Bakhtin and Modern Irish Satire

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"Carnival," "dialogue" and "heteroglossia" are key terms in Bakhtin's theory of dialogic literature in general and Menippean satire in particular. I will discuss two 20th-century Irish novels in terms of Bakhtin's theory of satire: Darrell Figgis's *The Return of the Hero* (1923) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). O'Brien's novel is far better known than Figgis's; the book is often mentioned in discussions of postmodernism as being an early and therefore noteworthy example of the use of techniques that came to be regarded as staples of postmodernist writing several decades later. While that is a valid approach, it is my intention here to show, in a comparison with *The Return of the Hero*, that *At Swim-Two-Birds* can equally fruitfully be read as a Menippean satire, and that when regarded in those terms the book is neither a particularly early example in 20th-century Ireland, nor an especially unique one.

The purpose of Menippean satire is the testing of ultimate philosophical and ideological positions and truths and the questioning of authority. Among the techniques used to achieve this end are the use of the fantastic and of free invention; the deliberate contemporization of historical figures and heroes of myth; the "making strange" of the familiar by means of unusual contexts and points of view; the incorporation in the text of inserted genres and "found" material; parody; the mixing of multiple styles, registers, voices, types of language and levels of meaning; and the use of abnormal states of mind, eccentric or inappropriate behaviour and the violation of accepted norms. What these characteristics of Menippean satire have in common with each other is their deviation from and distortion of the established norms and values that represent authority (be it in terms of religion, government, social behaviour or language itself); they act as a challenge to all forms of authority, which are by definition dogmatic, absolute and hostile to change.

Both *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* feature heroes borrowed from early medieval Irish literature. Figgis uses the dialogue between Oisín and Saint Patrick as the basis for his own narrative, versions of which are to be found in the *Acallam na Senórach* or Colloquy of the Ancients and the *Duanaire Finn* or Book of the Lays of Finn. Although Flann O'Brien also uses material from the Fenian Cycle, the core of *At Swim-Two-Birds* with regard to borrowed medieval material is *Buile Suibhne* or the Frenzy of Sweeny. The inclusion of characters of myth or ancient literature in a new (con)text with characters whose attitudes are alien to theirs is a technique of Menippean satire: juxtaposing characters from different backgrounds, from past and present, creates a dialogue between different and opposing values and ideologies.

The choice of the core texts used by Figgis and O'Brien deserves further consideration, because both *Duanaire Finn* and *Buile Suibhne* are highly dialogic texts in their own right. The dialogue between Oisín (or, in the *Colloquy*, Oisín and Cailte) and Patrick exists in a number of versions, all of which follow essentially the same pattern: Fionn MacCumhail's son Oisín, after spending several hundred years in the otherworld, returns to the real world where Christianity has meanwhile arrived in the person of St. Patrick. The latter engages Oisín in conversation and asks him about his life with the Fianna; Oisín tells him many different stories. In his turn, Patrick endeavours to convert Oisín to Christianity. This is no easy task, and they have many arguments as to who is more deserving of loyalty: the King of Heaven or the Leader of the Fianna. Myles Dillon points out in *Early Irish Literature* (1948) that

> The temper of the *Acallam* is cheerful, in spite of Cailte's loneliness and decrepitude and his regard for the heroic past. St. Patrick and the kings enjoy his stories, and heaven is promised him for himself and Finn and the other warriors whom he praises. But in the later ballad version both saint and hero become caricatures, and a different sort of humor appears. Here Patrick is a bigoted cleric, pronouncing the doom of hell upon the Fenians, and Cailte or Oisín the defiant pagan (40).

All versions, however, end with the debate unresolved, either intentionally or because the manuscript is incomplete.

Buile Suibhne is also the story of a conflict between a king and a clergyman. Suibhne discovers St. Ronan marking out a church and ringing his bell in the territory over which Suibhne is king; this so enrages him that he rushes out of his house stark naked, grabs the cleric's psalter and tosses it into the lake. Before he can further attack the saint, however, Suibhne is called away to fight in the battle at Magh Rath. Some time later there is another encounter between Ronan and Suibhne: the king is angered when Ronan's psalmist sprinkles holy water upon him, believing that this is done to mock him. He kills the psalmist and pierces the saint's bell with his spear. At this point St. Ronan curses his attacker: Suibhne will be condemned to take to the trees as a bird and roam the length and breadth of Ireland as a madman, to die eventually by a spear-point. Thus it happens, and the rest of the tale is given over to Suibhne's complaints about his plight. Although he eventually repents of his sinful deeds, he still remembers with longing the time "when I deemed more melodious / the yelping of the wolves / than the voice of a cleric within

/ a-baaing and a-bleating" (O'Keeffe 153).

What is interesting about these texts which serve as "inserted genres" or "found material" in the 20th-century satires is that the "originals" themselves also have many of the characteristics of Menippean satire: dialogue as a means of testing philosophical positions, the questioning of authority (the clergy), the use of the fantastic, the meeting of characters from different times or backgrounds, as well as madness and the violation of norms. In other words, the texts which are borrowed and exploited by Figgis and O'Brien as part of the process of subverting authority themselves challenge authority by means of the same methods that are used by their 20th-century counterparts.

