Doubling Dublin: Mimetic and Anti-Mimetic Use of Urban Space in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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Flann O'Brien's debut novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) is known for its complicated multi-layered Chinese-box structure as well as its overt use of other metafictional techniques and numerous intertextual references. It is a book about a writer, an unnamed student, who writes a book about a fictional author, a man called Dermot Trellis, who writes a book and nearly dies by the writerly hand of his son, Orlick Trellis, when his characters (one of whom is Orlick's mother) rebel against his authorial power. The story, or rather the stories, are for the most part set in Dublin with references to actual real-world locations frequently appearing in the novel. Scattered throughout narratives of different ontological status, they constitute, as I will illustrate, a metafictional commentary on the modes of representing a place in literature as well as on the function of place in a work of literature.

The chain of books within books constitutes a certain hierarchical division between characters and the narratives they appear in. The unnamed student narrator is the one to be accepted by the reader as the "real person" within the novel's realm and Dermot Trellis is introduced as his fictional creation. The difference between Trellis and his characters is much less clear-cut. While he is portrayed as the creator of some of them, the rest are professional characters with previous experience in other authors' fiction, merely hired to perform in his book—an artistic presentation of the student narrator's notion that "[t]he entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet" (25). Their ontological statuses are thus in most cases not entirely disparate, as was the case of the student narrator and Trellis, and the matter is further complicated by the fact that Trellis's book, as Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja notes, "occupies virtually no textual space" (76). We do read about the characters' work (that is, their occupation as characters in books), which constitutes another level of fictitiousness, but only rarely are those references concerned with work done for Trellis.

Based on the number of books, both fictional and real (that is, O'Brien's book about the student) which constitute the novel, Anne Clissmann distinguishes four main narrative levels which may have further extensions (84-85). The number of narrative levels has widely been accepted

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as four in criticism even by Bohman-Kalaja who revises Clissmann's model to produce her own schema based on game studies (51-54). For the purposes of this analysis, however, the number of strata are reduced to three, combining what Clissmann differentiates as two books, "Trellis's book about sin, and Orlick Trellis's book about his father" (84), into one fictional level that concerns all Dermot Trellis's characters including Orlick, the son he has with one of them. These three levels are: (1) the level of the student narrator and his life which the reader is expected to accept as the narrative proper; (2) the level of the fiction produced by the student, that is the level of life of Dermot Trellis and his characters when not at work; and (3) the characters' narratives of working in books, which are the fiction within fiction within fiction. This corresponds to the three contexts in which references to Dublin's topography occur most often: (1) the places relevant to the student narrator's everyday life; (2) the dwelling places of Trellis and his characters; and (3) Ringsend and Irishtown, both districts of Dublin, portrayed as a workplace of characters employed to perform in Western novels, the popular genre of fiction filled with cowboy lore usually set in the American West.

Conflating the vast conglomerate of narratives of *At Swim-Two-Birds* into a comprehensible form is not unproblematic. Two difficulties arise immediately. One is that Trellis's dwelling place is presented with references to Dublin streets in both the narrative that comes directly from the student narrator and in the text nominally written by Orlick Trellis within that narrative. As these usages are very similar in style and function, it seems reasonable to take the latter one step up the ontological ladder and discuss it along with the former, that is, with the primary level of the student narrator's book. The second problem is that while the Western novel segments are the ones in which the city's topography features quite prominently, the character who narrates them, Paul Shanahan, and those that appear in the narrative alongside of him seem to be the ones with the most distorted work/life balance. The line between the segments of the narrative they act out as part of their work and the part they perform as their private selves is thus often blurred. However, what these segments may lack in clarity as to their ontological status, they make up in the distinctively different way in which they engage with Dublin's cityscape. As this analysis is primarily concerned with the use of place and does not aspire to offer a new authoritative census of narrative levels, it seems reasonable to allow for this slight imprecision. Also, the intertextual play with a popular genre, much recognizable for the set of conventions it is expected to follow, makes these narratives stand out against the less strikingly conventional fiction of the student narrator's main text which does somewhat enhance the fictitiousness even when it is difficult

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to state with certainty whether a given reference is made within the realm of the student narrator's primary narrative or the fiction embedded in it.

