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“A huddle between the earth and heaven”: Language and Displacement in the Work of Flann O’Brien and John Banville

By BRENDAN MCNAMEE

In the course of his initial conversation with the Pooka in At Swim-Two-Birds (AS2B), the Good Fairy articulates the predicament of humanity as seen by Flann O’Brien. Speaking of “angelic or spiritual carnality,” he declares that “the offspring would be severely handicapped by being half flesh and half spirit, a very baffling and neutralizing assortment of fractions since the two elements are forever at variance” (AS2B 106). Freddie Montgomery, recounting (inventing?) his history, says, “I have always felt—what is the word—bifurcate, that’s it” (Book of Evidence [BE], 95). This bifurcation, the various ways in which “the two elements are forever at variance” in some works of Flann O’Brien and John Banville, will be the subject of this essay. It will argue that both writers view humanity as being permanently displaced between imagination and the material world, and that both, despite widely disparate styles, express views concerning the nature of objective reality, and the role of language in attempts to apprehend it, which are in the nature of what the Good Fairy might call a very good question: “A good question is hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question” (AS2B 201).

Displacement, in a number of different senses of the word, is a central feature of O’Brien’s first two novels, At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman (TP). In the latter, the dislocation is mainly moral in that it concerns a character who is in hell without knowing it. At Swim, too, has its moral element, as we shall see, but the primary disjunctions here are thematic and stylistic. Of the welter of stories that butt against and merge into one another in At Swim, two in particular stand out: the “realistic” story of the narrator, and the mythological story of Sweeny. Displacement is a central feature of both tales, and language becomes the means whereby both the narrator and Sweeny find solace for their pains. The narrator is emotionally estranged from his uncle, largely by dint of his own intellectual arrogance, and he takes refuge by “retir[ing] into the kingdom of [his] mind” (AS2B 13) and writing a novel. Sweeny, an arrogant king, is estranged from the world by dint of his violence.
and treachery and is condemned to flit from tree to tree as a bird-man. He consoles himself by praising the beauties of the natural world and lamenting in song that the good things in life are no longer his. Both characters are finally reconciled, the narrator by a sudden realization (which he finds “extremely difficult of literary rendition or description” (AS2B 215)) that he has misjudged his uncle, Sweeny, through the agency of the saint, Moling. Significantly, however, the final images of both characters are images of displacement: the narrator looks at his new watch and sees that the time is five fifty-four, and at the same time he hears the Angelus bells, which are rung on the dot of six—time and eternity forever out of sync; and Sweeny is last seen crouching in the trees, “a huddle between the earth and heaven” (AS2B 216).

But to extract two threads in this fashion from such a complex tapestry of interwoven styles and stories is possibly more misleading than helpful in that it makes the book sound like a simple moral tale, which it certainly is not. The idea of displacement is built into the various strands of the tale in such a way that the reader is never allowed to settle comfortably, can never be sure as to the precise nature of what he/she is reading, or what precisely his/her response should be. The reader, in effect, is kept permanently dislocated in the manner of Sweeny himself, huddling in his tree. This can be seen, for instance, in the language of the narrator in the novel’s main framework, the Biographical Reminiscences, in the commingling of myth and sordid reality that features strongly throughout, in the duo of the Pooka and the Good Fairy, in the reprising of the Sweeny story as told by Orlick Trellis, and overall, in the way in which the parodying of the concept of character creation “raises the question of the kinds of difference between ‘real’ life and ‘fictional’ life” (Clissmann 92).