Unlike many other "inserted genres" in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the text of *Buile Suibhne* is used by O'Brien almost in its entirety and with only a few hints of a parody of O'Keeffe's 1913 translation; other "found" material in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, both ancient and modern, is much more fragmented and distorted. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* the *story* of Suibhne (or Sweeny) is narrated in its entirety by another borrowed character, Finn Mac Cool; the *character* Sweeny, however, is in addition borrowed by O'Brien's narrator, placed in a new context and made to engage in a dialogue with a variety of other borrowed characters. O'Brien's insertion of a Menippean text within a Menippean text creates the type of serial "Quaker-Oats" or "Chinese Boxes" effect that he was later to use extensively in *The Third Policeman*: in the Menippean dialogue between characters of different backgrounds which challenges dogma O'Brien inserts a character who was originally part of a Menippean dialogue between characters of different backgrounds which challenges dogma. In such a serial universe authoritarian attitudes do not find a firm footing.

The Return of the Hero differs from *At Swim-Two-Birds* in that it borrows from and parodies only one existing medieval tale (albeit that this story exists in a number of sometimes quite different versions). Figgis does not essentially alter the idea and the nature of the confrontation between Oisín and Patrick, for much the same reasons that O'Brien keeps the story of Suibhne largely intact. Generally speaking, Figgis's changes and additions to the found material serve to strengthen the tale's Menippean characteristics, such as the addition of more voices (other bishops besides Patrick to represent different and more extreme religious attitudes), more frequent and more extreme violence and taboo behaviour on the part of Oisín, and a greater emphasis on the impossibility of establishing the conclusive and incontestable truth of any position.

Each of the two satires under discussion, then, creates a series of dialogues: between "old" and "new" characters within a new context and in new combinations who represent different and opposing values and ideologies; but also between the older texts and their modern reworkings. The dialogue between these two separate dialogues creates a paradox characteristic of Menippean satire. On the one hand, the dialogue between characters serves to question and undermine the authority of prevalent ideologies: in *The Return of the Hero*, Oisín's stubborn, uncomprehending and heretical behaviour consistently questions and undermines the authority of the Church. The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* sets out to expose the "despotism" of traditional literary devices which create the illusion of a reality that does not exist. The focus of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is therefore the authority of literature or of the text itself. But while the dialogues on the level of the characters in the satires of Figgis and O'Brien address different types and expressions of authority, what is fundamentally at stake in both satires is the elusive and mysterious nature of truth itself. This is borne out in both cases by the textual dialogue.

The dialogue between texts, and the reference within each satire to the existence of multiple manuscripts, fragments and versions of texts, sabotages the criticism of any particular ideology or authority implicit in the characters' dialogue - since such criticism implies that the critic adheres to a different, but equally inflexible truth - by questioning the authority of the foundation on which all judgments of such issues are based: text, language and meaning itself. The narrative framework of each satire draws attention to the fact that the stories we are reading exist only as (imperfect) texts. At frequent intervals in *The Return of the Hero* we hear St. Patrick reminding his scribe Brogan to write down all Oisín's stories. The narrator of the book makes it clear that we only have access to the characters and the story through Brogan's text. This places a series of narrators between the reader and the "events" recorded in the tale: the narrator of *The Return of the Hero* tells us what Brogan tells us that Oisín said that Finn did. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* the textual maze is more overt and even more complex: the first-person narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* writes a book about an author, Trellis, who creates and borrows characters for a book he is writing; these characters turn against their author and create another author, Orlick, Trellis's son, who writes a book about his father in which he punishes him for being a tyrannical writer.

What is most crucial about the textual layers thus created in these satires is not the number of manuscripts or the complexity of the relationship between them, but above all their incompleteness and obscurity. *The Return of the Hero* relates that towards the end of his inconclusive but increasingly antagonistic argument with Patrick and the bishops, a change takes place in Oisín: he addresses the clerics, but his words are those of a young man, or an old man, or both. The narrator tells us that "It is most unfortunate that at this point the texts vary considerably" and that, moreover, "the value of the texts at this critical moment seem[s] to increase with the degree of their inaccessibility" (201).

The narrator of Figgis's novel reports that there are three extant manuscripts of the tale. The text in the Library at Leipsic is clearly written, well preserved and accessible to all without restriction, but it finishes at a loose end. The text in the British Museum is fuller but is kept locked up in a strong box, and is only shown to those of unimpeachable faith. It is in wretched condition, written in a crabbed hand and difficult to read. It ends with the speech of an old man. The text at Trinity College Dublin is kept in a strong room, underground, and the narrator relates how access was gained to it only after bribing one of the College's most lenient Fellows and drugging the others. The manuscript is falling apart and there is hardly a word in it that is not abbreviated. It gives "what appears to be the speech of a young man" (203). Neither manuscript, however, relates what happened to Oisín after he left St. Patrick.