The first version of Dublin introduced in the novel is the Dublin of the student narrator. His presence in the city is focused on two activities which are, quite unsurprisingly for a university student, studying and drinking. It is the latter that is the first to be localized in the narrative. It is introduced in the first section captioned as "Biographical reminiscence":

> *Biographical reminiscence, part the first*: It was only a few months before composing the foregoing that I had my first experience of intoxicating beverages and their strange intestinal chemistry. I was walking through the Stephen's Green on a summer evening and conducting a conversation with a man called Kelly . . . . He suggested that we should drink a number of jars or pints of plain porter in Grogan's public house. (O'Brien 20)

The caption informing about the biographical character of the introduced fragment is at once a formal metafictional device, which describes the function of the element of the narrative and an invitation to consider the relation of that fragment to the world outside of the literary work. The use of the term "biographical" steers the reader towards non-fiction writing, which associates with factual precision. And while it is generally not uncommon amongst readers to assume at least a certain degree of connection between the author and the first-person narrator in any novel unless it is strikingly improbable, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is, in fact, at least in parts autobiographic (Long 20). Carol Taaffe notes how O'Brien's friends would recognize themselves in parts of the novel and quotes Niall Sheridan, a close friend who edited the text, saying "I found myself (under the name of Brinsley) living a sort of double life at the autobiographical core of a work which was in the process of creation" (40). The same applies to places. Some of the recurring references are to University College Dublin premises, where O'Brien studied at the time of writing of his debut novel, and to pubs he then frequented, Grogan's pub mentioned in the "Biographical reminiscence, part the first" being one of his favorites (Cronin 142-43).

While these facts of the author's life might not necessarily be known to every reader of his work, the style of the narrative itself invites a reading that accepts the accounts of events as factual or fact-like, as the detached "purposely cold prose," as Joseph Brooker defines it (31), does not seem to be a product of the author's imagination. This is also true for the description of the college (annotated as such, which adds to the impression of a precise business-like tone):

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> *Description of College*: The College is outwardly a rectangular plain building with a fine porch where the mid-day sun pours down in summer from the Donnybrook direction, heating the steps for the comfort of the students. The hallway inside is composed of large black and white squares arranged in the orthodox chessboard pattern, and the surrounding walls, done in an unpretentious cream wash, bear three rough smudges caused by the heels, buttocks and shoulders of the students. (33)

In many cases the reference to topography appears in fragments describing an irrelevant and/or unaesthetic action. Such is the case of the detail-filled account of the narrator making himself sick with porter: "I proceeded home one evening in October after leaving a gallon of half-digested porter on the floor of a public-house in Parnell Street and put myself with considerable difficulty into bed, where I remained for three days on the pretence of a chill" (23). Similarly, a much more innocent fragment, which overflows with strikingly redundant information, also offers precise geographical location: "One consequence of my resolve, at any rate, was that I attended at the College every day and walked through the Green and up and down the streets, conducting conversations with my acquaintances and occasionally talking with strangers on general topics" (44). There is no reason to distrust the plausibility or the accuracy of these fragments. The precision of the report, which seemingly does not discriminate against facts that may otherwise be seen as irrelevant, creates an illusion of a factual rather than fictional account, which may be trusted in terms of its representative value. This is Dublin as you would expect to see it in the real world. The references to the city's topography play an important role in producing that illusion as they offer a point of reference against which the mimetic effect can potentially be judged. Even if the readers cannot physically visit the place, the coherence of its presentation and the familiarity of the cartographic mode of description offer support for their belief.

