
Intertextual Re-creation in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*

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Abstract: As the title of the book indicates, Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*, published in 2001, refers back to Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). Through the use of such a parodic title, O'Neill places himself within a postmodern literary tradition, involving the influence of famous Irish parodists such as O'Brien or Joyce, who overshadow his novel. This title alludes to a famous text, gives it a new meaning, a new story and re-locates it in a different context, namely a gay universe which calls to mind another famous literary predecessor, Oscar Wilde, a writer also referred to repeatedly, whether explicitly or implicitly, throughout the novel. This paper focuses on the intertextual articulations of the novel in connection with the theories advanced by Neil Corcoran, Augustine Martin and Harold Bloom, whose essays take a real interest in the literary phenomenon of intertextuality.

Key-words: influence, tradition, intertextuality, Irishness, writer, postmodernism.

In 2001, Jamie O'Neill, a young Irish writer, published a novel entitled *At Swim, Two Boys*. Set in Dublin and its near surroundings, the plot follows the years 1915 and 1916, the time of Ireland's uprising against British rule. It tells about the love between two boys, Jim, a naive scholar and the younger son of a shopkeeper, Mr Mack, and Doyler, the rough son of Mr Mack's old army pal. Out at the Forty Foot, the great rock where gentlemen bathe, the two boys meet every day. There they agree that Doyler will teach Jim to swim, and in a year's time, at Easter 1916, they will jump from the Forty Foot and swim from the bay to the distant Muglins rock so as to claim that island for their country, and for themselves. The title of the book parodically refers to *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), the famous novel by Flann O'Brien. This title highlights the gap between the text it refers to and the one it announces, thereby establishing a connection between the two. By choosing *At Swim, Two Boys* as the title of his novel, O'Neill anchors himself in O'Brien's filiation, as is confirmed

by a text strewn with literary allusions and references. Through the use of such a parodic title, O'Neill places himself in an age-old literary tradition, in the lineage of famous Irish parodists such as O'Brien himself or Joyce, who overshadow his novel. The title rests both on resemblance with and distortion of O'Brien's text, since 'birds', the last word of O'Brien's title, is changed here into 'boys', two words that nevertheless echo each other given that they share the same number of syllables and the first and last letters. This intertextual title mentions a famous text, gives it a new meaning, a new story and re-locates it in a different context, namely a gay universe which calls to mind another famous literary predecessor, Oscar Wilde, who is also referred to repeatedly throughout the novel. Besides, O'Neill's literary interest in the past, and in Easter 1916 particularly, so characteristic of Irish writers, obviously recalls Yeats's famous nationalist poem, among other texts. I propose to focus here on the intertextual articulations of *At Swim, Two Boys*. As Julia Kristeva put it in the late 1960s, a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations (1969:37). Intertextuality denotes

the transposition, the transformation, the absorption of another text. This absorption takes on multiple forms since it ranges from the precise quotation or the ordinary reference to the allusion, with parodic purposes or not. These intertextual ramifications can be picked up all along the novel and will be studied in connection with the theories advanced by Neil Corcoran, Augustine Martin and Harold Bloom, whose essays display a real interest in the literary phenomenon of intertextuality. The study of intertextuality in O'Neill's novel is interesting because it lays emphasis on the simultaneous presence of different voices. Indeed, the narrative combines the low voices of fictive ordinary citizens, with their malapropisms, their mistakes and their Irish brogue, and the firm voices of some famous Irish writers who preceded O'Neill. These dialogic structures in the novel are in opposition to the authoritative monologic discourse which is at work in the narrative of a linear, continuous conception of history and confirms Bakhtin's theory according to which the novel is the ideal framework for dialogism to flourish. Intertextuality indeed highlights the plurivocality of the novel.

