp female generative power" (1989, 4).

Throughout the O'Brien *oeuvre* there are frequent, formal debates about the pervasive nature of Irish Catholicism. On the other hand there can be no such *formal* discussion of sexuality, combined with a very marked absence of women figures. Nonetheless, any basic deconstruction of the values espoused in his fiction invariably points to these absences as a prime concern in O'Brien's moral universe. However, the ethical force of this counter-narrative is lodged not on the level of the fabula but rather in the *syuzhet* or discourse, in what is *not* said, or as Margot Norris writes, "[such fiction] must therefore be read not as one text but as two texts: a 'loud' or audible male narration challenged and disrupted by a 'silent' or discounted female countertext..." (1994, 192).

4. The Metonymic Code

The key strategy employed by O'Brien in this context is what we might call a 'metonymic discourse'. According to one feminist interpretation, the main function of this strategy in the nineteenth-century novel is to evade censorship through a clandestine process of euphemism: "For the 'unspeakable' sexual desires of women, Charlotte Brontë returned to a metonymic discourse of the human body—hands and eyes for penises, 'vitals' or 'vital organs' for women's genitalia—often to comic effect" (Marxist-Feminist Collective 1989, 106). By way of example, this critique offers an extract from *Jane Eyre*:

'I am substantial enough—touch me' ... He held out his hand laughing. 'Is that a dream', said he, placing it close to my eyes. He had a rounded, muscular, and vigorous hand, as well as a long, strong arm. (Brontë 1966, 306–7)

At Swim-Two Birds employs a similar metonymic discourse. One typical characteristic of metafiction is the author's use of autocritical intrusions, and in this context O'Brien intervenes to teach us the code, just in case we miss the double-voiced discourse (he assumes, of course, that the censor will miss it). Take, for example, the narrator's description of college clubs and societies, which he suggests are pretexts for men and women to come together socially. These clubs are, he states, "concerned with the arrangement and conduct of ball games" (O'Brien 1967, 48). The metonymic discourse is launched by the sniggering ambiguity of a single

signifier—"balls"—formally representing billiards but metonymically signifying male genitals. When a player admiringly comments on a billiards shot—"Gob, there's a kiss"—O'Brien exposes his device by sending his uninitiated narrator to a dictionary to unravel the double signification: "Extract from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: 'Kiss, n. Caress given with lips; (billiards) impact between moving balls'" (O'Brien 1967, 51).

Even college literary societies become an excuse for crude puns and metonymic codes, and again the text instructs us, autocritically: "some [societies] were devoted to English letters, some to Irish letters, and some to the study and advancement of French language" (O'Brien 1967, 48). The metonymic displacement depends on the reader's understanding that 'French-letters' is a colloquialism for condoms, and the comedy is achieved by the word-play on language/letter. It is important to remember that until 1979, literature which 'advocated' the use of contraception was likely to be banned.⁶ Such clever manipulation of language evades censorship, but tacitly affirms the censor's legitimacy by that very cleverness: O'Brien delights in linguistic game-playing, but ethical integrity is sometimes sacrificed for the glory of the pun. Most of these metonymic codes do, in fact, develop from scatological puns, and all reinforce the paradigm that men are powerful and women submissive.

Beyond the commitment to coded titillation, the sexual act itself is strenuously resisted. During the debate on angelic carnality between the Pooka and the Good Fairy, the Pooka imagines what would happen as the result of union between a spirit and a human. He concludes that the offspring would be invariably traumatised, "severely handicapped by being half-spirit and half-flesh ... since the two elements are forever at variance" (O'Brien 1967, 106). Indeed, for the Irish writer, these elements must seem forever at variance: a spiritual and idealised notion of sexuality (fuelled by mystification and denial); and a real, physical carnality which cannot be spoken of.

