

O'Brien, Pirandello, and the Abyss of Subjectivity in Modernism¹

Corina David

University of Alba Iulia

Abstract:

In his biography, Pericles Lewis locates Brecht's innovative contribution to the twentieth-century drama in the construction of character. More precisely, he speaks of the "death of character": "The movement away from stable character entailed an increasing psychological distance between the audience and the characters on stage; it broke with the illusion that characters in a play are real people and therefore defeated the earlier goal of identification between the audience members and the characters". One gets the same feeling reading or watching Pirandello's plays or O'Brien's fiction and drama. Abyssmal psychology had revealed the stable and unitary Cartesian self to be a sham, the locus of contradictory impulses and uncontrollable drives. Characters in the two authors are left unfinished, their behaviour is erratic, their ontological status is uncertain (ambitioned to compete with their ... author), etc.

Keywords: Flann O'Brien, Luigi Pirandello, modernist subjectivity, modernist drama

The intent of the current paper is none other than to illustrate that O'Brien's peculiar style which translates his intricate imagination is rooted in modernism and that his astounding narrative technique belongs to a common background of other stellar European modernist writers. We are thus subscribing to what Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet observe in their introduction to *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*: "Pirandello's 'six characters in search of an author', Joyce's infamous 'new style per chapter', Schoenberg's conversion to, and away from, the serialism he had invented to escape the traps of tonality: there are any number of roughly contemporaneous instances of what Brian O'Nolan/ Flann O'Brien spontaneously performed (...)". (McDonald & Murphet 2014:10)

The aforementioned authors are perfectly aware that because of a long well-established tradition of perceiving O'Brien as a postmodernist, "his relationship to modernism is in pressing need of reassessment." (11) Their point is furthermore strengthened by alluding to James Joyce and Samuel Beckett whose clear-cut modernism is cosmopolitan, nurtured outside Ireland, whereas O'Brien's does not transcend his national background. The recent, more flexible views of modernism now include the national aspect which also redefines for instance the way James Joyce is perceived. Although moulded by the European urban spirit, he too cannot be separated from his Irish cultural and postcolonial aspect: "No longer is there an implicit oxymoron in 'Irish modernism'." (11)

Redefining subjectivity and reshaping characters represents one of the main concerns of modernists, with Virginia Woolf as the main herald of this stringent necessity. In her *Mr. Bennet*

¹ Based on papers read to a panel of the "Acting Out: IV International Flann O'Brien Conference" (Salzburg, 17-21 July 2017)

and *Mrs. Brown* essay, Woolf argues that the reason for her very own writing is the existence of a character she needs to entrap in all its truthfulness, with all the meanders of its thought into her papers. For Flann O'Brien the process seems to be in reverse order – he does not respond to a character's call, but to his own creative instincts. There is no identification between the author or the character, nor between the reader and the character. He is the puppeteer and the reader is constantly aware that there is only shifting ground in O'Brien's novels.

Glossing on Bertolt Brecht, Pericles Lewis argues that his innovative contribution to the twentieth century drama is his construction of characters. More specifically he talks about the "death of the character", something that Strindberg's dream plays had already experimented: "The movement away from stable character entailed an increasing psychological distance between the audience and the characters on stage; it broke with the illusion that characters in a play are real people and therefore defeated the earlier goal of identification between the audience members and the characters" (Lewis: web) This is something highly visible in *At Swim Two Birds*, a "*rara avis* in the world of fiction." (Mellamphy: web) An author who likes to reinvent himself all the time will create characters in his own image. Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet speculate on this side to O'Brien's personality:

In a late article, he argues that using a variety of pseudonyms and conscious self-creation 'ensures that the fundamental individual will not be credited with a certain way of thinking, fixed attitudes, irreversible techniques of expression. No author should write under his own name nor under one permanent pen-name; a male writer should include in his impostures a female pen-name, and possibly vice versa.'[...] this is a modernist notion of subjectivity that thwarts singular or positivistic ideas of a coherent, self-contained individual, which also has precursors in an Irish tradition of self-concealment. (9)