The book’s opening sentence provides an example of the first of these, the narrator’s use of language in his Biographical Reminiscences. “Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes’ chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression” (AS2B 9). The narrator retires into a world of imagination but describes the action in flat, pedantic language more suited to a policeman’s report. It gives the impression, as Anthony Cronin has noted, “that English was being written as if it were a dead language” (106), and that “some sort of exercise in de-personalization is taking place” (107). A dead language used to describe living, supposedly “real” circumstances; an exercise in de-personalization that traces the thoughts and actions of “real” people. One effect of this disparity, apart from being hugely comic, is to keep the reader forever off-balance and aware that these are fictional situations and fictional characters. The illusion of reality is disturbed (but, importantly, not destroyed), and thus there is a blurring of the lines between “reality” (the Biographical Reminiscences) and untrammelled imagination (the narrator’s novel). In these “biographical” passages, O’Brien never steps beyond the logically possible, as he is free to do in the narrator’s novel where, it being a declared fiction-within-a-fiction, anything can happen.
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without disrupting the overall framework of realism. As Orlick puts it, describing his plans for Dermot Trellis to Furriskey and his friends, “Reason will not permit of the apprehension of sensations of reckless or prodigal intensity. [...] Go beyond the agreed statutory limits, says Reason, and [...] I will close the shop” (AS2B 168). Thus does O’Brien, in these “biographical” passages, marry the form and content of the novel as a whole by, paradoxically, creating a disjunction between the form and content here. Displacement is written into the language itself and projected onto the reader.

There are other ways in which the “realistic” passages (including some of the factual insertions, such as letters from racing tipsters and the Conspectus) interact with the more “imaginative” sections. The connection between the story of Sweeny and that of the narrator has already been mentioned. The circumstances in which Sweeny’s story itself is related reveal a dazzling juxtaposition of the mythological, the satirical, and the mundane. The story, an example of early medieval romance, is told by Finn MacCool, a character from Gaelic legend who finds himself trapped in a modern hotel called the Red Swan in the company of three latter-day Dublin characters who have scant appreciation of his story-telling skills. The situation is a good example of what Finn earlier called being “twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller’s bookweb” (AS2B 19). Woven into Finn’s tale are the interruptions of these three, with their stories of Jem Casey and Sergeant Craddock. Casey’s “pome” both contrasts sharply with the Sweeny myth (it is thoroughly down-to-earth and realistic) and contains similarities (both Sweeny and Casey find solace from their trials in the writing of poetry). There is a link with the narrator, too, in that alcohol, the pint of plain, plays a fairly significant part in his life, much in the manner of Casey’s poem. Then there is the element of satire. Satire has no meaning unless it is aimed at some aspect of the real, recognizable world, and Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan, fictional characters at two removes though they are, and bizarre and unrealistic as are their various situations and adventures, are nevertheless recognizable types of the real world with which Flann O’Brien was clearly familiar. Thus do mythology, realism, satire, and the creations of a fictional poet within a story within a story, become dizzyingly jumbled. It is a brilliant example of O’Brien’s “enquiry into the nature of fictional reality—on a mythic and realistic level [and of] his attack on the idea that any one literary form can be said to portray reality” (Clissmann 95).

This fantastic scene full of songs and poetry immediately bleeds into the next, realistic scene, wherein the narrator’s uncle and Mr. Corcoran bring home a gramophone and enthuse over an opera, a scene which is brought abruptly to a close by the narrator’s disgust when Mr. Corcoran sneezes, “spattering his clothing with a mucous discharge from his nostrils” (AS2B 95). The contrast between the “two elements,” spirit and matter, here expressed through music and snot, reappears as the main theme of the next main section of the narrator’s novel with the introduction of the Pooka and the Good Fairy. At this point, the dislocations take on a distinctly moral, almost theological
tone and, as elsewhere, O’Brien ensures that the reader can never relax into easy identifications. On the face of it, the Pooka and the Good Fairy represent respectively the powers of evil and the powers of good, the grossly material and the spiritual. But the Pooka comes across as the soul of courtesy, is highly intellectual, and shows considerable compassion and tolerance during their ensuing meetings with Slug, Shorty, Casey, and Sweeny. The Good Fairy, despite being bodiless, talks as if he had a body (“It would be the price of you if I got sick here in your pocket” (AS2B 129)), is short-tempered, intolerant of failings (“I don’t believe in wasting my time on sots, do you?” (AS2B 127)), and cheats at cards. More interesting, and most ambiguous of all, however, are the Pooka’s thoughts on the nature of good and evil:

Are you aware of this, that your own existence was provoked by the vitality of my own evil, just as my own being is a reaction to the rampant goodness of Number One, that is, the Prime Truth, and that another Pooka whose number will be Four must inevitably appear as soon as your own benevolent activities are felt to require a corrective? (AS2B 109)

This calls to mind William Blake’s theories of eternal conflict being the condition of all life, and Blake is brought even more forcibly to mind in the Pooka’s earlier question to the Good Fairy concerning the nature of the last number: “I mean, will it be an odd one and victory for you and your people, or an even one and the resolution of heaven and hell and the world in my favour?” (AS2B 109). The Pooka here seems closer to Blake’s devils in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell than to the traditional symbol of evil presented by orthodox theology.

But he takes on an entirely more disconcerting aspect when he reappears later as Orlick’s fictional agent for the torturing of Dermot Trellis. In one of the book’s most unsettling and, from the point of view of O’Brien’s playing with ideas of language, perception, and reality, most complex scenes, the Pooka now appears as thoroughly malevolent. The humor and absurdity of the situation—a fictional author being tortured by his even more fictional characters in a wholly unrealistic fashion—clash with an underlying unease at the brutality of the treatment. The Pooka’s courteous manner now has more than a hint of Orwell’s Big Brother about it, and the reader is made uneasily aware that it is only forms of words, and habits of reading, that condition our responses to fiction, and perhaps, by extension, our responses to reality as well.

This moral note becomes stronger in The Third Policeman, though the book derives much of its power (and its humor) from the sense of dislocation conveyed mainly through the language of the policemen, with their interminable “pancakes” of conundrums. Through a morbid fascination with the works of a mad scientist called deSelby (whose chief failing is an inability to separate logic from perceived reality), the narrator commits murder and finds himself (though unaware that this is his punishment) in a mad deSelbyian world where logic projects into reality with the greatest of ease—and the most illogical, fantastic results.
The works of O’Brien and Banville have a number of parallels and two of the most interesting are displayed in The Third Policeman. These are their attitudes to nature (which will be dealt with later), and the difference between meaning and significance, a question that carries a particularly strong resonance in the field of art. Some novels (At Swim-Two-Birds, for instance, as Hugh Kenner has pointed out [71]) invite exegesis. They require an interpretive framework of some kind if they are to be anything more than a chaotic jumble of disconnected episodes. In other words, some kind of meaning is required as a prelude to perceiving the work’s significance. Other books, and The Third Policeman seems to be one such, defy interpretation (Beckett is probably the best example of this kind). They can be interpreted, certainly, and have been, but even when the interpretations are convincing, they somehow fail to bring us any closer to the book’s significance. Kenner himself offers one tentative interpretation of The Third Policeman—the three policemen as a parody of the Holy Trinity—only to dismiss it: “I trust I have done a service if by sketching an interpretation I have displayed the absurdity of any attempt to interpret” (69). Roy L. Hunt, who offers a fuller, and quite compelling interpretation of his own, catches the shortcomings of the search for meaning:

“Without a language reality has no meaning.” True, but it can have significance and attempting to capture something of this significance through language is the paradoxical impulse that compels writers to engage in constructing elaborate, obscure fictions that seem determined to evade meaning at all costs. So what we find when we interpret works like The Third Policeman is that we have simply replaced one set of linguistic concepts for another more familiar set, whose very familiarity has robbed them of whatever significance they once had. This is one reason for Banville’s focus on paintings throughout the “Freddie” trilogy. Painting offers a perfect emblem for that “thing itself” (Ghosts [G] 85) which lies beyond language, beyond meaning. Puzzling over the painting that obsesses him in Ghosts, Freddie decides that “there is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance” (G 95). And of The Third Policeman, Kenner writes: “Long after we have forgotten the plot’s intricacies, a dark weight and sense stays lodged in memory” (70).

