CHAPTER 6

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Stepping Away: Radical Digressivity and *At Swim-Two-Birds*

Maebh Long

Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a novel of digressions, of deviations, of interruptions and circumlocution. It has to date been read as 'one of the earliest postmodern novels of flaunted artifice',[1] one whose 'postmodern narrative strategies — dizzying intertextuality, interpenetrating frame tales, interanimated discourses, and reflexivity'[2] — as well as general indeterminacy are 'definitive of postmodern writing'.[3] The complex structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*' complicit yet independent fragments abounds with parodies, quotations, repetitions, and an excessive self-consciousness of form and self-reflexivity. In form its interconnected narratives can be likened to a radicalization of a set of Russian dolls, where each frame tale is not simply contained within the other, but inhabits the same space as the other. The smaller often impossibly contains the larger, and each doll is simultaneously the beginning, centre, and end of the series. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a radical move away from the traditional, the normative and the logocentric; it is a sidestep from a determinable plot of univocal meaning. Instead of a traditional plot or narrative, O'Brien's text presents a series of fragmentary units, a web of interruptions and interludes. Its intertextuality, indeterminacy, and reflexivity, its interconnected and yet independent frame tales, are not simply a postmodern excess (as the novel has been read by the critics quoted above), but more specifically, they form a general, incessant digressivity — a *radical digressivity*.

Radical digressivity is the name for a form of non-originary fragmentation whereby digressions proliferate to the point of wholly dissolving any stable centre or core. Comprising fragmentary or aphoristic units of digressions, a radically digressive text will fail as a unit to begin definitively and conclude categorically. As will be outlined over the course of this chapter, each digressive unit in such a text operates both wholly independently *and* as one of many interrelated fragments, creating a text that is both more and less than its parts. A radical digressivity thus results in a text of contamination, whose styles, forms, and frames intermingle. Plot or narrative progression is diverted and derailed, and becomes secondary to the digressive units. The text becomes a web of autonomous and interlocking fragments, as exemplified by the exquisitely tangled maze of O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The intricate, radical structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* contains four different authors. As the first author, Flann O'Brien writes a text in which an unnamed first-person narrator recounts, through ten biographical reminiscences, the events of his final year as a student at University College, Dublin. During the course of this year the narrator (the second author) writes a number of narrative fragments, one of which recounts the story of Trellis. Trellis, the manifestation of the controlling, dictatorial (third) author, pens a novel whose characters include those borrowed from ancient and contemporary works, and whom he compels 'to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them and see that there is no boozing'.[4] Desiring one of his female characters, he forces himself on her, and through what the narrator refers to as 'aestho-psycho-eugenics' (p. 144), she bears him a quasi-illusionary son.[5] While Trellis has absolute control over his characters, this control dissolves when he falls asleep, and so they, determined to lead independent lives and unhappy with his treatment and rate of pay, drug him so that he is almost permanently asleep. When Trellis's son Orlick is found to have inherited his father's literary skills, he is urged by the other characters to write Trellis into a further text, and so as the fourth novelist he writes a detailed account of Trellis's torture and subsequent trial.

Interspersed throughout these narratives are autobiographical fragments of the narrator's life, lyrical descriptions of the Irish hero Fionn MacCumhaill (anglicized in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to 'Finn Mac Cool'), prose accounts of Middle Irish verse, extracts from letters, books, encyclopaedias, newspaper articles, short descriptions of people encountered, and explanations of literary tropes employed. Pages are skipped, sections are reported lost, characters' attributes or activities listed rather than described, and summaries are given for the benefit of new readers who started the book in the middle. Styles, tones, voices, and genres move to intersect, turn away from, and merge with each other as reference, plagiarism, and quotation become intermingled. The differing narrative spaces become complicit as characters exist on multiple planes, and reality and fiction become entangled. Conversations that occurred in one narrative frame are re-encountered within another, and characters absorb each other's prose style and vocabularies. The proliferation of material means that no single narrative can ever attain primacy — in *At Swim-Two-Birds* digression follows digression, interrupting and cutting across each other so that everything becomes digressive, and digression is radicalized. It is a text without a core, without a stable centre, and as such exemplifies what this chapter terms *radical* digressivity.

The radical stance of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is both outlined and parodied in the narrator's anarchistic literary manifesto. In this, the narrator proclaims that the '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'. 'The modern novel', he writes, 'should be largely a work of reference' — a good author could and should borrow characters and plot lines from existing works, as they are effectively 'interchangeable [...] between one book and another'. Hence we find cowboys on the streets of Dublin, and Sweeny from the Middle Irish *Buile Shuibhne* taking a hand in a poker game. However, as the 'novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic',

the narrator stresses that it is important to allow each character, borrowed or created, 'a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living' (p. 25). Characters should be paid a decent wage, given sufficient time off and appropriate dress for their role and time of year.

In recognizing the need for a liberal, democratic attitude towards its protagonists, the novel should make clear that its fictive status, as the work of fiction, 'self-administered in private', has a shamefully masturbatory self-involvement and self-indulgence, and a lamentable tendency towards the aping of reality. For the narrator the novel is therefore 'inferior to the play inasmuch as it lack[s] the outward accidents of illusion' — that is, a superior novel 'should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity' (p. 25). The novel should make no attempt to appear as anything other than a fiction; the reader should be able to see the stagehands changing scenes, and witness the actors adopting their roles. As will be developed over the course of this chapter, the narrator's manifesto informs much of the mode of interruption and deviation performed in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: its extremism provokes a radical, fragmented, uncompromising digressivity.

