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5 Postmodern Play with Worlds

The Case of At Swim-Two-Birds

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Patricia Waugh observes that “all art is ‘play’ in its creation of other symbolic worlds” (1984, 34). In this essay, I argue that the readerly play involved in delineating textual possible worlds is a defining feature of “postmodernist fiction” (McHale 1987, 10), where worlds tend to be multiple, complex, or even kaleidoscopic in nature. Postmodern fiction typically instantiates an aesthetics of play in which ontological questions about the sorts of worlds characters inhabit and the ways in which readers orient to these worlds constitute a central readerly concern.

In association with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “carnavalesque,” Roger Caillois’s category of “*ilinx*” productively captures the nature of play in postmodern fiction, particularly in the way it foregrounds the affective disorientation that readers sometimes experience in their encounters with chaotic postmodern textual worlds. Referring to games “based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (Caillois [1958] 1961, 23), Marie-Laure Ryan observes that “*ilinx* expresses the aesthetics, sensibility, and conception of language of the postmodern age” (2001, 186). While the “jarring fragmentation and incoherencies” of postmodern play worlds have their own “stimulating aesthetic (and cognitive) effect,” Richard Shusterman notes that the “human need to perceive and experience satisfying unities in the disordered flux of experience” also “motivates our interest in [literary] art” (2000, 75–77). Since *ilinx* is characterized by the pleasurable, *momentary* destruction of stable perceptions, it is simultaneously implied that coherence-restoring cognitive processes complement the disorienting effects of play.

I suggest that the cognitive disorientation readers tend to experience in their encounters with postmodern textual worlds spurs what Friedrich Schiller terms the “formal instinct” (“Letter XII,” in [1794] 1902) into action, as readers attempt to comprehend the text and restore stability of perception by imposing some form of (artificial and/or temporary) “global coherence” (Ryan 2001, 223). While classical aesthetics dominantly locates such harmonizing tendencies in the artifact’s formal design—as a product of the artist’s efforts—postmodern literature modifies our understanding of contemporary aesthetics by displacing the latent energies of coherence, order, and harmony from the artifact/artist to the reader/perceiver/participant/player. This shared onus of formal coherence promotes the “active and playful participation of the reader” (195–96), whereby order and coherence are no longer readily perceptible characteristics of the artifact but are (partially) relocated to readers’ consciousness. Using Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a case study, I suggest that the possible worlds approach functions as a particularly useful apparatus for capturing readers’ cognitive attempts at managing the complexities of postmodern fiction’s disorienting, playful textual worlds.

Mediating Accessibility Relations: Finessing the Possible Worlds Model

Ryan’s account of possible worlds theory designates *reality* as a universe that is “the sum of the imaginable,” with the “actual world” (AW) at the center of its system and satellite worlds that are products of “mental activity, such as dreaming, imagining, foretelling, promising, or storytelling” (2005b, 446–48). Theorists like David Lewis and Nicholas Rescher have further debated and finessed the concept, but for my purpose, the AW refers to the world inhabited by flesh-and-blood authors and readers, including the late Brian O’Nolan (better known by his pseudonym, Flann O’Brien) and readers of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Ryan explains that though there is only one AW, fictional texts establish their own pretended actual world, with “its own horizons of possibilities,” which she calls the “textual actual world” (TAW) (447). The process of “fictional recentering” occurs when we read fiction and shift our attention from the AW to the TAW, becoming “in make-believe temporary members of the recentered system” (Ryan 1991, 24–26).

Ryan suggests that readers minimize such distance “between the textual universe and our own system of reality” by a default reliance on “the principle of minimal departure” (1991, 51), which states that “when readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality. This model can only be overruled by the text itself” (2005b, 447).¹ Scholars who dispute aspects of the minimal departure principle include Lubomír Doležel, who argues that the principle’s assumption of “ontologically complete” fictional worlds is problematic because “incompleteness [is] the distinctive feature of fictional existence. He argues that by filling the gaps, readers would reduce the ontological diversity found in fictional worlds to a uniform structure” (Ryan 2005b, 447; see also Ryan’s chapter in this volume addressing this debate).