But how exactly was subjectivity affected by modernism in general and in O'Brien's work in particular? As we have already mentioned, modernism is a cross-cultural phenomenon historically linked to the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the natural response to a world destabilised by the First World War, by the decline of the great empires and the fight for colonial independence, but also to a world taken by surprise by groundbreaking scientific discoveries. New concepts in psychology and therefore a better understanding of the human nature also massively impacted the 20th century with literature having to respond to these changes. Artists, writers of the new school are fully aware of the task they are performing – the creative process is not merely dictated by inspiration but developed according to a plan, there is feedback put into the process which is open to amendments. This is something we will notice in O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* – but ahead of him it was Ford Maddox Ford who, in his essay *On Impressionism*, observes that: "On the one hand the difficulty of getting hold of any critical guidance was, when I was a boy, insuperable. There was nothing. Criticism was non-existent; self-conscious art was decried; you were supposed to write by inspiration (...). But young writers to-day have a much better chance, on the aesthetic chance at least. Here and there in nooks and corners they can find someone to discuss their work, not from the point of view of goodness or badness or of niceness or of nastiness, but from the simple point of view of expediency." (Rainey: 573)

In O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, authors, be they characters without having a clue about it, constantly discuss and improve on their works. We no longer run into the supreme almighty writer who creates fixed worlds, but writers attuned to the public's taste and literary needs. Here is the narrator asking Brinsley for his opinion after managing to breathe life into Finn Mac Cool – his character: "Did you read that stuff about Finn, I said, that stuff I gave you? Oh, yes, he said,

that was the pig's whiskers. That was funny all right." (O'Brien: 17) or Orlick's friends and acquaintances: "At the conclusion of a brief interval, Lamont spread out his hand and addressed Mr. Orlick in a low earnest voice. A nice simple story would be very nice, Sir, he said, you take a lot of the good out of it when you start, you know, the other business. A nice simple story with plenty of the razor, you understand." (O'Brien: 177)

At Swim-Two-Birds is an intriguing book: it's not an easy reading, as characters mix and change, some of them displace authors, and authors become characters, Irish tales and legends and their devilish cast are interspersed with scientific references.

There are three levels of narration: first, we are told about an unnamed student of literature who likes to try his pen in his spare time. He is extremely astute and versed in literary devices and techniques and instantly rejects the idea of a classic novel with a straightforward beginning, development and denouement: "I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. 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 inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." (O'Brien: 1) He eventually writes a story about Finn Mac Cool – a hero of old Ireland (the modernist re-mythification) and delights us with the deliberately exaggerated account of his physical strength. Another character in the story is Dermot Trellis who, in his turn, decides to write a book and create characters out of the blue. Such is the case of John Furriskey born at the age of twenty five out of a literary whim. This represents the second level, while the third one is represented by Trellis becoming a subject in a story written by Orlick Trellis, the fruit of his father's lust for one of his characters. It is a topsy-turvy world with caricatures instead of full-fledged characters, with devils questioning the human nature of kangaroos, with sudden stops and reminders, "biographical reminiscences," or information about the literary devices used. It is a sham, but it is a well-designed one that serves a specific purpose. And this is what brings us back to O'Brien's modernity, his knack for craftsmanship and his alignment to an international school of thought. The discussions between the unnamed, young narrator and his friend Brinsley are perhaps the most illuminating ones in point of revealing O'Brien's literary beliefs: "There are two ways to make big money, he said, to write a book or to make a book. It happened that this remark provoked between us a discussion on the subject of Literature – great authors living and dead, the character of modern poetry (...). Psycho-analysis was mentioned – with, however, a somewhat light touch." (O'Brien: 19-20) The discussion continues with the differences between novels and plays, this synthesising what may be called a spot-on explanation for O'Brien's novel and his literary ambitions: "In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. (...) Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. (...) The modern novel should be largely a work of reference." (O'Brien: 20)

As it has already been mentioned, the major change in modernist literature affected the way characters were constructed and this is because the previous unity of the Cartesian self was no longer felt to be valid. This is Descartes's belief: "When I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire." (Descartes: 1-31). In other words, when mental events occur we are fully aware of them. He also viewed the body as a separate entity, the brains functioning as mediator. His dualism lingered well into the early 20th century but was eventually debunked thanks to the advancements of science. Darwin's evolutionary theory, the development of hypnosis and the discovery of the regions of brains responsible for speech (Paul Broca)

weakened the Cartesian unity by suggesting that mental states are actually physical states of the brains. It is Freud that asserted that mental processes are unconscious and that introspection is a limited psychological tool that cannot access the unconscious. O'Brien's narrator is certainly familiar with psychoanalysis – his characters seem to be the projection of unfinished, wandering thoughts or of raw feelings – the equivalent of Freud's id which in its turn implies a gratification of all needs and pleasures without consideration of reality.