Radical Digressivity

Digression is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a 'departure or deviation from the subject in discourse or writing'. A digression is thus that which consolidates a logocentric reading of the text; it signifies the presumption of the existence of a totalized whole and presupposes a certain singularity of purpose, that is, a set, determinable argument from which we have momentarily drifted but to which we will return. A digression is the minor aberration that supports and sustains notions of the security of foundations and of innate comprehensibility. It establishes the concept of a primary plot or thesis by opposing it to a typically lesser, shorter aside; as such, a digression is a detour onto a secondary road that makes the motorway seem all the longer, straighter, more direct. The logic of the digression is that of the exception that proves the rule — it is the comparison that enables the distinctions between greater and lesser to be made.[6]

In establishing a main road we find notions of univocal meaning, of right answers and correct interpretations, of authorial intentionality and determinability. On the main road we can make clear, context-related readings and follow signposts to arrive at our — the author's — intended destination. Through the logic of the digression we read books that start on the first page and end on the last, that are signed, authorized, and legitimized by the author, and that can be understood through their context. What occurs, however, when digressions proliferate to the extent that the highway and the byway become indistinguishable? When the whole of the text is split into a series of digressions from which no single thread, no genre, no style, no signature retains primacy? When digression itself appears as a simulacrum, a departure from the central that attempts to consolidate notions of a grounded and stable centre, but in fact hides its absence? When we are faced with a radical digressivity that is always already there: an instant interruption that shatters notions of a single primary plot or meaning and turns the safe motorway into a

series of interconnected mazes? Then we are no longer in the space of the book but the space of the text, which Derrida describes as:

> a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) — all the limits.[7]

In this complex web of radical digressivity the work becomes 'the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home'.[8] Wandering persists as there is no longer any home, no place of determinable, univocal meaning that can be inhabited without excess or remainder. Digression follows digression and undoes notions of beginnings and endings, of univocal meaning, of determinable authorial intentionality and of the linear progression of plot, temporality, and influence.

To digress, to wander or step away, can be understood as a movement not only away from a primary plot, but also from a primary meaning. Thus, while the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of digression — 'departure or deviation from the *subject* in discourse or writing' (emphasis added) — clearly intends 'subject' to mean plot or argument, the potential for 'subject' to designate 'self' interrupts (steps away from, takes another path, digresses from) this meaning. 'Subject' interrupts itself, digresses from itself in such a way as to perform radically what it constatively describes — a deviation from the subject, a departure from itself. Thus, included in that bastion of main roads and mapped-out routes, the dictionary's definition and constative description of digression is a radical digressivity that interrupts single, univocal, or authorially intended meaning. The definition of the digressive digresses from itself, interrupts itself, fragments a single, constative meaning with a performance of a pervasive digressivity. The exception that *proves* the rule — the digression that indicates the main route/plot/meaning — is always already radicalized to *transgress* the rule, to undo notions of legality and legitimacy. This radical digressivity is understood here to indicate a (non-)originary fragmentation — a fragmentation that shatters the notion of origins and stable ground.

As a logocentric device, a digression presupposes not only a centre from which to deviate, but a structure of beginnings and endings. A radical, fragmentary digressivity is the undoing of such an order — it is a non-progressive series of beginnings that never present a secure starting point as there is always something that came before. It is a non-linear series of endings that never posit closure as there is always something more to come. Each fragment of the digressive text is both wholly independent as it functions as a separate aside, and absolutely part of a whole, as it is a section in a larger work. The repetitions that take place between the digressions therefore never function as *simple* reiterations — each reuse presents the same material differently, and thus we have non-tautologous repetitions. The same content is never simply the same content: the different context, the different position, the different time all result in the same never being just or simply the same.

Beginnings and Endings

As a radically digressive text, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is beset not only with the difficulty of staying on a single path, but with the prior problem of beginning, of establishing a single, solid route. *At Swim-Two-Birds* thus begins without beginning: it opens with the impossibility of making any firm first step. As the narrator writes, 'One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and interrelated only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings' (p. 9). Thus the narrator presents three different openings, each describing one of the characters of his text(s) — the courtly devil Pooka MacPhellimey; John Furriskey, born through literary technique at the age of twenty-five; and Finn Mac Cool, the mythical hero of old Ireland. The first page of *At Swim-Two-Birds* hence contains four separate, related, and yet unrelated beginnings that move through differing narrative layers. The first stems from the narrator's autobiographical frame tale, while the subsequent three belong to the frame of the narrator's fiction. What the narrator lists as the first opening is already preceded by the narrator's autobiographical opening, and is therefore both the first opening and the second opening. The second (third) opening begins (through) a further frame tale, as John Furriskey is one of the characters of Trellis's book. The second/third opening therefore begins, in a sense, *without* having begun, as the frame tale of Trellis's text has not been introduced. It thus operates out of sync, out of time, beginning before the beginning of its sequence and out of its own narrative space. In an inversion of this fragment's non-beginning, the use of a familiar folkloric character — the Irish hero Fionn MacCumhaill — throws the third/fourth opening back to the mythological cycle of the Fianna, and thus it begins having begun *fadó, fadó* — a long, long time ago.[9]