The narrator of *The Return of the Hero* insists on examining every available scrap of evidence that might throw light on the question of the story's end, since "four rooms at the Royal Irish Academy are piled thick, from floor to floor, with manuscripts dealing only with this point" (213). Two of the rooms full of texts, he claims, are of no help at all: many of the manuscripts contain only rude remarks, obscene jests in difficult Irish or still more obscure Latin; others are filled with perplexing drawings, some of plumed and mysterious presences, others of no kind of presences at all. The narrator tells us that only a few incidents "drop through the finely meshed sieve of criticism, and may therefore with authority be dropped on this page" (214). The first reports that an old man had seen a strange and wonderful being coming down the hill, which led him to the conclusion that the gods were walking abroad and revealing themselves to men. The second recorded incident concerns a young man who told his mother that he had seen a terrible demon stalking down the road, a notion which terrified them both. Reportedly a third man, a Dane, told his wife that he had seen a strange being, either a god or an old sort of Irishman, but that either way it boded ill for the Danish establishments at Cluain Tairbh. One final text closes the series: an old and almost overlooked hagiology which, according to the narrator, contains "the one priceless truth in the century of credulous fables that encumber its pages" (217). It reports that a young herd witnessed a wonderful being leaping across the beach and into the sea; he heard it call out, "Mannanán mac Lir!", and then the being disappeared. A hermit told the young man that he had seen a demon; the herd "asked if this was an omen that he would die by drowning; and the saint told him that he would not die by drowning if he never went near water" (218).

The textual status of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is equally precarious, its manuscripts being similarly inconclusive and full of gaps at crucial points of the story. The first person narrator of the novel, finding the description of the birth of Orlick beyond the powers of his imagination, decides at this point simply "to abandon a passage extending over the length of eleven pages" (144). Elsewhere the same narrator reports: "It happens that a portion of my manuscript containing an account ... of the words that passed between Furriskey and the voice [of his creator] is lost beyond retrieval" (50). This discovery leads to further textual deletions:

> ... I found two things which caused me considerable consternation.
> *The first thing*: An inexplicable chasm in the pagination, four pages of unascertained content being wanting.
> *The second thing*: An unaccountable omission of one of the four improper assaults required by the ramification of the plot or argument....
> ... Without seeking independent advice on the matter, I decided - foolishly perhaps - to delete the entire narrative and present in its place a brief résumé (or summary) of the events which it contained (60).

This decision means that the whole of Trellis's moralistic novel, "the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends" (215-16), in fact the sole *raison d'être* of all the characters in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is summarized in just over one page of text. This arbitrary deletion is repeated on a different textual level when Trellis's servant accidentally burns the manuscript of his book, thereby ending the story. *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* each consist of a narrative framework that contains and relies upon incomplete and fragmentary texts. This means that the narrative framework itself cannot be anything but inconclusive.

In the Introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin's theory of communication is summarized as follows:

> On the one hand, a mode of transcription must, in order to do its work of separating out texts, be a more or less fixed system. But these repeatable features, on the other hand, are in the power of the particular context in which the utterance is made; this context can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context....
> Implicit in all this is the notion that all transcription systems - including the speaking voice in a living utterance - are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey (xix-xx).

Both *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds* draw attention to the fact that there is no objective truth or meaning: that every perception of meaning is dependent on context and on an act of interpretation on the part of the receiver of the message.

No text has authority: texts are incomplete, unreliable and versions, retellings, parodies and interpretations of other texts without ever touching base in a verifiable truth or reality. The only truth is that there is no such thing as truth; the only authoritative position is that no position has a claim to authority. Needless to say, this also holds true for the position of the narrators of *The Return of the Hero* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

If these satires come to any conclusion it is that anything is possible, that authority is a fiction, since the truth is inaccessible, and that significance is therefore to be found, paradoxically, only in mystery and the absence of meaning. In *The Return of the Hero*, St. Patrick in moments of crisis always vehemently utters one word: "Mudebroth!," which has the effect of immediately silencing even his most heated opponents. Questioned by Oisín as to the meaning of this word, Brogan replies that nobody knows for certain what it means and that it should be remembered that Patrick, being a Gall, speaks imperfect Irish; it might mean "my God's doomsday." Oisín, however, thinks that it is an incantation "and therefore means nothing. It is not possible for an incantation to have any power when it is known what it means. The value of all incantations is in the ignorance of the hearer, and it is because no one knows what it means that Mudebroth is a mighty spell" (62). The value of the word lies in its mystery, and "Truth is itself the greatest mystery of all" (92). A similar view is expressed in *At Swim-Two-Birds* by the Good Fairy: since everything depends for its meaning upon context (including the perception of good and evil, since neither exists in isolation but is defined in terms of its opposite), "Answers do not matter so much as questions.... A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question" (201). The book itself therefore has three alternative endings, and as for the meaning of it all: "It is extremely hard to say.... Nobody knows" (217).