This distaste for the mystified subject of fascination is reflected throughout the novel, particularly in the discussion of "aestho-autogamy". Trellis, a moralist and a rapist, is so appalled by sex that "at last [he] realised his dream of producing a living mammal from an operation involving neither fertilisation nor conception" (O'Brien 1967, 40). Aestho-autogamy becomes the satiric ideal of a celibate utopia, where there would be no need for sex, contraception, or feminism: "Those mortifying stratagems collectively known as birth control would become a mere memory if parents and married couples could be assured that their legitimate diversion would straightaway result in finished breadwinners and marriageable daughters" (O'Brien 1967, 41). This is literary genetic engineering for an Irish Brave New World, producing, asexually, women for domesticity and men for work and public life, but without the confusion of desire. Silence and evasion are inevitable when the text is faced with the real question of birth and reproduction, and

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this anxiety is echoed by the narrator, who is unable to describe the birth of Orlick Trellis: "The task of rendering and describing the birth of Mr. Trellis's illegitimate off-spring I found one fraught with obstacles and difficulties of a technical, constructional, or literary character—so much so, in fact, that I found it entirely beyond my powers" (O'Brien 1967, 144).

Another metafictional quality used to evade censorship is the intertextual licence to plunder at will from the historical canon, i.e. the belief that the "entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw" (O'Brien 1967, 25). In this respect, intertextual extracts are often borrowed for their dialogic implications. For example, the narrator presents us an extract (by an unnamed author) from a second-hand book entitled *The Athenian Oracle*:⁷

1. Whether it be possible for a woman so carnally to know a man in her sleep as to conceive, for I am sure that this and no way other was I got with child.
2. Whether it be lawful to use means to put a stop to this growing mischief, and to kill it in the embryo; this being the only way to avert the Thunderclap of my Father's indignation. (O'Brien 1967, 102)

In metafictional terms the author is showing us the oblique psychodynamics of fiction-making, as these pseudo-theological ideas are later transformed, on a narrative level, into the principle of aestho-autogamy, and the associated problem of how to excise troublesome characters from the text (such as the pregnant Sheila Lamont). On the level of the counter-narrative however, these plunderings fulfil another function. They stress the ideological obsessions of a Catholic culture which privileges the ideal of virgin birth, and which denies even the mention of abortion through its rigid censorship laws—"the Thunderclap of my Father's indignation".⁸ Alluding to abortion by quoting another text—seemingly more authoritative (hence the elision of its satirical author)—is a clever evasion of this.

O'Brien never borrows in order to create a web of pretty pastiche for its own sake; on the contrary he is smartly selective, and constantly alludes to the spectre of censorship. In this regard, the books on the narrator's shelves are obviously strategic: "ranging from those of Mr Joyce to the *widely read* books of Mr A. Huxley" (O'Brien 1967, 11; my emphasis). The irony is clear: among the books banned at the first meeting of the Censorship Board in 1930 was Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (1928), a key intertext in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.⁹

It is worth noting how Dermot Trellis, the 'author-god' of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, developed aestho-autogamy: "Much of the credit for Mr. Furriskey's presence ... must go to my late friend and colleague William Tracy ... The credit for the achievement of a successful act of procreation

41). Autocritically the text reveals the process of male collaboration as an act of 'procreation', or as Wayne Koestenbaum writes of this process in general: "men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse..." (1989, 3). For Koestenbaum, one universal feature of any male collaborative text is its overt homophobic posturing, created in order to distance the author(s) from accusations of subliminal homoeroticism. Throughout O'Brien's novels there is a more discrete mocking of homosexuality, but it serves a similar end. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, with its typical male relationships and denial of the female, he again resorts to a metonymic discourse, in this case punning on the ambivalence of the signifier 'fairy' (defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* both as a "a mythical small being with magical powers" or "slang for male homosexual").

The Good Fairy is bodiless—and therefore technically androgynous—although male gender is conferred by the use of the pronoun 'he'. When he slips invisibly into the Pooka's hut his voice is described as "a small voice that was sweeter by far than the tinkle and clap of a waterfall" (O'Brien 1967, 104). It is eventually made clear that his voice is rather effeminate, and this becomes the nexus of a homosocial discourse, playing deliberately on the ambiguities of both 'fairy' and the signifier 'queer' (defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "odd" or "slang for homosexual"): "Welcome to my poor hut, said the Pooka as he surveyed the floor, and it is a queer standing" (O'Brien 1967, 104). Just in case we miss O'Brien's verbal dexterity he underlines his intention with ruthless repetition, to stress that it is a coded referent. When the Pooka feels that he must be hallucinating due to "over-eating at bed-time", he recalls that the previous night he had finished off "a portion of a queer confection". This "queer confection", he later tells us, was "the loins of a man" (O'Brien 1967, 105).