The four beginnings do not begin in the same narrative space, but begin at different times and in different frame tales, that is, in different narrative realities. They present four different, independent openings that are nonetheless conjoined and contaminated. The narrator's openings are dependent on the frame tale, or narrative space, of the narrator having begun. They begin having thus already begun in the narrator. A stable, non-fragmented, non-digressive point of origin cannot, however, be located in the narrator's autobiographical frame tale, as it begins following the author's epigraph, a quotation from Euripides' *Heracles*: 'Εξίσταται γὰρ πάντ' ἀπ' ἀλλήλων δίχα' [For all things change, making way for each other]. Each beginning of *At Swim-Two-Birds* refers to another beginning, and all refer to change, to making way, to moving elsewhere, to digressing. Each beginning is preceded by another beginning, another text, another reference — back to Old Ireland, back to Ancient Greece — and so *At Swim-Two-Birds* is always a digression from a greater textual web. When Orlick commences he begins with '*Part One. Chapter One*' (p. 216), but never advances beyond this. Without proper commencements and conclusions the digressions themselves never progress, but present a series of interruptions and repetitions. Three times in *At Swim-Two-Birds* we are presented with synopses, 'being a summary of what went before, FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS' (p. 60). Each synopsis is concluded with three words — 'Now

read on' (p. 62) — which highlight that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in a text of radical digressivity, it is never a case of beginning but of *continuing*, of *reading on*.[10]

As Blanchot wrote, 'If the book could for a first time really begin, it would, for one last time, long since have ended'.[11] The fragmented digressivity of the beginnings of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is echoed in its endings. Three conclusions are given to the text — the antepenultimate conclusion which ends the narrator's autobiographical frame tale, and the penultimate conclusion which concludes the convoluted plot(s) of Trellis and Orlick. The ultimate conclusion, however, presents a digression, a fragment that is written in a wholly different style and which appears to be written neither by the narrator nor by any of the narrator's characters. Its style in fact bears a remarkable resemblance to passages in O'Brien's later work *The Third Policeman*. As an exploration of the (bi)cycles of hell as infinite repetition, *The Third Policeman* highlights the impossibility of both beginning and ending, and by ending with a prologue to an as yet unwritten text *At Swim-Two-Birds* thus ends without ending, digressing from any point of closure. By providing a form of critical commentary on Trellis's actions, the ultimate ending turns *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s radically digressive structure in on itself, *and* causes the text to operate as a preface for *The Third Policeman*.

Plot

A radical digressivity produces a form that is fragmentary or aphoristic, a series of units that operate both independently *and* as a greater unit. It is a form that produces an abundance of contradictions, paradoxes, repetitions, digressions, and interruptions, while at the same time problematizing oppositional or comparative statements. The fragmentary units of a radical digressivity are too isolated to be placed in direct relation; they function independently and therefore are not directly related to the content of the other units. In this they can be related to Derrida's work on the aphoristic unit, as he states that each aphorism 'must never refer to another. It is sufficient unto itself, a world or monad'.[12] In this sense the repetitive qualities of *At Swim-Two-Birds* are what can be called non-repetitive or non-tautologous repetitions; each digressive fragment stands in isolation. Hence the narrator's friend Brinsley is repeatedly introduced as if for the first time ('A friend of mine, Brinsley', p. 34), the narrator's uncle is described and redescribed, and his uncle repeatedly complains about the narrator's seemingly neglected study. As has been noted, for the narrator 'One book, one opening, was a principle with which I did not find it possible to concur' (p. 13). Each digressive unit is a new, independent beginning, presenting a sovereign — if already interrupted and digressive — fragment.

The isolation of the digressive units should not, however, be overemphasized. In the text on aphorisms cited above, Derrida also writes that 'there is always more than one aphorism': the aphorism is always in a series, always awaiting another fragment, always anticipating a new turn or path.[13] Each digressive unit calls to the other digressive units, and while the parts are both more and less than the whole, they are interrelated. Hence the digressive units are linked — the tales of Sweeney are reinscribed into Orlick's torture of Trellis, certain phrases used by the narrator's

friends make their way into Shanahan's, Lamont's, and Furriskey's exchanges — *but also* operate separately.

The relation of relation and non-relation between the units means that a radically digressive text acquires a certain plotlessness, as the narrative thread is incessantly interrupted by recurring deviations. There is no central thread from which to divert, no single, determinable outline from which to turn momentarily. There are just beginnings that are not a point of origin, and endings that do not conclude, units that are contingent and non-contingent. There is an arbitrariness to the units presented — the extracts that comprise *At Swim-Two-Birds* are often completely unrelated to any potentially unifying narrative. The existence of two basic, related plots can be argued — the narrator's academic year and the lives of Trellis's characters — but these plot(s) are undone by the sense that any random two points of opening and conclusion would have enabled the reader to assemble a plot-like structure. Brooks describes plots not just as outlines, skeletons that organize and support, but also as 'intentional structures, goal-orientated and forward moving'.[14] The extreme digressivity of *At Swim-Two-Birds* interrupts notions of goal, intentionality, and progressions to the point of becoming, if not plotless, then a radical restructuring of structuration.

The plot of the narrator's autobiographical reminiscences is deemed to be so simply because it has a *temporal* progression, that is, it mentions the months passing in linear order, and because the narrator passes his exams. In other words, a narrative structure is created retrospectively by the reader from a random series of events, by analeptically reading back from the last digressive unit, which outlines how the narrator's uncle presented him with a watch on achieving an honours degree. Before this fragment the narrator's studies were only mentioned by his uncle, and were rather incidental to anecdotes about drinking and writing.