Ineluctable intertexts

A writer is first a reader and is necessarily affected by his readings which leave traces on his works. He may or may not be aware of this legacy. Umberto Eco, for example, as he puts it in *On Literature* (2004:161), realized that Borges had exerted an influence on him only once some readers and critics proved that there were indeed elements which were proper to Borges's fiction in *The Name of the Rose* (1983). Eco claims he had never realized how great this power was until he had evidence of it. This influence, perceptible through identical structures, motifs or styles, implies a filial relationship in literary creation. Nowadays this notion of influence seems to be too restrictive to deal with transtextual connections and this is why the more comprehensive notion of intertextuality is often preferred. Intertextuality is an inevitable phenomenon insofar as any given text derives from other texts. As a result, there is an intense degree of cross-fertilization in any literature. Most of the time, individual writers deliberately refer to the work of others, pay tribute to famous predecessors and willingly borrow references from them. Concerning Irish fiction, two great precursors

have an immense effect on the styles, stances and preoccupations of those who have succeeded them: Yeats and Joyce. Neil Corcoran's essay, significantly entitled *After Yeats and Joyce* (1997), is dedicated to this phenomenon:

This literature is 'after Yeats and Joyce', in the aesthetic or intertextual sense: it is, that is to say, a literature always to some degree shadowed by the achievements of these unignorable turn-of-the-century writers, a literature having to come to terms with belatedness or subsequence. This is ... sometimes a matter of direct allusion. It is also sometimes a matter of stylistic or thematic indebtedness, and this is not necessarily genre-specific (1997:vii).

References to Yeats's or Joyce's influences are constantly accompanied by the image of the shadow, as in the above quotation or in Augustine Martin's following remarks:

In fact our own modest tradition has fallen under the immense and crippling shadows of Joyce and Yeats; and when two such giants throw their shade over a social landscape as small as Ireland's, things are likely to get very difficult for the fledgling writer who is trying to bring that raw material into artistic focus (1996:83).

Yet shadows can be cold, scary, disturbing or, on the contrary, soothing, salutary, refreshing. This is why there are positive as well as negative aspects in these authorities. The influences of these famous predecessors on today's writers range, according to Corcoran, from imitation to anxiety – a phenomenon which Harold Bloom studied in his work *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) – from admiration to rejection, not to mention modification or subversion. Whatever attitude is adopted, the Irish writer today seems to be compelled to place himself in his relationship with these literary fathers. As for Jamie O'Neill, he seems to idolize Joyce, Wilde and Yeats, who are, according to Vivian Mercier, "objects of local veneration" (1994:327). In *At Swim, Two Boys*, intertextuality manifests itself in subtle, various ways, by formal allusions to the works of Yeats or Joyce and by references to the texts or the life of Wilde, whose name keeps coming back in pious invocation. There is literally no end to the traces of such seminal writers and O'Neill seems to enjoy living and writing in their shadows. As a result, literature feeds on its

own entrails, in a self-referential way which may become a bottomless pit because intertextual phenomena are potentially never-ending: the present writer is haunted by a predecessor who is himself influenced by a preceding text, etc. This could lead to a process of infinite regress (as far back into the past as Homer concerning Joyce) comparable to Flann O'Brien's character who writes a book on a writer who is writing a book. These articulations generate a feeling of *mise en abyme*, an indefinite intertextual vortex which can make the reader dizzy. Furthermore, concerning O'Neill's novel, these connections are circumscribed within the field of Irish literature. The presence of famous Irish men-of-letters in *At Swim, Two Boys* contributes to making a parochial writer of Jamie O'Neill, parochial in the positive sense that Patrick Kavanagh gave the word when he hailed Joyce as parochial seeing that he had never written about anywhere but Dublin. Kavanagh had it that all great poetry was parochial (1952:71). O'Neill can also be considered as a parochial writer because the transpositions at work in his novel are essentially Irish. As Neil Corcoran puts it: "Irish literature is the scene of an intertextuality in which Ireland is itself read" (1997:vi). As a result, O'Neill is an instance both of filiation with his native culture and affiliation with it through scholarly work, according to the distinction established by Edward Said: "The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life' whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society" (1983:20). These notions of filiation and affiliation denote a father-son relationship between today's young writers and their famous predecessors.