The other objection comes from Thomas Pavel, who suggests that when “confronted with radical oddities,” readers are likely instead to anticipate “‘maximal departure’ from the real world” (1986, 93; cf. Alber 2009, 82; Ryan 1991, 57). The main difference between minimal and maximal departure relates to the cognitive premise from which readers proceed: if minimal departure relies on a default assumption of the fictional world’s similarity to our own experiential reality, I propose that maximal departure proceeds from readerly expectations that such real-world frames are repurposed, reconfigured, and retooled as mere building blocks of the fictional universe; the distinction lies in readers’ attitudes toward the functions of these frames of reference. Under the principle of maximal departure, the fantastic, strange, and nonsensical (to borrow from J. R. R. Tolkien) are not anomalous but default modes of the fictional world. It is crucial to note that the principle of maximal departure does not completely cancel the effects of minimal departure, since we overwhelmingly use such real-world frames in our everyday processing of the world—including fiction. Instead, it is useful to consider the principles of minimal and maximal departure as being two ends on the same spectrum of fictional credulity, whereby readers adopt a point of departure based on their attentiveness to textual cues in the work of fiction.

To address Doležel’s contention that incompleteness is distinctive of fictional worlds and attests to their ontological diversity and Pavel’s suggestion that readers anticipate maximal departure when confronted with radical oddities, I propose that three factors mediate accessibility relations,

which help readers determine the shape and nature of (postmodern) textual worlds. I use the possible worlds model to explain the functional purpose of some of postmodern fiction's difficulties in terms of their effects on the reading experience and to explore possible strategies that readers intuit or undertake in coping with the challenges posed by such texts.

Ryan proposes that nine orders of "accessibility relations from AW [are] involved in the construction of TAW"—qualities that readers use to determine the relevance of assuming that principles operating in the AW will continue to operate in the TAW. The criteria of comparison, in "decreasing order of stringency," include (1) "identity of properties," (2) "identity of inventory," (3) "compatibility of inventory," (4) "chronological compatibility," (5) "physical compatibility," (6) "taxonomic compatibility," (7) "logical compatibility," (8) "analytical compatibility," and (9) "linguistic compatibility" (1991, 32–33). Two domains of such accessibility relations govern our mental blueprints of the fictional universe: "transuniverse relations" articulate relationships between the AW and TAW, "function[ing] as the airline through which participants in the fictional game reach the world at the center of the textual universe," while "intrauniverse relations" articulate relationships linking the TAW to its own textual alternate possible worlds (32). The notion of play thus implicitly characterizes Ryan's model in terms of readers' projections and coconstructions of textual possible worlds.

In my revision to Ryan's model, I propose that three types of textual cues mediate our beliefs/knowledge about the distance/proximity of the AW from the TAW and, correspondingly, of the TAW from its TAPWS:

1. At which point or how far into the narrative do departures take place?
2. How frequently do we encounter departures?
3. What is the qualitative nature of these departures?

I use the word *departures* in reference to accessibility relations: for instance, a departure or deviation from "logical compatibility" is evident in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where sexual relations and procreation are possible between an author and his character (Orlick Trellis is begotten after Dermot Trellis assaults his own fictional creation, Sheila Lamont). The qualitative nature of departures relates both to how explicitly such departures are signaled in the text and to the perceived degree of estrangement: the lower its posi-

tion on Ryan's list of accessibility relations, the more readers are likely to regard such deviations as radical.

The position, frequency, and nature of the textual universe's departures from the AW determine whether readers are likely to adopt the principle of minimal or maximal departure. In general, readers likely assume *minimal* departure the *later* a deviation occurs, the *fewer* the number of departures, the more *implicit* authors are about them (such that readers likely fail to observe their occurrence), and/or the *less radical* the nature of these departures. Conversely, readers likely assume *maximal* departure the *sooner* they notice deviations from the AW, the more *frequently* they observe them, the more *explicitly* authors signal them, and/or the more *radical* the nature of these departures. Furthermore, indeterminacy or "undecidable relations"—such as "when epistemic access to these facts is denied" (Ryan 1991, 39)—is also likely to facilitate the principle of maximal departure. I suggest that readers remain engaged in discerning accessibility relations even in textual worlds that cue maximal departure, since it is a pertinent cognitive act that gives us traction for gaining a "foothold" in these fictional worlds, however slippery and tentative.