While the plot line detailing Trellis and his characters has a greater sense of plot, that is, of a plan of action that progresses in a certain way, the traditional elements of a plot — exposition, conflict, climax, *dénouement* — are constantly interrupted, and presented in such isolated units that the narrative flow becomes wholly secondary to the individual fragments of the digressions. Parts are far greater than the whole, and the narrative that they create is a web of interconnecting yet independent parts rather than a stable totality. Indeed, the three synopses that are presented for new readers both summarize plot details and present new information, and narrative continuity or cohesion is reduced to a vague outline, wholly inferior to the units' digressive content. The authorial drive to impose a systematic structure on the fragmentary units of life is lamented by Finn, who describes himself as '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). If plot is 'the principle of interconnectedness and intention' that 'allows us to connect a whole',[15] then the interconnectedness of *At Swim-Two-Birds* connects *beyond* wholes and intentionality, creating a web of relations and digressions that allow for excess, that give space to meaning, to each God-big Finn.

The importance of the digressive units and their non-plot-related content is perhaps best demonstrated in exchanges between the Good Fairy and the Pooka.

In terms of plot the Good Fairy arrives at the Pooka's house to inform him that Orlick is soon to be born, and that they must be present to decide who gets his soul. This plot detail is, however, absolutely secondary to the dialogue between the Good Fairy and the Pooka, which is exemplary of communication whose dedication to painstakingly address each aspect of a question — to absolutely stay on the path and not digress — causes the path to be fragmented into minute corridors of investigation. Detail causes digression, and so a question on pockets leads to an association of pockets with humanity, which in turn leads to a comparison between the pockets and the kangaroo's pouch. An issue raised regarding 'angelic or spiritual carnality' (p. 106) results in a protracted discussion of the possibilities of a union between a human and an angel, which circles back to kangaroos and the possibility that the Pooka's wife is, in fact, a marsupial; this causes an extensive debate about tails — on animals and on shirts. A determination not to digress from a single detail results in a radical digressivity that fragments the very concept of a primary path. The narrative purpose of the debates is lost, digressed from, wholly interrupted by the web of interconnecting detail in which the drive *not to digress* results. Radical digressivity interrupts and disrupts plot, fragmenting it into independent and yet interlocking units.

Counterpoint

The antepenultimate and penultimate conclusions of *At Swim-Two-Birds* have disappointed a number of critics, as, on first reading, they appear to outline how the narrator, on achieving an honours degree and winning the approval of his uncle, no longer needs to pen tales of rebellion against authority figures, and so ends the characters' torture of Trellis. David Cohen, for example, writes that: '*At Swim-Two-Birds* [is] a novel about a man seduced by the power of authority, and, as such, a completely conventional novel. The three endings defy their labels and become the climax, denouement, and conclusion'.[16] The multiple beginnings and endings prescribed by the narrator are for Cohen, who quotes *At Swim-Two-Birds* against itself, 'a self-evident sham'.[17] But while the general contentment pervading the narrator's house following his examination success and his resultant positive '*Description of my uncle*: Simple, well-intentioned; pathetic in humility; responsible member of large commercial concern' (p. 215) appears to lead directly to Trellis's salvation and the narrator's embracing of his uncle's bourgeois values, the situation is far from unambiguous. The narrator's uncle presents him with a watch to mark the occasion of his graduation from student life, a gift that places the student within staid, responsible adult society. The watch signifies the closure of the fragments, and the movement of the student away from the flights of fancy that caused him to write such experimental work. Yet, while walking up the stairs to his room the narrator hears the bells of the Angelus ring out while the watch reads five fifty-four.[18] The two timepieces, the personal wristwatch and the bells of the greater community, still fail to ring in time. On the narrator's wrist the watch keeps a different time, operates in a different frame, and is always out of sync. While this points to the fact that the narrator will never be wholly in time with society, that he will always

function as a digression, a step away from the norm, it also indicates an important relation between a radical digressivity and a contrapuntal time. A radical digressivity fragments a linear temporality — there is no primary time frame which is circled by proleptic or analeptic steps, but a general fragmentation of 'real' and narrative time. The digressions, or fragments of narrative, are always slightly out of time, on the edge of a temporal exigency, specifically operating through *counterpoint*.

During the course of the Pooka and the Good Fairy's discussion(s), the 'contrapuntal character of Bach's work' (p. 110) is mentioned as a 'delight', with the Good Fairy adding that 'Counterpoint is an odd number' (p. 110), and therefore good and true. Counterpoint, which is the harmonious relation between two or more musical lines independent in sound and rhythm, exemplifies the relation between the radically digressive fragments of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Each section of the text is independent both of each other section and of the sections as a whole, while also related to each part and the greater unit. Each section stands alone and is interconnected. The bells and the watch are both undecidably in and out of harmony: they are out of time as they strike to a different time and rhythm, and in time through a syncopated or contrapuntal time. Counterpoint is thus always fragmented, always digressing from itself to re-transcribe itself as *counter-point*.