Yeats's shadow

This is how Yeats, for example, is implicitly evoked in the following extract: "Mac-Murrough shut his eyes. The song was of a swan on a lake but the singing held the sadness of Ireland, the lost lonely wastes of sadness. He saw the black water and the declining sun and the swan dipping down, its white wings flashing, and slowing and slowing till silver ripples carried it home. It was a scene which seemed the heart of this land" (O'Neill 2001:210). Indeed this quote, with its allusion to a sad song, to twilight, to home and to "the heart of this land", a phrase which evokes *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), can be read as

an echo of Yeats's fiction and more particularly of his 1919 poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole", with the image of swans drifting on dark water:

Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans (Yeats 1982:147).

Elsewhere in the book, Yeats's shadow is still perceptible between the lines in the allusions to "old Mrs Houlihan" (O'Neill 2001:289), the traditional nationalist representation of Ireland exploited by the poet and playwright, particularly in his plays *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) or *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). Furthermore, the chronotope of the novel, located in Dublin in 1916, is obviously reminiscent of the poem written by Yeats in dedication to the martyrs of Ireland, "Easter 1916". Unlike Yeats, who wrote this poem in the very year when these events took place, O'Neill narrates the Rising with the hindsight and detachment that the chronological gap of eighty years provides. He considers the historical fact cautiously and ironically. Opting for a postmodern reading of the event, his approach to history questions the grand nationalist narrative and focuses first and foremost on its catastrophic repercussions on the population, particularly on these young men who gave their lives for a cause which perhaps did not require so many sacrifices. In this, he precisely pursues a question asked by Yeats in the poem: "Was it needless death after all?" (1982:204). Yeats had a sharp-sighted vision of his days when he mentioned this historical event as "the casual comedy" (1982:203). His ambiguous reading of the Rising is not denied by today's revisionist approach. Yeats and O'Neill both admire the generous impulse of these heroes and at the same time deplore so many absurd sacrifices. The oxymoronic refrain of the poem mirrors these mixed feelings of admiration and horror: "A terrible beauty is born" (1982:203). Scepticism is at work here and is perceived as essential according to the current revisionist theoreticians. Significantly, Edna Longley borrows the title of her book on revisionism and literature – *The Living Stream* (1994) – precisely from Yeats's poem "Easter 1916". Revisionism is interpreted in this work as the stone which troubles the living stream of linear history. This revision of history and of Easter 1916 particularly is reminiscent of another

recent novel, namely Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999). Both *A Star Called Henry* and *At Swim, Two Boys* re-write history as a reaction against nationalistic ideology, and are thus affiliated with contemporary revisionist ideas. The interest of these novels lies in the tension between the will to represent 'true' events and the trend to change reality into a material that directly appeals to imagination. Doyle and O'Neill are both post-nationalist novelists who demand to be rid of the burden of the past and no longer to be affected by the destiny of their nation. This claim can make it possible to consider them as the spokesmen of their fellow citizens. Their postmodern questioning of received discourses and narratives is a contemporary phenomenon with which Flann O'Brien or Joyce, who considered that one event could be subject to a variety of interpretations, would probably agree. Besides, novels such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *Finnegans Wake* themselves are seen by most critics as precursors of postmodernism.

Joyce's shadow

Postmodern aesthetics is particularly attached to parody and this strategy is at work in O'Neill's novel in the imitative and deformative use of canonical, religious texts: the 'Ave Maria' prayer for example is parodied in a blasphemous way by a character: "Male hairy, bull of grace, the lard is with thee" (O'Neill 2001:453). This disrespectful distortion of a sacred text recalls the Joycean parodies of the *Credo* in *Ulysses*: "They believe in rod, the scourger almighty, creator of hell upon earth and in Jacky Tar, the son of a gun..." (Joyce 1922:327). Through this process, *At Swim, Two Boys* is in line with the Irish literary tradition and Joyce of course cannot be ignored in this field. Here again, O'Neill follows his precursor Flann O'Brien, who thinks of Joyce as still alive in his *Dalkey Archive* (1964), a novel in which Joyce has survived his own death and is writing away as usual. Likewise, in the Mylesian and Joycean tradition, O'Neill's novel has an ironical tone when it deals with the major events of Irish history, Irish national heroes and nationalism, for example when an official speech is judged by the text as "the usual nationalist platitudes" (O'Neill 2001:443). Besides, resonances of Joyce's works can be spotted in the political or advertising slogans, traditional songs or poems