The Manichaeanism that Anthony Cronin tentatively ascribes to O’Brien’s vision in The Third Policeman (Cronin 104-06) seems also to be a strong feature of Banville’s world. Freddie Montgomery, relating a particularly gruesome dream, says, “Some nameless authority was making me do this terrible thing, was standing over me implacably with folded arms as I sucked and
slobbered, yet despite this—or perhaps, even, because of it—despite the horror, too, and the nausea—deep inside me something exulted” (BE 54). On the murder itself, he admits that were time to be put back he would do it all again, “not because I would want to, but because I would have no choice” (BE 150). It is as if there is some elemental force in Freddie which, having been denied expression for so long through his long-standing disconnection from the natural world around him, finally bursts out. It may not be intrinsically evil, insofar as evil is understood to be a conscious intention, something distinct from frustrated energy. O'Brien's murderer acts from conscious intention and suffers no remorse (the distinction is perhaps dubious since the result is the same). Frustrated energy would seem to be the chief cause of Freddie’s action, and underlying this, a lifelong sense of dis-ease, of feeling “bifurcate,” cut off from real life. The Pooka’s theory of opposites provoking each other into existence comes to mind. Simple instances of reality seem alternately to terrify and mystify Freddie. Viewing his mother’s ponies, he puts his hand on a horse’s flank to push it away and is “startled by the solidity, the actuality of the animal, the coarse dry coat, the dense unyielding flesh beneath, the blood warmth. Shocked, I took my hand away quickly and stepped back” (BE 46).

A wordless gesture of affection between Joanne and his mother causes him to wonder if “people of our kind” have not “missed out on something, I mean something in general, a universal principle, which is so simple, so obvious, that no-one has ever thought to tell us about it? (BE 49).”

This displacement seems to stem from (or at least to have been severely aggravated by) an incident in his childhood. Walking through the woods one day, he comes within a whisker of being killed by a falling branch. “I might have been no more than a flaw in the air. Ground, branch, wind, sky, world, all these were the precise and necessary co-ordinates of the event. Only I was misplaced, only I had no part to play” (BE 187).

There are two important ironies embedded in Freddie’s imbuing this incident with such significance. It is precisely because he initially feels such an intense sense of significance, of purpose in life (he once saw himself as a “masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice [ ... ] which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free” [BE 16]), that the sudden realization of the fragility of it all at the hands of indifferent nature is so shocking to him. Thereafter, the sense of significance and purpose becomes an absence but an absence of the kind John Montague speaks of in the lines, “There is an absence, real as presence” (181). Freddie, in effect, goes into a permanent sulk against the universe for not matching up to his inner visions. And therein lies the second irony. The episode of the branch is instrumental in forming Freddie’s conviction that life is pure chance, and he lives accordingly. A life of random wandering, chance encounters, aimless drift, that is in fact governed by this iron conviction that there is no purpose. In its paradoxical way, it is as driven and purposeful a life as the most carefully charted career.
But it is unnaturally one-sided, and thwarted nature takes her revenge. Reflecting the Pooka’s theory of good and evil provoking each other into existence, Freddie’s refusal to take real life seriously, and to insist on filtering it all through his hyperactive imagination, provokes a response from reality. It begins with Aguirre. Freddie thinks he has “stumbled into a supporting feature,” but finds, with “horrified amazement” that “this was the real world, the world of fear and pain and retribution” (BE 21-22). From this point on, his actions have all the sense of inevitability of tragedy, despite his insistence that it is still “all just drift” (BE 95). “Every tiniest action I ever took was a grain of sand in the flow of things tapering towards that moment when I let go of myself, when with a great Tarraa! I flung open the door of the cage and let the beast come bounding out” (G 195).