Derrida relates the aphorism — a fragment of a radical digressivity — to counterpoint through the counter-point of the French term *contretemps* (out of time). Each aphorism is an off-beat within the system, a digression away from every other aphorism. The serial logic of the fragment is such that each 'aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other — and in the other series'.[19] Each aphorism is always in *contretemps*, in countertime, in counterpoint, and a counter-point; it is the death knell and morning bell for every other aphorism. It is always slightly out of time, slightly out of step, presenting something other. Derrida analyses the stepping out of the aphorism through the *contretemps* of Romeo and Juliet, who both impossibly die before the other *and* survive the other.[20] The aphorism is an impossible synchronization, an 'exemplary anachrony, the essential impossibility of any absolute synchronization'.[21] In a state of radical digressivity where everything becomes a series of fragments or aphorisms, the timepieces are *out of time*, that is, beating (at) different times but also operating within the absence of a linear, progressive, systematic temporality. Hence the temporal disorder of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, hence the fact that 'the omission of several pages at this stage does not materially disturb the continuity of the story' (p. 145). Hence the fact that events from the trial of Trellis can occur pages (in the space of the text) and months (in narrative time) before the trial has been written. Each digression, each fragment beats its own time, and both in and out of time, counterpoint and counter-point.

Contaminated Categories

A radical digressivity does not operate at the level of a single, whole, determinable unit, but fragments the unit itself, showing that each digression is internally interrupted — each unit of digression also digresses from itself. This means that each digressive unit comprises a myriad of styles, giving no style primacy. The

digressive approach to stylistics in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be exemplified by the description of the songs sung as the Pooka, the Good Fairy, and their mixed group make their way to Orlick's birth. While the original passage is nearly a page long, ruthlessly pruned the characters sing

> *Home on the Range* and the pick of the old cowboy airs [...] the ageless minstrelsy of the native-land [...], they rendered old catches with full throats, and glees and round-songs and riddle-me-raddies, *Tipperary* and *Nellie Dean* and *The Shade of the Apple Tree*. They sang Cuban love songs and moonsweet madrigals and selections from the best and finest of the Italian operas, from the compositions of Puccini and Meyerbeer and [...]. They rendered two hundred and forty-two (242) songs by Schubert [...] and a long excerpt from a mass by Bach, as well as innumerable tuneful pleasantries from the able pens of no less than Mozart and Handel [...], they gave with thunderous spirit such pieces by Offenbach, Schumann [...]. They sang entire movements from cantatas and oratorios and other items of sacred music, *allegro ma no troppo*, *largo*, and *andante cantabile*. (p. 131)

The characters are unconstrained by their names and traditional literary associations and are able to move freely between styles and periods: Sweeney of the Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne* croons in Italian; the cowboys serenade in *Hochdeutsch*; the 'plain people' of Dublin sing in Spanish. As such they become floating signifiers, marks whose iterability allows them to reinscribe themselves infinitely. This disassociation from a prevailing style operates throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and thus we move from the alliteration and assonance of Middle Irish verse — 'The arms to him were like the necks of beasts, ball swollen with their bunched-up brawnstrings and blood-veins' (pp. 14–15) — to the formal 'my dim room rang with the iron of fine words and the names of great Russian masters were articulated with fastidious intonation' (p. 24). Clissman has noted the use of thirty-six different styles within the text, styles which not only digress from each other but interact and contaminate each other.[22] Thus when Orlick begins to write the torture of Trellis, the tale bears remarkable similarities to the curse of Sweeney. Inspired by both the nature imagery in Finn's prose and the sentiment and rhyme scheme of Jem Casey's working man's poetry, Shanahan writes the stanza: 'When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the colour of bran, when a badger bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN' (p. 80). Characters refuse to be restricted to a single quality, and digress from the type that they are supposed to represent: the Good Fairy is arrogant, hot-tempered, selfish, and cheats at cards, while the Pooka — a member of the devil class — is sophisticated, honourable, and courteous. Furriskey, conceived by Trellis as depraved, falls in love with the woman he is sent to rape, and vows to live a virtuous life.

Without using such terms as radical digressivity or fragmentation, Kim McCullen reads *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a text that presents Ireland within a digressive, fragmentary exigency, a culture without a stable core: 'O'Brien's text releases a collective and at times subversive interrogation of the discursive construction of Irish culture without invoking a "norm" or a "real", by initiating an interanimated dialogue among the various discourses vying for ascendancy'.[23] The lack of a normative identity exemplifies a state of radical digressivity, a step away from a stable core of values and characteristics, a digression from and transgression of notions of a single,

determinable history. This radical digressivity is demonstrated during a meeting the narrator's uncle holds to plan a *céilí*.[24] In a subversive parody of the preoccupations of the Gaelic League, there is some disagreement about the inclusion of the 'old-time waltz', as it is deemed to be insufficiently Irish: 'We have plenty of our dances without crossing the road to borrow what we can't wear. [...] Leave the waltz to the jazz-boys' (p. 133). The debate is centred on the notion of a purity of genre and identity, on the ability to have a primary, uncontaminated category of 'Irishness'. The uncle and his friends attempt to draw a clear line between normative Irish activities and those which are heterogeneous and to be excluded. A proper identity, a proper text, has a certain purity of genre, of style, of influence, of identity, which may be digressed from, but only in order to emphasize the centrality and primacy of, in this case, what is traditionally Irish. For O'Brien however, as well-versed in Middle Irish poetry and mythology as he was well-read in contemporary literature, identity is *a priori* contaminated and fragmented — always already in a state of radical digressivity. The concept of a pure Irish identity is a fiction, as demonstrated by the fact that the very committee obsessed with deciding whether the waltz is overly foreign, or a red carpet too embroiled with English royalty, are able to offer no more than 'A few words in Irish' (p. 135) before the real speeches — in English — get underway. Even the characters who are representative of an older, less anglicized Irish identity are interrupted, fragmented, digressed from in the anglicization of their names — hence Sweeny for Suibhne, Finn for Fionn. Ireland's relation to its past is constantly digressed from, always operating under a radical, fragmentary digressivity.