which pepper O'Neill's narrative and, here again, create a sort of Bakhtinian dialogism. By the same token, clichés or *idées reçues* echo each other from one text to another: "Demon drink, curse of Ireland" (O'Neill 2001:50) is reminiscent of Joyce's sentence in *Ulysses*: "drink, the curse of Ireland" (Joyce 1922:309). O'Neill, like Joyce but also O'Brien, has a love for words: he is a master of language and uses all styles and all registers, from colloquial speech to academic jargon. Plurilinguism is also present in the novel with the use of Latin, Gaelic and foreign languages. Furthermore, both *Ulysses* and *At Swim, Two Boys* resort extensively to the use of dialogues, of spoken language in narrative scenes.

Nevertheless, it is especially from a thematic viewpoint that Joyce's work is conjured up, particularly as regards the difficulties experienced at school by the protagonist:

Brother Polycarp rapped his wand on the easel and the fluting straggled to indefinite desistance. 'Will the man at the back with the grace notes kindly stand forward?'

Feet shuffled, some faces turned, eventually the culprit rose.

'The new man, is it? Tell me, Doyle, where did you learn to play flute at all?'

'Nowhere, sir. Brother, I mean. I mean I learnt meself' (O'Neill 2001: 59).

The contemptuous words of the teaching priest who shouts at the young fearful protagonist obviously recall the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916:293-96). With his speech and his wand, the priest in both texts generates a feeling of guilt among the children and a terrible fear of hell in connection with their awakening sexualities. After yielding to temptations of the flesh, Jim Mack, like Stephen Dedalus, experiences spiritual torments in a retreat and only aspires to go to confession in order to release the heavy burden which threatens him with eternal death. After sleepless nights, he wanders through the city and yearns for peace and serenity: "Next day was Sunday: there were no confessions to be had. Three Masses he heard, but without his receiving, there could be no solace. He thought to try St Michael's in Kingstown. It was St Stephen's day" (O'Neill 2001:408). This detailed precision concerning St Stephen's day, which could have been called 'Boxing Day' after all, is a direct hint to Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus. The tortures the

protagonist endures are so painful that he falls ill, like Dedalus at the beginning of *A Portrait*:

His lank hair glued to his forehead. His forehead was burning. He shivered ...
 'I think I have a fever, Da'.
 'Sure you've had a fever these last four days' (O'Neill 2001:417-418).

The alternation of heat and shivering, of hot and cold, is again reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus's feverish state. Structurally, Jim's development is comparable to Stephen's: *At Swim, Two Boys* and *A Portrait of the Artist* both follow the same pattern of disillusion in the heroes' pursuit of love, which ends in a first encounter provoking pride in the flesh but also fall into sin. Both boys are destroyed by the retreat sermons, all the more so when they realize that they lack a vocation for the priesthood. The character of Jim Mack undoubtedly shares certain traits with Stephen Dedalus.

Similarly, the bathing scenes and the places mentioned in O'Neill's novel also evoke a Joycean environment: "Sandy Cove's beached harbour, the Martello tower on its cliff, its cliff improbably landward. Two figures strolled from the Point, towels slung over their shoulders. Bathers out of the Forty Foot, gentlemen's bathing-place. There was a loneliness in watching them" (O'Neill 2001:42). Both Joyce and O'Neill are fascinated with the unities of time and place as this is the same bathing-place where Buck Mulligan takes his dip at the beginning of *Ulysses*. Likewise, the protagonist's peregrinations in the streets of Dublin are reminiscent of Leopold Bloom's. In both cases, a man is wandering through a modern city, thinking about somebody whom he rejoins before the end of the narrative. In *At Swim, Two Boys*, this is an amorous vacillation interrupted by various encounters: "A wedding left the church and, meeting a funeral, he walked three steps with the dead" (O'Neill 2001:276) can be paralleled with Bloom following a coffin too: "Paltry funeral: coach and three carriages" (Joyce 1922:102). Besides, from the opening lines, the reader of O'Neill's novel finds himself rooted in the thoughts of Doyle, whose interior monologue relates what Mack is doing and what is happening to him. O'Neill seems to have drawn heavily on Joyce's work. Many other allusions or references could be given. For example, it is worth mentioning that Joyce's