I begin my analysis with a review of critical approaches to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which highlights the difficulties critics and readers have encountered in cognitively processing the play with possible worlds in O'Brien's novel. By elucidating the novel's transuniverse and intrauniverse relations, I explain how my three factors mediating accessibility relations bear on the principle of minimal or maximal departure in each world. In so doing, I hope to more clearly explicate the imaginative range of the novel's tangled textual worlds and to explain the functional purposes of some of its interpretive difficulties. I suggest that navigating the novel's labyrinthine fictional universe is part of the challenge O'Brien invites his readers to participate in through the aesthetics of play that characterizes the novel's overarching textual design.

Textual Universe of *At Swim-Two-Birds*

Brian McHale theorizes that unlike modernist fiction, which is preoccupied with epistemological issues, "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*" (1987, 10). Therefore, questions such as "What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" and "How is a projected world structured?" are concerns brought

to the fore in postmodern fiction (10). The frequently problematic structures of worlds are a central readerly concern in postmodern texts such as Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981), Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1985–86), and especially O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where discerning the very shape of its textual universe becomes a key readerly game-task, particularly given the ambiguity or uncertainty surrounding attempts to map out these worlds.

Consider the amount of critical effort that has been expended in attempts to offer a comprehensible structure of O'Brien's novel. Thomas Shea observes, "From the beginning, we assume that [the characters] Finn, Furriskey, and The Pooka exist adjacent to one another. . . . Not until the fifth autobiographical reminiscence do we find that Finn has been 'demoted' a level, serving as a character of Dermot Trellis who is himself a character of the undergraduate. Once we think we have it settled, however, our quandary begins anew" (1992, 58). David Herman describes the novel as a "baroquely hypodiegetic narrative" with characters like Orlick Trellis, whose "diegetically unstable status" allows him to "metaleptically migrate to a frame positioned somewhere between O'Brien's narrator and Dermot Trellis" (1997, 136–39). Shea notes that "critics often struggle to impose thematic shape onto *At Swim*" (1992, 74) and the very tentativeness of the language these critics use (e.g., "struggle," "somewhere between," and "quandary") evinces the difficulties they have had navigating the text's ontological challenges.

Anne Clissmann (1975, 84–85), Rüdiger Imhof (1985, 168), and William Gass (1998, ix) are generally in agreement that O'Brien's book (B₁) comprises the homodiegetic student-narrator's book (B₂), which in turn contains Dermot Trellis's book (B₃), which in turn frames Dermot's son, Orlick Trellis's book (B₄). Gass points out that the four books "are not hermetically sealed from one another," but like "salvage from the sea, flotsam from this or that wrecked narrative washes up on foreign shores" (1998, ix). Though this four-book model is widely used, Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja points out that it has "one fundamental drawback" (2007, 51): readers tend to accept Dermot "Trellis as a narrator because they are told to, but his book on sin occupies virtually no textual space," since he "never succeeds in creating any manuscript at all" (76). Bohman-Kalaja rightly observes that we never read a word of Dermot's manuscript; in fact, most of B₃'s events occur when Dermot is drugged and asleep and hence could

Fig. 5.1. Possible worlds model of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

have no possible knowledge of them. Furthermore, even within this four-book structure, Imhof points out that it is “possible to establish yet another level,” depending on what readers do with “the tale about Finn MacCool, who in turn tells the romance about Mad King Sweeny”: while some critics regard it as part of B₃, others “regard the Finn part as a ‘book’ in its own right” (1985, 168). Reliance on this four-book structure thus presents significant interpretive challenges.

My adaptation of the possible worlds approach makes it possible to untangle some of these navigational nightmares, since I rely on textual cues about storylines and characters to answer McHale’s questions “What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?” (1987, 10). In so doing, I employ a critical approach that offers an apparatus for aiding readerly comprehension of the fabula. Possible worlds theory thus serves as a useful model for approaching postmodern fiction’s kaleidoscopic textual worlds, giving us a sense of how readers might possibly handle *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ ontological challenges.