The contamination of genres that radical digressivity demonstrates is a performance of what Derrida has shown to be the mark's — and through that the genre's — *a priori* divided or fragmented structure. Like the traditional concept of digression, genres demand respect for norms and demarcations, and guard against 'impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity'.[25] Each mark that designates a particular genre or style is always already riven by the iterability of the mark, by its potential to designate something other. It is therefore never wholly present to itself, and is always in a state of digressivity. Furthermore, the mark as a title stands extant from that which it designates: the genre mark 'novel' is not itself a novel, and can be seen to lie outside its own corpus. Thus the mark, 'this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class. The re-mark of belonging does not belong' (p. 65). The mark of genre is an interruption, a movement away, a digression from what it, as a mark of category, has effectively allowed to be. The mark of genre 'declasses what it allows to be classed. It tolls the knell of genealogy or of genericity, which it however also brings forth to the light of day' (p. 65). This essential impossibility of the genre necessitates a mode of exposition that eradicates genericity by encompassing all genres; the agenre of the radically digressive fragment. The movement between the thirty-six modes of expression that takes place in *At Swim-Two-Birds* demonstrates the contamination and digressivity already at play within the genre, and within the mark as the basic unit of communication.

Contaminated Frames

The contamination of the digressive fragments of *At Swim-Two-Birds* operates not only stylistically or generically, but between the fictive spaces or planes of reality of the novel's frame tales. The primary example of the destabilization of boundaries between fictive spaces is found in the birth of Orlick, the son of the 'human' Trellis, and his fictional character, Sheila Lamont. Orlick was born in a process that produced 'a living mammal from an operation involving neither fertilization nor conception' (p. 40) and hence exists on two planes of reality, in two separate spaces. Yet other characters, created in more traditional ways, are equally able to move between spaces, as Trellis is described as forcing his characters to live with him. Shanahan, one of Trellis's characters, interrupts the writing of Trellis's torture by Trellis's own quasi-fictional son by 'insert[ing] a brown tobacco finger in the texture of the story and in this manner caus[ing] a lacuna in the palimpsest' (p. 185). The frames within frames within frames interrupt and digress from each other, infiltrating the space of the other. Each narrative frame does not surround the other but merges into the other, the frame part of what it contains and what contains it.

Characters move between the narrative space of different texts as if between different roles — Shanahan recounts a cattle-raid that occurred when he 'worked' as a cowboy for an author named Tracy. While he was speaking with Tracy a cattle rustler named Red Kiersay, employee of an author named Henderson, stole half his herd of cattle and all the maids. Following a dramatic chase and standoff, Shanahan calls in the help of the 'Red Indians up in the Phoenix Park' (p. 57) and other cowboys from another of Tracy's novels, and later the police — characters? real law enforcers? — join in the fray. Eventually, after a full, hard battle ('We broke every pane of glass in that tram, raked the roadway with a death-dealing rain of six-gun shrapnel', p. 58), Red Kiersay is defeated. Shanahan's account is then followed by a press report which recounts the incident as the riotous behaviour of 'a gang of corner-boys whose horse-play in the streets was the curse of the Ringsend district' (p. 59). These 'pests and public nuisances' (p. 59) broke two windows of a tram to a damage of two pounds and eleven shillings. To what level of reality does the press report refer? An incident in the reality space of the student who used the incident as material, or the press report from the space of reality of Trellis's characters, whose hyperbole is revealed? The divisions between fictive spaces and planes become troubled and indeterminate. Characters wander — digress — between narrative times and spaces, preventing any fictive reality from operating as primary. The categories of 'real' and 'fictive' no longer apply, as their boundaries have been transgressed — stepped over, stepped away from, digressed from.

The contamination of the ontological categories not only occurs within the narrator's various frame tales, but between Flann O'Brien and the text as a whole. Much work has been done noting both the mirroring of characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds* with friends of Flann O'Brien (Brinsley is Niall Sheridan, Kerrigan is Niall Montgomery) and the mimesis of the narrator's life within his novel(s):

> The characters in the narrator's novel begin to take on the characteristics of the narrator's associates, and it soon becomes obvious that the narrator is consciously transferring the events of his life, and presumably the fruits of his education, into his work of fiction.[26]

Many of the narrator's 'biographical reminiscences' have been noted to be actual events from O'Brien's time as a student.[27] *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a memoir which Friedrich Schlegel termed a 'System von Fragmenten' [system of fragments].[28] Flann O'Brien writes himself into his text, and the narrator writes himself into his characters, representing his conception of himself as the enlightened, sensitive, intellectual author in the character of Orlick. Each storyteller tells his or her own story in every work, narrating him or herself, and thus becoming both progenitor and progeny. As Finn declaims, 'I am my own father and my own son. I am every hero from the crack of time' (p. 19). The author becomes a point of radical digression, as he or she is written into the text, and becomes fragmented into author-self and text-self, creator and created. Trellis is a despotic author not simply because he demands that his characters follow his instructions and provides miserly wages and poor accommodation, but because he attempts to remain at a distance from his text. He insists on absolute control and authority, but gives nothing of himself. He creates from afar with dictatorial decree, but attempts to invest nothing of his own identity.