overpowering influence on O'Neill is also conspicuous in their intertextual borrowings. As St Augustine is conjured up in *Ulysses* – "It was revealed to me that those things are good which yet are corrupted which neither if they were supremely good nor unless they were good could be corrupted. Ah, curse you! That's saint Augustine" (Joyce 1922:143) – it is interesting to notice that the same St Augustine is also quoted in the epigraph of the second part of *At Swim, Two Boys* (O'Neill 2001:339). Lastly, it is again Joyce's fiction, more especially one of his stories, that is referred to in one of the female characters in O'Neill's novel, significantly named Eveline.

Wilde's shadow

Eveline MacMurrough, who bears a Joycean Christian name, backs the Republicans by providing them with guns. She lives in a big house with her nephew, Anthony, a dandy who spent two years in Wandsworth prison for gross indecency, a fact which makes a typically Wildean character of him. This man's relationships with boys from the lower classes, his taste for aphorisms, his attraction to Hellenic civilization and his fascination with Wilde, whom he considers as a model, strengthen this connection. As he says himself: "I wanted to be the queer bugger who lives in that house ... An Oscar Wilde in Ireland" (O'Neill 2001:201). Wilde's name is repeatedly mentioned or simply referred to, for example, as "one Irishman associated with Merrion Square" (O'Neill 2001: 436). O'Neill's novel is also interested in literary history, as the scene of the party in the Pavilion Gardens illustrates:

- 'It was considered among the soldiers – and the soldiery was every citizen in Sparta –
- Sound enough.
- Considered disreputable if a soldier among them did not have his lover.
- His lover, ay? ...
- It was an Irishman who first made this point. In print, I mean. Chap name of Mahaffy, in his Greek history ... He taught Wilde.
- Is it Oscar Wilde?
- Yes.
- He was a very bad fellow, they say.
- Yes, they do.
- They'd say anything against an Irishman, the English would ...
- He stayed here, you know.
- In this house?

- Walked these very paths. It's whispered some of his poems were, if not written, contemplated here' (O'Neill 2001:297-298).

Likewise, Wilde's trial is evoked, precisely the part played by the prosecutor, Sir Edward Carson: "Carson – leader of the Orangists, an avowed law-breaker, Attorney-General they make him. Tell me about the English" (O'Neill 2001:306). Anthony's fascination for Wilde is reinforced by his behaviour and his experiments, particularly his own years of confinement and convict labour. Besides, to highlight this mirror image, the same word – punishment – is used not only concerning Wilde – "The English have always favoured punishment over sense" (O'Neill 2001:438) – but also, on the following page, as regards MacMurrough: "It was a terrible punishment you suffered" (O'Neill 2001:439). This osmosis in the destinies of Wilde and MacMurrough is also perceptible in Wilde's works, which spontaneously crop up in MacMurrough's mind: "He thought of that phrase from Wilde: *What one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry on the housetop*. Wilde had meant in confession. Was it conceivable to cry out with pride?" (O'Neill 2001:320-321). Wilde's work is clearly presented as food for thought for the reader, in this case MacMurrough, who shows his affinity for Wilde in several ways and even considers himself as his *alter ego*. Even if the source of the quotation is not specified in the text, this sentence is taken from *De Profundis* (1905), which is, as everyone knows, focused on prison experience. Sharing the same experience as Wilde for two years in the same prison, MacMurrough cannot but read and ponder over and, as a result, be influenced by *De Profundis*, a text which apparently left visible repercussions on his psyche. Likewise, after providing a boy with a suit of clothes, MacMurrough quotes Wilde again: "*The best amongst the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious*" (O'Neill 2001:295). Written in italics, these two sentences are presented as a quotation the author of which is said to be Wilde but the source of which is not indicated. In fact, it proves to be taken from *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1895) and confirms that O'Neill really seems to be absorbed in Wilde's works. This is also visible in the implicit allusions to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

(1891). Just as Wilde's protagonist, MacMurrough sees himself as eternally young:

His unconscious mind had not kept pace with the years ... his sense of himself was of a burgeoning youth. He was on the verge of manhood, always the verge ... Consciousness pulled him up, sharp as a looking-glass, and told out his proper years ... MacMurrough was a boy on the verge of manhood. Always, just (O'Neill 2001:323).