That O'Brien was consciously using the toponyms for his purposes becomes even clearer, when they abound in the text:

> . . . at about eight o'clock I was alone in Nassau Street, a district frequented by the prostitute class, when I perceived a ramrod in a cloth cap on the watch at the corner of Kildare Street. As I passed I saw that the man was Kelly. . . . Purporting to be an immoral character, I accompanied him on a long walk through the environs of Irishtown, Sandymount and Sydney Parade, returning by Haddington Road and the banks of the canal. (47)

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The sheer number suggests that the author was well aware of the functions places play in fiction. As Jean-Pierre Durix notes, "[t]he most realistic text is one in which time and space are recognizable. The realistic pact between writer and reader implies that, once localized, the text presents itself as a believable artifice" (62-63). The fact that O'Brien's debut comes after James Joyce established himself as a major writer and his debut novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a post-*Ulysses* work certainly is of importance to how it represents the city of Dublin as well. Jon Hegglund notes that "[r]eaders continue to accord *Ulysses* an epistemological authority akin to that of the map: the novel claims to present a totalizing representation of factual knowledge about a particular 'real-world' physical space" (164) and that the use of mapping in *Ulysses* has been largely interpreted by critics as "a modernist aesthetic strategy designed to give his novel the legitimating weight of fact" (165), though, as he further argues, Joyce's use of the rhetoric of cartography is in fact much more subversive than that.

O'Brien's topographical references gain a new meaning when the second layer of fiction, that is the book the narrator is writing about Dermot Trellis and his characters, is introduced. The description of the Red Swan Hotel, where Trellis and his characters live, is perhaps even more detailed than that of the College when first introduced and it certainly is richer in topographical details. Together with outlining a detailed history of the place, this creates an illusion of a place that actually exists in the real world:

> *Extract from Manuscript as to nature of Red Swan premises, oratio recta*: The Red Swan premises in Lower Leeson Street are held in fee farm, the landlord whosoever being pledged to maintain the narrow lane which marks its eastern boundary unimpeded and free from nuisance for a distance of seventeen yards, that is, up to the intersection of Peter Place. New Paragraph. A terminus of the Cornelscourt coach in the seventeenth century, the hotel was rebuilt in 1712 and afterwards fired by the yeomanry for reasons which must be sought in the quiet of its ruined garden, on the three-perch stretch that goes by Croppies' Acre. To-day, it is a large building of four stories. The title is worked in snow-white letters along the circumference of the fanlight and the centre of the circle is concerned with the delicate image of a red swan, pleasingly conceived and carried out by a casting process in Birmingham delf. (25-26)

Interestingly, even the description of the place's interior in a different fragment contains a reference to a street name: "On the window-ledge there was a small bakelite clock which grappled with each new day as it entered his room through the window from Peter Place, arranging it with precision into

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twenty-four hours" (31). The scrupulously developed setting might have its prototype in the real-world Dublin. With regards to the Red Swan Hotel location, Charles Travis found that there was a hotel in the 1930s in Lower Leeson Street where the actual Grogan's pub mentioned in the student part was also situated (227). However, these references could hardly establish the realistic pact with the readers in the same way as the references which concern the student narrator's life do. The reason for that lies in the ontological status of the narratives they appear in within the novel's realm. These are not presented to the readers as what they should accept as the "reality" of the book but as a product of the student narrator's imagination.

The readers could hardly miss the change in narrative levels. The "Extract from Manuscript as to nature of Red Swan premises" is preceded by the much quoted fragment in which the student narrator recapitulates the discussion he has with his friend Brinsley about his own ideas about novels:

> It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters . . . . [I]t was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. (25)

With the narrator calling for the novels to be a "self-evident sham," it is assumed that the excerpt from his own novel that immediately follows is meant to be a self-evident sham despite the realistic mode in which it is delivered. Elsewhere in the novel a casually mock-factual description of the Red Swan Hotel does not allow for the place to be taken very seriously: "There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr. McCool, a hero of old Ireland, is on the floor above. The cellar is full of leprechauns" (35). The peculiar mix of characters, none of whom seems remotely probable in the 1930s Dublin, defamiliarizes the location. Similarly, a reference to Dublin's suburb Dolphin's Barn, where two of Dermot Trellis's characters live when not working for him, is somewhat stripped of its potential plausibility when the true nature of those characters is considered. The relevant fragments quite uncontroversially state that: "[Furriskey and Peggy] took a little house in Dolphin's Barn and opened a sweet-shop and lived there happily for about twenty hours out of twenty-four . . . [Shanahan and Lamont] were frequent and welcome visitors to the little house in Dolphin's Barn" (101). While Peggy has been hired by Trellis to perform in his book and can thus be considered a "real" person on that

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level of narrative, her relationship with Furriskey is an ontological mésalliance, as he had been altogether invented by Trellis, which is discussed in length in the novel. Because of that the conventional story of a happy family in which the suburban setting would normally enhance the illusion of conventionality is disclosed as being entirely fabricated by the writer figure (in this case, the student narrator).