Enraged by the death of his mother, and guided in sophisticated evil by the Pooka, Orlick joins forces with Trellis's other characters, and *writes* the torture of Trellis. Trellis thus becomes a character within his own novel. In an emphatic digression from Trellis's intended plot his son and characters step away from the lives that he wished to give them, and live not only according to their own desires, but write Trellis into the narrative in order to bring him to trial. Torturing Trellis and writing about his torture become identical — writing is the production not of text but of manifest effects, and as such writing has clear physical, and ontological implications. During the (writing of the) torture of Trellis, Orlick leaves the room, and Shanahan, Lamont and Furriskey take up the thread, as they feel the delay will enable Trellis to recover: 'Gentlemen, said Shanahan, we're taking all the good out of it by giving him a rest, we're letting him get his wind. Now that's a mistake' (p. 181). While writing is taking place its effects are 'real', but once it ceases, 'real' time continues: for the time that Orlick is away Trellis is not frozen but is subject to the same passage of time. However, once writing resumes temporality bows down before authorial intentionality, and so, to prevent Orlick from discovering their interference, they write: 'the Pooka worked more magic till himself and Trellis found themselves again in the air in their own bodies, just as they had been a quarter of an hour before that, none the worse for their trying ordeals' (p. 183). Once the characters have been repositioned Orlick is unable to discern their prior actions and continues writing. Writing, within the fictive frame of the characters, does not create physical marks on a page, pages that can be turned back and re-read, but events that are without a medium that is visible externally or separately to the event itself. Once occurred, events cannot be re-read, as the marks that allow for such a re-reading have essentially expired in the process of creation. In a digression

from the 'normal' functioning of text, and narrative time, temporality in this frame operates in real time, or perhaps, filmic *reel* time.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds* textuality functions like a film reel. Characters are actors who adhere to the director's wishes when the film is rolling, but off-camera have the liberty to act as they wish. Hence the characters' complaints against Trellis — cows in the fields weren't milked, clothing was ill-suited to the climate, salaries were low: 'His reputed salary was 45s per week but no allowance was made for travelling and tramfares' (p. 202). Fiction and reality become contaminated, and the temporality of the different narrative spaces becomes hopelessly knotted. Fiction digresses into reality, and reality digresses into fiction, and all are interrupted and conjoined by a temporality that digresses repeatedly from itself.

The dissolution of the boundaries between reality and fiction has been criticized by some, who see it as producing no more than a lifeless structure of meaningless or directionless digressions. Robert Alter describes *At Swim-Two-Birds* as:

> a hodgepodge of fictions where nothing seems particularly credible and where everything finally becomes tedious through the sheer proliferation of directionless narrative invention. *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a celebration of fabulation in which novelistic self-consciousness has gone slack because fiction is everywhere and there is no longer any quixotic tension between what is fictional and what is real.[29]

The movement of radical digressivity through frame tales, or through reality and fiction, has, for Alter, digressed to the point of dissolving any narrative form. For him *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a failed novel, an abundance of plots and themes whose profusion of digressions makes it plotless and pointless; it is a novel without novelty, a work without worth. Yet while its excess may prove displeasing to a reader who seeks univocal, determinable meaning, the fragmented units of *At Swim-Two-Birds* are a masterful performance of the *a priori* radical digressivity of a textual structure. The absence of a tension between the real and the fictional points to the difficulty of retaining absolute distinctions between an absolute fact and an event that has been affected by its context, its place in space and time, and the language used in its expression.

Form

The fragment — the form of radical digressivity — was for the German Romantics an act of production that encompassed all genres. In comprising all genres the work becomes an act of *poiesis* to the extent that it would *be*, rather than represent; that it would, in the words of Blanchot,

> be everything, but without content or a content that is almost indifferent, and thus at the same time affirming the absolute and the fragmentary; affirming totality, but in a form that, being all forms — that is, at the limit, being none at all — does not realize the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it.[30]

A fragmentary text is an agenre and formless form, a production rather than a product, a repeated interruption and digression. As fragmentation, a radical

digressivity is a form of formlessness, a text that fails to begin and to end. As Simon Critchley writes, it is 'a genre that embodies failure within itself, whose completion is incompletion, whose structure is essentially ambiguous'.[31]

The problematics of the expression of form are performed in *At Swim-Two-Birds* through the character of the Good Fairy, who is without physical form — 'I am like a point in Euclid, explained the Good Fairy, position but no magnitude you know' (p. 146). Nonetheless, he — and despite a lack of form he is possessed of a gender — is referred to through the novel as sitting, pointing, holding cards, threatening to vomit — 'I felt him [the Good Fairy] nodding his head against my hip' (p. 124). Thus despite the formlessness of the Good Fairy, the grammatical and structural requirements of language, in this case English, demand a certain positioning, a certain identity. Within language a form (grammatical, structural, or otherwise) is imposed, and so, even in a form that pertains to the formless (the fragmentary, the radically digressive), the formless fails to be formless and digresses from its own desire to be without form.