His consciousness, compared to a looking-glass, is of course reminiscent of the picture of the old wrinkled man, the mirror of Dorian's soul in Wilde's novel. By the same token, MacMurrough hears a woman whisper "God bless your work, alannah, he turned, thinking absurdly of himself" (O'Neill 2001:321). His reaction shows that he considers himself as a work of art, a fact which makes him share Dorian Gray's opinion of himself.

Similarly, MacMurrough's inner tumult, shown by his confession – "May the heart be redeemed by renunciation? ... I want to feel good. I never have that feeling" (O'Neill 2001:327) – is again reminiscent of Dorian Gray's decision not to seduce anyone anymore but to improve his behaviour. Finally, as he is watching the schoolteacher and envies him for being loved so much by his pupils, MacMurrough remarks: "he has shorn the curtains and entered the land of youth" (O'Neill 2001: 326). This sentence can be read again as an allusion to Dorian's picture, veiled by a curtain so that nobody can see the ugliness of the portrait which allows Dorian to remain young and handsome. There are so many intertextual articulations in *At Swim, Two Boys* that the creative consciousness of O'Neill seems to be under abusive pressure from the literary tradition which he has received from the past.

The postmodern voice of historiographic metafiction

Together with his attraction for the past of Ireland – 1916 being, according to the author, "the birth of modern Ireland" (O'Neill 2002:14) – O'Neill's interest in the literary archives of the past leads the reader to wonder about the relevance of so many references to the past and, to a broader extent, about the relationships which link the writer to his contemporaries. Is *At Swim, Two Boys* evidence of "the tyranny of the past" (Martin 1996:95)? Augustine Martin uses this phrase to

deploring the fact that “Irish writing has been almost morbidly fixated with the past” and that the Irish literary attitude to the past is an obstacle to the writer’s task, which is “to render a present that is in flux, that changes before our eyes” (1996:95). Martin wrote the essay entitled “Inherited Dissent: the Dilemma of the Irish Writer” in 1965 but he considered it still relevant at the end of the century since he published it again in *Bearing Witness. Essays on Anglo-Irish Literature* (1996). He had seen so little change since the 1960s concerning the Irish artist’s position *vis-à-vis* Irish society that he thought his text was worth reading again. In this book, Martin continues to consider that too many Irish writers are still fondly gazing at the past and that “this attitude infects our view of the present” (1996:95). According to him, writers must learn to curb and control the influence of tradition. They must be careful that the past does not overwhelm them completely. Otherwise this would create a barrier between the artist and his society. For indeed, how interested is today’s Irish society in the events of 1916? Colm Toibin remembers that in 1966 in the Republic, “there were whole-hearted celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising, which included an exciting drama documentary on television, marches, days off school and a feeling of national pride” (1998:195). On the contrary, in 1991, with the passing of time and with the development of revisionist theories bringing along cynicism with regard to national institutions and political life and an unspoken assumption that everything emanating from official sources is a lie, most people in Ireland remained reasonably indifferent. If Roy Foster’s definition is true, namely if “to celebrate something is, presumably, to say it was wonderful and to, in a sense, re-enact it as a communal ritual” (1993:74), then the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Rising was *not* celebrated. Toibin confirms this overall indifference: “State television did not reshow the drama documentary and there were no days off school. State television, instead, interviewed various historians and public figures about the Rising: did they think it was right or wrong? Did they think it should be commemorated?” (1998:199).