Linda Hutcheon argues against automatically regarding all metafiction to be anti-mimetic and for treating it as a different kind of mimesis (5). She notes that while metafiction may not mimic life in the way traditional mimetic fiction does, it does mimic the process of writing (25). Those two fictional levels in *At Swim-Two-Birds* represent the two different approaches, the traditional mimesis of product and the self-conscious mimesis of process, as Hutcheon calls them (5). Another characteristic of metafiction much relevant to O'Brien's novel is highlighted by Patricia Waugh, when she notes that it "explores the concept of fictionality through an opposition between the construction and the breaking of illusion" (16). References to Dublin's topography play a vital part in facilitating that process in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. While on the realistic level of the student narrator's life they help to establish the authoritativeness of the narrative, the mimicry of that usage in the student narrator's part reminds the reader that setting the plot in a particular real-world location is in fact a purely arbitrary decision that the writer makes when creating fiction. The same mode of writing that builds an illusion of a seemingly realistic, mimetic representation used in another context effectively breaks that illusion.

The conventionality of localizing a narrative seems to be stressed in the narrative by Dermot Trellis's son, Orlick, a product of the writer's rape of one of his invented characters. The book is written in order to kill Dermot—a written fictional account of his death is expected to have performative effect outside of Orlick's text. In its very first sentence, street names are mentioned: "*Extract from Manuscript by 0. Trellis. Part One. Chapter One*: Tuesday had come down through Dundrum and Foster Avenue, brine-fresh from sea-travel, a corn-yellow sun-drench that called forth the bees at an incustomary hour to their day of bumbling" (164). These references retain their exposed position even after Orlick is criticized by the other characters for taking too long to get to the killing part. The resumed narrative not only repeats what has already been said about the location word after word but also adds even more topographical detail as it unravels:

> Tuesday had come down through Dundrum and Foster Avenue, brine-fresh from sea-travel, a corn-yellow sundrench that called forth the bees at an

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> incustomary hour to their day of bumbling. . . . His home was by the banks of the Grand Canal, a magnificent building resembling a palace, with seventeen windows to the front and maybe twice that number to the rear. (169)

The obsessive insistence on keeping the place names in a narrative which is supposed to serve a single purpose—to deliver a story about Dermot Trellis's death, which would then by its literary powers generate the actual decease—once again reveals just how important place is in the process of creating a story that is supposed to appear believable (in this specific case believable enough to become true).

In the third context where references to Dublin occur, on the other hand, there is hardly any claim at plausibility. They describe the fictional work of a Western novel writer William Tracy, for whom some of Trellis's characters had worked in the past. These are either mock-objective descriptions of Tracy's work or stories about working for him narrated by the characters. Tracy himself is introduced in a fabricated press article with the press and the Dublin topography acting as the realistic elements against which a comic effect is created through the use of contrastingly fantastic facts in the article's content:

> *Relevant excerpt from the Press:* We regret to announce the passing of Mr. William Tracy, the eminent novelist, which occurred yesterday under painful circumstances at his home in Grace Park Gardens. Early in the afternoon, deceased was knocked down in Weavers' Square by a tandem cycle proceeding towards the city. . . . He was the first man in Europe to exhibit twenty-nine lions in a cage at the same time and the only writer to demonstrate that cow-punching could be economically carried on in Ringsend. (53)

The cow-punching stories themselves are presented by a character named Paul Shanahan in an expressive style that mimics the style of Western novels through narrating idiomatic cowboys' narratives complete with a reference to prairies—a very Western (and very non-Dublin) landscape feature:

> One morning Slug and Shorty and myself and a few of the boys got the wire to saddle and ride up to Drumcondra to see my nabs Mr. Tracy to get our orders for the day: Up we went on our horses, cantering up Mountjoy Square with our hats tilted back on our heads and the sun in our eyes and our gun-butts swinging at our holsters. When we got the length, go to God but wasn't it, a false alarm. . . . Get back to hell, says Tracy, I never sent any message.