With reference to figure 5.1 and table 5.1, AW refers to the *actual world* inhabited by flesh-and-blood authors and readers. TAW refers to the *textual*

Table 5.1. Possible worlds of *At Swim-Two-Birds*

TEXTUAL WORLDS	INHABITANTS
Textual actual world (TAW)	Student-narrator Brinsley Byrne Cryan Kerrigan Kelly Verney Wright Student-narrator's uncle Mr. Connors Mr. Fogarty Mr. Corcoran Mr. Hickey William Falconer
Textual alternate possible world 1 (TAPW 1): characters in the student-narrator's manuscript	Dermot Trellis Orlick Trellis Sheila Lamont Antony Lamont John Furriskey Peggy William Tracy Paul Shanahan (cowboy) Slug Willard Peter (Shorty) Andrews Red Indians Henderson Red Kiersay Unnamed Belgian author Timothy Danaos Dona Ferentes Good Fairy Pooka (Fergus MacPhellimey) Finn MacCool Dermot Granya Sweeny Jem Casey Detective-Officer Snodgrass Superintendent Clohessy Mr. Lamphall Teresa
Textual alternate possible subworld 1 (TAPSW 1.1): characters in Finn MacCool's imaginings (Correspondingly, also characters in the student-narrator's manuscript)	Conán Diarmuid Donn Caolcrodha Mac Morna Liagan Luaimneach O Luachair Dheaghaidh Gearr mac Aonchearda

TEXTUAL WORLDS	INHABITANTS
Textual alternate possible subworld 2 (TAPSW 1.2): characters in Orlick's manuscript (Correspondingly, also characters in the student-narrator's manuscript)	Dermot Trellis (accused) Paul Shanahan (philosopher) Justice Sweeny Justice Lamont Justice Casey Justice Andrews Justice Lamphall Justice Furriskey Supt. Clohessy Mr. Sweeny F. MacCool S. Willard R. Kiersay M. Tracy Pooka Good Fairy Moling Unnamed cleric Short-horn cow
Textual alternate possible world 2 (TAPW 2): characters in William Falconer's "The Ship- wreck"	Master Albert Rodmond Arion Palemon Anna

actual world inhabited by the student-narrator and his family and friends. TAPW 1 refers to the dominant *textual alternate possible world* inhabited by Dermot Trellis and his fellow authors, as well as their created and hired characters. Embedded within TAPW 1 are at least two *textual alternate possible subworlds*, TAPSW 1.1 (characterized by Finn MacCool's imaginings) and TAPSW 1.2 (characterized by the events that occur in Orlick Trellis's manuscript). TAPW 2 refers to a minor *textual alternate possible world* as characterized by the events of William Falconer's epic poem "The Shipwreck." By explicating the configuration of textual worlds in *At Swim-Two-Birds* with reference to the position, frequency, and nature of their departures from the AW, I focus on moments that cue fictional recentering to show how a possible worlds approach allows us to account for some of the novel's difficulties in terms of their effects on the reading experience.

Critics who use the four-book structure tend to agree on the relative diegetic stability of the novel's TAW, inhabited by the homodiegetic student-narrator and his family and friends. Part of the reason for this

agreement is that fictional recentering from its alternate possible worlds back to the TAW is signposted by an italicized heading—such as “*Biographical reminiscence, part . . .*” or “*Extract from my typescript*” (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 8–9)—which signal that the narration is about to change gears as the student-narrator moves from describing events taking place around him to explicating parts of his book manuscript. However, headings are used not only to cue fictional recentering but also to gloss information that the student-narrator provides about objects in the TAW, such as the “*Quality of rasher in use in household*” or the student-narrator’s “*Description of my uncle*” (6). In other words, not every use of a heading signals a contextual shift, which is part of the disorienting confusion readers are likely to experience and with increasing intensity when *At Swim-Two-Birds* becomes populated by more and more characters and subworlds. Though readers appear to be able to rely on these headings for shifts in contexts, like other O’Brien devices (such as the chapter title on the very first page), the headings turn out to be one of O’Brien’s illusionistic tricks: playful red herrings that contribute to the novel’s comic appeal.²

In general, however, the headings signal transitions from the novel’s satellite worlds back to the TAW—a world characterized by few departures from the AW, none of which is radical, such that readers, without any great leaps of imagination, can readily adopt the belief that the homodiegetic student-narrator plausibly lived in Dublin, Ireland, of the AW at some point. Readers are thus cued to approach the TAW using the principle of minimal departure. It is when we leave the TAW that worlds start to become muddled.