Toibin’s article is provocatively entitled “New Ways to Kill your Father” precisely to suggest that children cannot always live in the

shadow of their predecessors, that they must, according to Freudian theory, symbolically kill their fathers to mature and lead their adult lives. In this regard, Harold Bloom expounds an interesting idea based on the Oedipus complex in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Bloom advances the notion that every writer is, in a sense, oppressed by anxiety because of precursor writers. Any young writer inevitably grows up in the shadow of the great predecessors of the past. This writer stands in the relationship of ‘son’ to them, or to one of them in particular, and feels oppressed by that relationship. Carrying through the Oedipal idea, Bloom suggests that such a ‘son’ is a rival to the father writer who is a ‘castrating precursor’. The ‘son’, powerfully influenced by a parent-text or texts by the ‘father’, experiences ambivalent feelings, compounded not only of love and admiration but also of envy and fear – and perhaps even hatred. This fear and hatred are caused by the son’s great need to reject and rebel against the ‘father’, to be autonomous and original and find his own ‘voice’.

Concerning O’Neill, whose filiation and affiliation with Irish predecessors have clearly been shown here, the Oedipal crisis is apparently overcome since there are no signs of hatred or rebellion. His relationship with literary fathers is conspicuously made of love, admiration and envy, and it seems obvious that the author of *At Swim, Two Boys* has found his voice: he proves to be the spokesman of second-class citizens. Indeed, it is through the peripheral viewpoint of marginalized population groups, in this case homosexuals, that the Irish historical event of 1916 is narrated in the novel. If Irish fiction is obsessed so much with the past, it may be due to a need to find a specifically Irish voice in a hegemonic ethnocentric tradition. This is the postmodern challenge. The text is thus aesthetically postmodern, a characteristic which is also perceptible in its use of parody. This decentered perspective, this ex-centric minoritarian discourse problematizes history, all the more so as it is highly subjective. It questions our assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge. It confirms that history is conditioned by textuality, that the past cannot be reached but through the text. So history-writing cannot claim to be objective and is necessarily narrated through a subjective point of view. *At Swim, Two Boys* is no

traditional historical novel, with authorial theoretical developments, but what Linda Hutcheon, in her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, calls a 'historiographic metafiction', that is to say "a novel which is intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lays claim to historical events and personages" (1988:5). O'Neill's novel is really anchored in postmodernism insofar as it suggests a re-evaluation of and an intertextual, plurivocal dialogue with the past in the light of the present. This postmodern approach to history saves *At Swim, Two Boys* from the sterile repetition and uncritical mimicry of inherited attitudes that Martin deplors in so many Irish novels. O'Neill's fiction revisits history in a critical way, contests the tenets of dominant ideologies, challenges the grand historical narrative and keeps questioning the *idées reçues* of the past. It favours the dialogue between history and literature and shows profound scepticism toward history as it has been related so far. The traditional writing of history, which is focused on great names and heroic works and which claims to report the naked truth, but without ever taking into account the minoritarian points of view, is challenged here by the voices of ex-centrics that had always been silenced. By shedding light on the margin, the novel, on the one hand, incites the reader to be aware of all kinds of differences and develop a sense of critical consciousness, and, on the other, highlights subversion and transgression, two notions which are announced by the parodic title of the novel. The title marks its paradoxical double investment in both continuity and change, both authority and transgression. Parody is the ironic mode of intertextuality that enables such revisitations of the past. It becomes the mode of the ex-centric according to Hutcheon, who sees it as "a mode of postmodern formal self-reflexivity, of incorporation of the past" (1988:35). This definition of parody differs from the usual "imitative use of the words, style, attitude, tone and ideas of an author in such a way as to make them ridiculous" (Cuddon 1976:682). In fact, even when he uses parody, O'Neill shows deep respect and even admiration for Yeats, Joyce and Wilde, and never ridicules or caricatures them in a mocking attitude. Quite the opposite. With his novel, he incites his readers to go back to the source and takes into account Flann O'Brien's words about Tomas O'Crohan's *An tOileanach*

(1929) after the publication of *An Béal Bocht* (1941): "My prayer is that all who read it afresh will be stimulated into stumbling upon the majestic book upon which it is based" (1957:18). The use of so many intertextual connections in *At Swim, Two Boys*, which happens to be O'Neill's first novel, can thus be interpreted not only as the author's will to be recognized as a fully-fledged writer, to be credited with being part of a serious literary lineage, but also as an incentive for the reader to savour the intertextual articulations and transpositions that are at work in the text by reading or re-reading the famous hypotexts the novel rests upon.

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