Thereafter begins the slow process of his redemption. Or does it? It is at this point that Banville’s interests in questions of reality and imagination and their interplay begin to resemble O’Brien’s. Many postmodernist writers—Barth, Calvino, Fowles—have no hesitation in stepping right into their fictions and taking a good look around, usually in order to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. Banville and O’Brien have their narrators do the job for them, thus adding a subtle twist to the question. Freddie, for instance, frequently hints that he is inventing freely, both in The Book of Evidence and Ghosts, causing the reader to ask (since Freddie is himself a fictional character), in what sense does this matter? What it points to, finally, is the fact that the blurring agent is language itself, and not just factual/novelistic uses of it. On the question of Freddie’s remorse, given his propensity to fictionalize, we can never be sure how much of what he says is true, but we would be equally in the dark if Freddie was a real person, presenting his case to a real jury, who had only his words to go on to make their judgment on him. The facts are not in dispute, and Freddie makes no attempt to sugarcoat his action. Quite the reverse. “She wasn’t dead, you know, when I left her [ ... ] I wasn’t man enough to finish her off” (BE 218). All a jury would have to go on, as all the reader has to go on, would be the words themselves. And what makes the words true? That Freddie really believes them? This might be a valid question in a work of realism but Banville’s stylistic sleight-of-hand has blocked that avenue. All we are left with finally are the words on the page. What is their relation to truth? We can never know for sure. We can certainly never say for sure. Roy Hunt’s earlier quoted sentence is apposite here: “Once reality is mediated through language, reality is forever displaced.” Truth, if it exists at all, would seem to inhabit a place beyond both imagination and the material world, a place that can perhaps only be approached via a mingling of both. “It is not the dead that interest me now, no matter how piteously they may howl in the chambers of the night. Who, then? The living? No, no, something in between; some third thing” (G 29).

It is the quest for this third thing that preoccupies Freddie in Ghosts, and it is also what grounds his story in a tangible moral space. Despite the ambiguities spoken of above, one great quality of Banville’s fiction is that it does not
allow the reader to wallow undisturbed in a sea of linguistic relativism. There is nothing relative or ambiguous about the guilt that Freddie suffers throughout the trilogy (to be strictly accurate, perhaps we should say there is nothing relative or ambiguous about the guilt that is expressed on the page). He is, Joseph McMinn suggests, "condemned [...] like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, to relive and retell his ghostly tale" (129). His punishment, as spoken of in this passage when he describes his first sight of the fateful painting, sounds an eerie echo of the experience of O’Brien’s murderer: "I turned then, and saw myself turning as I turned, as I seem to myself to be turning still, as I sometimes imagine I shall be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her" (BE 78). What gives the “Freddie” trilogy its moral weight is the way in which Freddie’s fascination for “the thing itself, the pure, unmediated essence in which, he thinks, he will at last find himself and his true home” (G 85), is inseparable from his crime. He steals the painting because he thinks he has found in it this philosopher’s stone; he kills Josie Bell because, he says, for him she lacked reality. And immediately, the positions are reversed. The painting turns to “Ashes. Daubs. Mere paint on a piece of rag” (G 85), while Josie Bell lodges in his soul with all the force of a revelation. But a revelation of what? Perhaps the greatest mystery of Freddie’s crime is that, despite his claim that he killed her because she wasn’t real for him, just moments prior to the first blow she does in fact attain for him the kind of reality that he thinks he has found in the painting. This is hinted at as he relates the murder in The Book of Evidence and made explicit as he recalls it in Ghosts:

“He recalls with fascination and a kind of swooning wonderment the moments before he struck the first blow, when he looked into his victim’s eyes and knew that he had never known another creature—not mother, wife, child, not anyone—so intimately, so invasively, to such indecent depths, as he did just then this woman whom he was about to bludgeon to death. [...] How, with such knowledge, could he have gone ahead and killed?” (G 86)

Bunter did it, of course. There is always that excuse. But Freddie does not let himself off so lightly. He knows that Bunter is himself, always there, a dark twin dogging his every step, and he knows, too, that it is because of Bunter, because of the bifurcate nature of the self, that there will never, despite all his yearnings, be true redemption. Ghosts ends on a note of chilling finality: “No: no riddance” (245). No answers, either.