The same loss of the Cartesian unity is also illustrated by Furriskey's character, whose existence is defined through bewilderment and perplexity: "He was consumed by doubts as to his own identity, as to the nature of his body and the cast of his countenance." (O'Brien: 36) Furriskey was born out of an experiment at the age of twenty five – he simply awoke as if from a deep sleep. Trellis is gallant enough to acknowledge that his success is due to a certain Mr. William Tracy, a legend in the world of psycho-eugenics. A detail like this cannot be ignored as it points to the importance of scientific experiments as source of modernist art. Sir Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics believed that mental characteristics are inherited the same way as physical characteristics are and that they could somehow be selected and controlled. O'Brien's experimental characters are thus a response to the real experiments of the 20th century.

In *Modernism: A Cultural History*, Tim Armstrong defines modernism as a series of artistic international movements highly responsive to the ideas of the new but also as transnational phenomena characterised by cultural exchange and displacement. Subjectivity was intensely affected by this, Armstrong recalling Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" and the burden that comes from the realisation that we are not self-created: "Identity can only be formed from a struggle, and what emerges from that struggle is contradictory and unstable, since it believes it cannot be both 'true to itself, its immutable identity, and at one with the constantly changing world. The result of this unresolved contradiction is that the subject identifies with the contingent and changeable – with modernity..." (Armstrong 2005: 9)

Not only had characters themselves been affected by historical, political and scientific changes, but so had the readers' expectations. O'Brien's narrator writes with a specific audience in mind. It is this audience that dictates the topics, the characters, the register: "Nobody will read the like of that, said Brinsley. Yes they will, I answered. Trellis wants this salutary book to be read by all. He realizes that purely a moralizing tract would not reach the public. Therefore he is putting plenty of smut into this book." (O'Brien: 28).

However, we could argue that there are two types of audience – the reader who needs entertainment and the reader who may well be a fellow writer and is generously exposed to a new style of narration constantly interrupted by reminders that this is all part of a writing scheme: "Biographical reminiscence, part the fourth: The further obtrusion of my personal affairs at this stage is unhappily not entirely fortuitous. It happens that a portion of my manuscript containing an account (in the direct style) of the words that passed between Furriskey and the voice is lost beyond retrieval." (O'Brien: 45)

As mentioned at the very beginning, O'Brien is not the only one to have toyed with the boundaries between authors, narrators and readers. Luigi Pirandello's impact in terms of character goes far beyond literature. So radical was his vision that Esslin compared Pirandello's influence to that of Einstein's: "Pirandello more than any other playwright has been responsible for a revolution in men's attitude to the world that is comparable to the revolution caused by Einstein's discovery of the concept of relativity in physics: Pirandello has transformed our attitude to human personality and the whole concept of reality in human relations by showing that the

personality- the character in stage terms - is not a fixed entity but an infinitely fluid, blurred and relative concept.” (Quinn 1989: 1)

According to Jennifer Lorch, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is now recognised as a classic piece of modernism, one which, beyond its massive influence on the development of theatre and philosophy, is severely marked by Pirandello’s own pessimistic outlook on life. Lorch refers to a letter Pirandello sent to his elder sister in which he describes human beings as desperate individuals marked by a sense of futility and using occupations or dreams as a coping mechanism against this feeling of sheer despair. The impossibility to know anything for certain is also part of his philosophy which transpires in his work. Lorch remarks: “For him identity is a collection of masks, forms imposed upon the life within us by ourselves and by others.” (Lorch 2005: 3) This is reminiscent of Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” mentioned in connection with O’Brien. Pirandello’s six characters are forced to wear masks as a means of distinguishing themselves from the actors playing their parts, although they should symbolise authenticity and a fixed reality: “*The CHARACTERS should not, in fact, appear as phantasms, but as created realities, unchangeable creations of the imagination and, therefore, more real and more consistent than the ever-changing naturalness of the ACTORS.*” (Pirandello: 680) We assist here at a reversed order of things with creations becoming creators (the characters who want to play their own roles), creations that live with the illusion of being creators (the actors) when they may well be nothing else but the puppets of an invisible God, and authors that become authors by simply scribing what characters dictated to them (the producer).

In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the initial discussion between the father and the producer is a metadramatic exchange that defines the role of the theatre – making what isn’t true seem true just for fun, but it also announces one of the main themes of the play – that of multiple personalities that constantly change in response to human interaction: “My drama lies entirely in this one thing ... In my being conscious that each one of us believes himself to be a single person. But it’s not true. ... Each one of us is many persons. ... Many persons ... according to all the possibilities of being that are within us.” (Pirandello: 688) To his stepdaughter the father is a vile man, to the son, a complete stranger, to the mother, a pervert but also a safety net. In O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the student narrator may well be a talent for his friend Brinsley, while being a complete failure and lazy bones for his dejected uncle. And while the rest of the characters do not necessarily define themselves in relations to others, they are free to roam the narratives as there is no check-point at the borders. The Pooka and the Good Fairy for instance will eventually pay a visit to Trellis’s characters’ lodging to assist Orlick’s spectacular birth.