Lamont, Furriskey, and Shanahan represent the antithesis of formlessness, and instead champion the manifest, the obvious, the traditional and the univocal. During Trellis's torture, Lamont, Shanahan and Furriskey — the 'Plain People of Ireland'[32] — are obsessed with the infliction of physical damage, with hurt that is directly visible. They insist on a direct correlation between signifier and signified, on uncontaminated genres and forms, and single, determinable meaning. For them life and texts proceed in a straightforward, linear fashion, and any digression makes the main road all the straighter. As Lamont says, 'I like to know where I am, do you know. Everything has a beginning and an end' (p. 63). When Orlick writes the torture of Trellis, these characters insist on physical torture, on a punishment that can be clearly observed. While Orlick wishes to impose a subtle, psychological torment — 'I will pierce him with a pluperfect' (p. 168) — Lamont, Furriskey, and Shanahan desire 'A nice simple story with plenty of the razor' (p. 169). As Derrida writes, '*Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself'.[33] Unable to understand the force of the unseen, the force of the formless, Lamont, Furriskey, and Shanahan insist on form, on the manifest. In conversation they appreciate the determinable, the factual, and yet the facts they present are wholly inaccurate — they describe Homer's death from hemlock, deem Pegasus to be a fiddle player, and misquote 'Onward Christian Soldiers' (pp. 153–56). When Orlick writes them into his story he bestows them with what they perceive to be wisdom — facts in isolation that are recited without commentary or critical engagement. As Shanahan remarks, 'true knowledge is unpractised or abstract usefulness' (p. 189).

Despite their insistence on the transparency of the sign, Brinsley complains to the narrator that Lamont, Furriskey, and Shanahan are no more than three proper names signifying the same composite identity. They themselves are empty signifiers, three different names that represent no more than the traditional modes of engagement with texts. In an attempt to present the characters as independent and separate entities the narrator writes a '*Memorandum of the respective diacritical traits or qualities of Messers Furriskey, Lamont and Shanahan*' (p. 161). The differential

qualities that the narrator bestows upon them are of a wholly superficial quality, being distinctions between the shapes of their heads, configuration of their noses, pedal and volar traits, 'unimportant physical afflictions' (p. 161), and so on and so forth. As noted by the narrator, these differences are diacritical: they are purely a difference of the physical (the sign), while essentially, beyond the differences of the signifier, the signified is unchanged. To satisfy certain literary conventions the narrator endows them with different forms, but beyond a stylistic difference in their representation they remain no more than a device.

To step then towards a conclusion, as impossible as it is, a text of radical digressivity can be seen to be a text of independent yet interconnected fragments, a text whose interruptions, deviations, and diversions step away from any primary plot, identity, theme, temporality, subject, style, or form. A text of radical digressivity is a text of ruptures and false starts, a text stepping in and out of time. It is a text that having failed definitively to begin can never conclusively end, and so, not with a bang but a whimper, not with a cry but an endless murmur, *At Swim-Two-Birds* takes leave three times and concludes without concluding: 'good-bye, good-bye, good-bye' (p. 218).

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 223.
2. Kim McMullen, 'Culture as Colloquy: Flann O'Brien's Postmodern Dialogue with Irish Tradition', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 27.1 (1993), 62–84, p. 63.
3. David Cohen, 'An Atomy of the Novel: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 39.2 (1993), 208–29, p. 208.
4. Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 35. All subsequent references to *At Swim-Two-Birds* refer to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.
5. While the term 'forces himself' may seem overly euphemistic, given that the event in question happens between an author and a fictional character, and that the narrator is rather vague as to its technicalities, a periphrastic phrase seemed necessary.
6. See also Samuel Frederick, 'Re-reading Digression: Towards a Theory of Plotless Narrativity', in this volume.
7. Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', trans. by James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom and others, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 62–142 (p. 69).
8. Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia?', trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 221–37 (p. 225).
9. The word *fadó* is the Irish for a 'long time ago', and 'Fadó, fadó' was the phrase with which the famous Irish *seanachaí* (storyteller) Peig Sayers began her stories.
10. See also Jena Habegger-Conti, '"On with the Story!" John Barth's Theory of Narrative Digression', in this volume.
11. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 36.
12. Jacques Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword', trans. by Andrew Benjamin, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 2 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), II, 117–26, p. 121.
13. Ibid., p. 125.
14. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 12.
15. Ibid., p. 5.
16. Cohen, p. 223.
17. Cohen, p. 224.

18. The Angelus is traditionally rung at 6.00, 12.00, and 18.00.
19. Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', trans. by Nicholas Royle, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 2 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), II, 127–42, p. 128.
20. Juliet 'dies' before Romeo, who sees what he takes to be her dead body. He stabs himself, and dies as she awakes. She, having died before him, sees his dead body, and kills herself. Thus both Romeo and Juliet outlive each other, while both die before the other.
21. Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', p. 129.
22. Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1975), p. 86.
23. McMullen, p. 71.
24. The *céilí* is an Irish celebration involving traditional Irish dances.
25. Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), 55–81, p. 57.
26. Cohen, p. 212.
27. Clissman, pp. 104–05.
28. Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäum Fragment 77', in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe II*, ed. by Hans Eichner (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), p. 176; Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum Fragments', in *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 161–270 (p. 170).
29. Alter, p. 224.
30. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 353.
31. Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 106.
32. Myles na Gopaleen, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. by Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), p. 79.
33. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. and ed. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 3.