From the point of view of the eternal displacement of humanity between imagination and the self grounded in the material world, one of the most interesting features of Freddie’s tale is that by exploring such metaphysical questions through the mind of a murderer with an intense interest in these very issues, Banville grounds the metaphysics in felt life and demonstrates that, ultimately, imagination and morality are inseparable, and that both are intrinsic, perhaps even anterior, to the self. O’Brien makes a similar point in The Third Policeman. Like Freddie, his narrator kills because he has cut himself adrift from the world and chosen to live wholly, and dangerously, in his mind. This is a place where language has come adrift from perceived reality,
a place where “if you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist” (TP 54). As regards the limitations of language, both writers occupy a site where postmodernists and mystics almost meet, a divide which is bridged by the following two quotes, the first from a religiously minded critic, James Wood, the second from that arch postmodernist, Jorge Luis Borges: “Truth can be looked for, but cannot be looked at [ ... ] and art is the greatest way of giving form to this contradiction” (Wood 105); “Literature can be defined by the sense of the imminence of a revelation which does not in fact occur” (Borges quoted in Mitchelmore 1).

That it is the world itself, nature, which provides consciousness with its deepest awareness of this revelation, this elusive state where the questions are not so much answered as dissolved, is yet another connecting link between Banville and O’Brien. It is most explicit in Banville, where Freddie is frequently astonished by the sheer beauty of the material world and the wonder of a consciousness capable of beholding it. These are rare interludes in Freddie’s life when his sense of bifurcation disappears and there is no longer the sense of a different self “living marvellously, elsewhere” (BE 144). They are moments of sublime, wordless knowledge, when the absolute elsewhere is revealed as being absolutely here, now, and their absence from his life in general is the hidden, informing element of his entire story. In At Swim, it is most evident in the story of Sweeney. Nature, and the singing of its praises in poetry, provides the tormented king with his strongest sense of reality and his greatest consolation. There is also the sense of the world being alive and capable of suffering. When Sweeney falls from the tree there is “the rending scream of a shattered stirk” (AS2B 126), and Jem Casey emerging from a thicket causes “sharp agonies of fractured branches, the pitiless flogging against each other of green life-laden leaves, the thrashing and the scourging of a clump in torment” (AS2B 118). As the narrator of The Third Policeman awaits hanging, he finds solace in imagining himself blending into the world: “I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river [ ... ] Or perhaps a smaller thing like movement in the grass [ ... ] some hidden creature going about its business” (TP 137-38). Freddie, too, has moments like this: “I thought sometimes [ ... ] that I might simply drift away and become a part of all that out there, drift and dissolve, be a shimmer of light slowly fading into nothing” (G 38). A strong ecological streak, verging on pantheism, runs through the work of both these writers.

There is an image in the concluding section of At Swim-Two-Birds which movingly encapsulates the theme that this essay has concerned itself with: the inability of language to capture reality and the consequent displacement of a humanity reliant on language, caught in “a huddle between the earth and heaven” (AS2B 216). Sweeny sits in the trees listening to the barking of dogs which “punctuate and give majesty to the serial enigma of the dark, laying it more evenly and heavily upon the fabric of the mind” (AS2B 216). This recalls Beckett and his declared artistic credo of wanting to “leave a stain on the silence.” Words, finally, are all we have with which to try to encompass
“the serial enigma of the dark.” At their best they can “punctuate and give majesty to” this dark, but they can never finally dispel it. The human condition has often been described as one of sin; the original sin of theology, Yeats’s “crime of birth and death” (Yeats 285), the “sin” of Schopenhauer and Beckett, the aggravated versions here portrayed in these novels (in the original Greek, the word means “to miss the mark”). If language, being bifurcate by nature (always a subject and an object), is a reflection of this condition, and if the condition itself gives rise naturally to shame, then perhaps the true relationship of language to truth is caught in Freddie’s answer to Haslet’s question as to how much of his story is really true: “True, Inspector? All of it. None of it. Only the shame” (BE 221).

Works Cited