While the type of character independence is different in the two authors (Pirandello’s characters are abandoned while O’Brien’s gain their independence through mutiny) the outcome it produces is the same: the characters are rather confused and their existence is a meaningless one: for example, once liberated, do Trellis’s characters go beyond the idea of revenge? As for Pirandello’s characters, they are truly tragic – they imagine a world with various possibilities but are trapped in their assigned roles; they cannot see beyond the illusion, they are forced to live their past and present for eternity – there is no future lying ahead. It is all the more tragic as the father speaks with conviction: “A character, sir, may always ask a man who he is. Because a character has a life which is truly his, marked with his own special characteristics. ... And as a result he is always somebody! Whilst a man. ... And I’m not speaking of you personally at the moment. ... Man in general ... can quite well be nobody.” (700)

Pericles Lewis reminds us that Pirandello made himself known in the world of theatre after establishing himself as a writer of short stories and novels first. One of the most exploited

themes of these stories was the “illusory character of personal identity, and it formed the basis of some of his early plays.” (Lewis: web) Lewis believes that Pirandello’s greatest accomplishment is that of using theatre as a means of revealing the many roles we have to play in our apparently mundane lives: “Like the modernists who celebrated the power of myth to transform the everyday, Pirandello celebrates the theater, which reveals the element of self-dramatization inherent in the roles people play in everyday life.” (Lewis: web) Or as the father confessed when trying to get absolved of his sins: “With some people we are one person. ... With others we are somebody quite different. ... And all the time we are under the illusion of always being one and the same person for everybody.” (Pirandello: 688)

In Freudian fashion, Pirandello’s characters may also symbolise the unconscious mind that wants to break free. Their assigned masks are a translation of powerful feelings: sorrow, revenge, contempt, remorse, while the father’s sexual pursuit of his stepdaughter bears a clear Freudian hallmark (similarly does Trellis in O’Brien’s work assault his creation – his daughter).

In *Relative Identity and Ideal Art: the Pirandello Conflict and Its Political Analogy*, Michael Quinn stresses the political background that permeates his work: “Few critics of Pirandello have remarked upon the aesthetic and political structures in his work that parallel his stance toward role-playing. Possibly this gap exists because Pirandello frequently allowed his relativism to disperse into a kind of mystical pool, so that aesthetics, political thought and dramatic themes appear to be fairly separate.” (Quinn: 79). He argues that the characters searching for an author stand for the search for authority, thus hinting at Pirandello’s support of Fascism – the need for a ruler (Mussolini) that should stabilise a disillusioned Europe.

The value that Pirandello places on authority in the constitution of the stage work and the conduct of his characters’ lives is translated directly into a political philosophy that would treat living humans like actors in search of roles, and political leaders like authors capable of creating truth from the wellsprings of a personal genius. Pirandello may have often reconsidered his commitment to Fascism, as his apologists have suggested, yet the damage done by his conversion was great, never reversed... (Quinn: 83).

If the author stands for the dictator, the director may stand for the government which can be easily corruptible (he lets himself be convinced by the characters, mainly by the father) or is simply not suitable to handle the mass of people under its rule.

Leaving aside any political or psychoanalytical interpretation, any use of metafiction or metatheatre in the works analysed, we become simple spectators of a tragicomic game which questions what is real and what is illusion. We may even start to question our own reality wondering whether we ourselves may not be actors in a simulated reality which tries to reconstruct ancestors’ lives for the generations of the future. In his *Are You Living in a Computer Simulation*, Nick Bostrom acknowledges the immense power that computers have on our lives and imagines a future with super powerful computers that are able to generate simulations of the lives of the ancestors. These ancestors could well be us: “Suppose that these simulated people are conscious. (...) Then it could be the case that the vast majority of minds like ours do not belong to the original race but rather to people simulated by the advanced descendants of an original race.” (Bostrom 2003: 1).

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Corina David is a Philology graduate of Petru Maior University of Targu Mures, Romania, the Faculty of Sciences and Letters. She has an MA in Gender Studies and is currently a PhD student at the University of Alba Iulia. Her doctoral project is an interdisciplinary study in the novels of Borges, Vonnegut, Martin Amis, and Peter Ackroyd, which are placed within two frames of understanding: postmodernist narratives of parallel plots and physical speculations on the wave function and the multiverse.