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> Get back to hell to your prairies, says he, you pack of lousers that can be taken in by any fly-be-night with a fine story. I'm telling you that we were small men when we took the trail again for home. When we got the length, be damned but wasn't the half of our steers rustled across the border in Irishtown by Red Kiersay's gang of thieving ruffians. (54)

Later on in the fragment, Shanahan mentions that Red Kiersay was at the time working for another fictional Western novel author, Henderson. The suggestion is that the area was crowded by cowboys and Western novel authors for whom they worked. Soon enough another book by Tracy is mentioned which triggers another set of Dublin locations to be listed: "Out we crept to the buggy and down Londonbridge Road and across the town to Lad Lane. . . . Do you know what it is, says Slug, Tracy is writing another book too and has a crowd of Red Indians up in the Phoenix Park, squaws and wigwams and warpaint an' all, the real stuff all right, believe me" (57). These fragments are strikingly non-realistic and thus they are also openly anti-mimetic in the traditional sense.

The use of the Western novel, a genre that is associated with a certain type of geographic setting so strong that it appears in its very name, allows for the comic effect to be built upon a striking incongruity with the urban setting of Dublin, to which it has been transposed with much attention to providing topographical details. However, as Declan Kiberd notes in *Irish Classics*, wild as the idea appears at first, the Western novel is not as far removed from the reality of Dublin of the 1930s as it may seem (512-14). It was a tremendously popular genre at the time and Dublin itself, despite being the country's capital city, was then still fairly rural and thus not as wildly incompatible with the more conventional settings of Western novel scenarios as it is today. Also Shanahan's narrative is punctuated by excerpts from the press with one of them mentioning a group of men charged for "riotous assembly and malicious damage," who are described as "a gang of corner-boys whose horse-play in the streets was the curse of the Ringsend district" (59)—a possible allusion to the antics of the real-life students of University College Dublin, Kiberd argues (512-14). So although the urban space is radically transformed in those fragments, through that radical transformation O'Brien actually provides some kind of insight to the character of the real-life Dublin of that era. With some interpretative reverse engineering, what was specifically designed to appear unrealistic and implausible, entirely fabricated in the writer's mind and constructed of elements that seemingly lack congruity, is revealed to have a fairly reasonable amount of informative value.

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With the spatial setting being an important constructional element of the novel, the representation of Dublin in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is as complicated as its overall structure. The relationship between the real city and its literary adaptation changes throughout the novel. A constant rewriting of the notion of place takes place throughout the multiple narratives. The traditionally mimetic use of the cartographic mode in the description of the cityscape is instrumental for the building of a realistic framework but the very same mode is also used to discard the illusion produced. The peculiar mathematics of that means that two pluses add up to the reader's uncertainty as to whether the author can be trusted or not. When a strikingly anti-mimetic technique is employed, on the other hand, it invites the reader to explore the various possibilities of representing a place without failing to provide some objective truth about its real-world referent. The procession of Shanahan narratives delivered in a Dublinated Western novel idiom and the factually oriented press excerpts, of style and counter-style, which all deal with the same events and the same location throughout several pages is as much a formal exercise in writing for O'Brien as it is in reading for his audience. Overt disregard for realism of that section may still result in a representation that re-connects the reader to the real world. The relationship between the actual real-life Dublin and the fictionalized versions of it may thus at times be entirely counter-commonsensical with the realistic representations' status being challenged by other realistic representations, while the strikingly non-realistic might not necessarily be all that unreal. The uncertainty it produces may then encourage the reader to re-evaluate the notions they have about literature in its various forms and the capacity of those forms to render the real world, on the one hand, and about the real world itself with the multiplicity of ways it can be read through fiction, on the other.

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