After this episode various other characters attest to the 'queer' speaking voice of the Good Fairy: the cowboy, Slug, tells the Fairy, "no offence, you have a queer way of speaking" (O'Brien 1967, 115); Orlick Trellis, just after his birth, points to the fairy who is nestled in the Pooka's trouser pocket and says "that is a very queer little mouth you have in your clothes" (O'Brien 1967, 146); and eventually, during the mock trial-by-fiction, Mr. Justice Casey tells the Good Fairy "that is a very queer thing to say", in response to the Good Fairy's evasive answer on the nature of his relationship with Dermot Trellis (O'Brien 1967, 201).

Finally, in the Pooka's hut, the Pooka and the Fairy have a convoluted discussion on the nature of sex and gender. The Fairy has decided not to conduct this conversation in the bed where the Pooka and his wife lie, to which the Pooka cryptically responds: "If your departure from my poor bed was actuated solely by a regard for chastity and conjugal fidelity, you are welcome to remain within the blankets ... for there is safety in a triad, chastity is truth, and truth is an odd number" (O'Brien 1967, 106). The Fairy

chastity is truth, and truth is an odd number" (O'Brien 1967, 106). The Fairy is an 'odd number'; not just numerically but colloquially: he is bodiless, effeminate of voice, and refuses categorically to declare his gender. When the Pooka probes the gender question further, the texture of the language reveals its sub-text: "whether you are a man-angel or not, that is a conundrum personal to yourself" (O'Brien 1967, 110). It is significant that this is the only time that the synonym 'man-angel' appears for the expected 'man-fairy', and the displacement is another lesson on how to read this dialogic discourse. Homosexuality is finally conferred upon the fairy and we understand that he is in fact neither gender within a sexually conservative paradigm, but an 'odd number', a homosexual.

Perhaps it was the snide texture of such language which led the anonymous critic of the *Times Literary Supplement* to condemn O'Brien for his "schoolboy brand of mild vulgarity" (1939, 161). No doubt the author himself found this discrete vulgarity to be the perfect self-mocking antidote to his own serious manichean world-view, but it is also an unobtrusive means of broaching homosexuality—yet another sensitive taboo which was grounds enough for suppression by the Irish censor.¹⁰

5. Conclusion

In all of O'Brien's work there is a painful awareness that a cloistered nativist ethos has damaged Irish attitudes to sexuality. At times his discourse gamely attempts to deconstruct certain cultural taboos within the restrictive parameters of censorship (itself a reflection of socio-sexual anxiety), but in the process he sometimes loses track and reveals himself to be a participant as well as an observer. Language leaks, and the texture of his own discourse is afflicted with an incipient, inbred misogyny, which he cannot always transcend. He evades censorship by constructing a coy metonymic discourse which by virtue of its sniggering tone reneges on its possibilities. Paradoxically his prose degenerates into a cheap, lurid exploitation of sexuality; simultaneously enshrining yet strangely subverting the patriarchal presumptions of the paradigm.

What does this mean ("enshrining yet subverting"), and how are we to evaluate these contradictory critical observations—if at all? As Margot Norris points out (1994, 192), two broad strands of feminist criticism seem to exist: the Anglo-American school, exemplified by Gilbert and Gubar, which is representational and polemical (it "pays attention to *what* is said"); and French feminism, exemplified by Cixous and Kristeva, which is performative and rhetorical (it "pays attention to *how* saying works"). On the first level of representational politics, O'Brien's novels are obviously disappointing. But in terms of his counterrealist discourse there is another version of events:

Post-structuralist feminism pays relatively little attention to what writers say about women, or how women are represented, in favour of exploring how the activity of saying may itself act as a gendering of a text ... The inauthoritative textuality of *Finnegans Wake* [for example], which proclaims itself as having nothing significant to tell the reader, acts out a set of values (anti-dogmatism, undecidability, playfulness) that can be designated as feminine writing (*écriture féminine*), in distinction to a patriarchal writing that arrogates truth, knowledge, and authority to itself. (1994, 192)

The anti-dogmatic playfulness of O'Brien's metafictional discourse is predicated on its resistance to truth, knowledge and authority. As Yeats famously put it, "Great hatred, little room, maimed us from the start" (1989, 288), but the dialogic carnival of *At Swim-Two-Birds* offers itself up as a shamanistic gesture of healing within the oppressive, fetishistic culture of censorship.

NOTES

¹ Under the Customs Consolidation Act (1876, section 42), *Ulysses* was prohibited from entering the country. Although this exclusion order was withdrawn in 1932—and even though *Ulysses* was never banned under the Censorship of Publications Act (1929)—libraries and booksellers continued to impose their own form of censorship (see Adams 1968, 31; Carlson 1990, 9–12).

² As late as the 1980s, literary critics such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag were added to this list (see Carlson 1990, 1.).

³ The Censorship Board was composed, almost entirely, of devout Catholic laymen. The key lobby group for the Board's creation was the Irish Vigilance Association (founded by the Dominicans in 1911), which disseminated its ideas in *The Irish Rosary*. As one typical editorial phrased it (in February, 1913): "the evil publications against which the fight is being waged are not the product of Irish brains, nor the output of Irish hands. They are foreign to every ideal and aspiration of the clean-minded Celt, and mostly inspired by hatred of the Catholic Faith..." (cited in Adams 1968, 16).

⁴ The Act was amended twice: once in 1946 when provision was made for an Appeal Board (in practice this had little effect as few appeals were lodged); and again in 1967 when the period for which a book could be banned was limited to twelve years (this had considerable impact as thousands of books were automatically 'unbanned').

⁵ O'Connor first made this point at a debate in 1962, and by way of illustrating his argument he opened with the following anecdote:

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One day during my time as a librarian a young man asked to see me. He wanted to complain of an indecent book. I asked him what was indecent about it, and he said there was a dirty word in it. I asked where and he replied promptly 'Page 164'. Obviously page 164 had imprinted itself indelibly on his brain. I read the page and asked 'Which word?' He said 'That word' and he pointed to the word 'navel'. I felt sorry for him and wanted to ask him whether he couldn't find some nice girl to walk out with, but I decided it might be dangerous. (1962, 39)

⁶ Of the 1,700 books banned between 1930 and 1945, approximately one-eighth were on the grounds that they "advocated the unnatural prevention of conception" or the "procurement of abortion" (Adams 1968, 242–43). As Samuel Beckett drily commented: "France may commit race suicide, Erin will never. And should she be found at any time deficient in Cuchulains, at least it shall never be said they were contraceived" (1983, 88).

⁷ The author in question is the Augustan satirist, John Dunton, whose journal *The Athenian Gazette* (1691–97) was republished in four volumes as *The Athenian Oracle* (London: Andrew Bell, 1703–10).

⁸ It seems clear that O'Brien is referring directly to censorship here. In a letter to Timothy O'Keefe (in September, 1961) regarding the offensive strategies employed in *The Hard Life* he wrote: "the mere name of Father Kurt Fahrt S.J., will justify the *thunder clap*" (Cronin 1989, 214; my emphasis).

⁹ By 1940, six Huxley titles were banned in Ireland (Adams 1968, 71).

¹⁰ In a celebrated case, Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* was banned in 1941 on the basis of one, rather flowery sentence: "she saw Etienne and her Father, in the embrace of love" (Carlson 1990, 11). Ironically, the Censorship Board may have been alerted to this sentence in a review by Austin Clarke—himself a victim of censorship—a month previously: "It is an outward shock, purely pathological, and mentioned in a single, euphemistic sentence" (Clarke cited in Adams 1968, 213).

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