TAPW 1 is characterized by frequent and radical departures from the AW and TAW. Readers learn that Dermot Trellis—a product of the TAW student-narrator’s story and hence of TAPW 1—buys “a ream of ruled foolscap and is starting on his story. He is compelling all his characters to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them. . . . Trellis has absolute control over his minions but this control is abandoned when he falls asleep. Consequently he must make sure that they are all in bed before he locks up and goes to bed himself” (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 31). Readers are thus directed to approach TAPW 1 using the principle of maximal departure, since we are explicitly cued early on to make a radical break with the AW. Furthermore, the comic purpose of such radical departures—of a dictatorial author sharing the same phys-

ical space as his characters—prompts readers to take a playful attitude toward TAPW 1.

Such logical incompatibilities (in relation to the AW and TAW) are ad hoc features of TAPW 1 that are continually foregrounded: Dermot, for instance, sexually assaults his fictional creation, who later gives birth to a son, Orlick Trellis (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 58, 142–43). Furthermore, like the character John Furriskey, Orlick is born into TAPW 1 as a fully grown man rather than a baby through the process of “aestho-autogamy” (36–37, 142–43). To compound the challenges readers face in cognitively processing TAPW 1, its inhabitants are not fully fleshed out early in the narrative discourse: consider the Good Fairy, who enters only midway through the novel, significantly modifying our existing mental model of TAPW 1, which has thus far largely been confined to the Red Swan Hotel and its inhabitants. Part of the reader's game-task is to figure out who belongs (and how) to which world—an issue I take up more fully in the following section on intrauniverse relations.

The effect of creating a TAW that is very similar to our sense of AW reality to buffer the AW and TAPW 1 is that it prevents us from simplistically reading (or, worse still, dismissing) *At Swim-Two-Birds* as pure fantasy. By juxtaposing these worlds that operate on different principles within the same textual universe, O'Brien foregrounds issues of metafictionality by preserving the strange and wonderful texture of TAPW 1 (operating on maximal departure) alongside overt confrontations about the nature of fiction writing thus raised in the TAW (operating on minimal departure). Waugh notes that postmodern metafictional novels function “through the problematization rather than the destruction of the concept of ‘reality’” (1984, 40–41). The mimetic TAW thus serves as *At Swim-Two-Birds*' tenuous anchor to the AW, creating an alternative to (rather than replacement/substitution/destruction of) reality. In so doing, ontological readerly game-tasks are foregrounded as we are forced to continually engage with our own AW sense of reality even as we are kept busy in the shuffle of fictional recentering between the novel's satellite worlds. O'Brien further problematizes the very idea of a fictional “center” by displacing its centrality altogether; most of the novel's action, so to speak, occurs not in the TAW but in TAPW 1 and TAPSW 1.2, such that we are likely to feel more invested in the outcomes of characters populating these satellite worlds (as compared to characters in the mimetic TAW, with whom we are more marginally engaged).

Intrauniverse Relations: Delineating TAPW 1 from Its Subworlds

One of the key interpretive difficulties that characterizes O'Brien's novel is determining if and when fictional recentering is supposed to be taking place—a challenge compounded by the stylistic continuities that characterize different textual worlds (e.g., italicized headings that gloss the TAW and signpost TAPW 1) and stylistic incongruities that characterize the same textual world (e.g., Finn MacCool's grandiloquence is jarringly juxtaposed with Shanahan's colloquialism in TAPW 1).³ The difficulties entailed in delineating TAPW 1 from its subworlds are aggravated by O'Brien's playful use of naming functions, as he employs both "homonymy" (Ryan 2001, 232) and "transworld identity" (Bell and Alber 2012, 171) to perpetuate further readerly confusion.⁴ The possible worlds approach thus becomes an especially useful "cheat sheet" for navigating O'Brien's disorienting, tangled play worlds. By grasping the novel's complex "internal configuration" through its "intrauniverse relations" (Ryan 1991, 32), readers gain a clearer sense of the brilliant construction underlying its textual universe instead of simply dismissing *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a chaotic mishmash.

The expansive TAPW 1 is at least partly modeled on AW Ireland: readers are told that the Red Swan Hotel is located in "Lower Leeson Street," and Shanahan reminisces about "Dublin in the old days" (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 22, 49). TAPW 1's inhabitants include author figures (Dermot Trellis, William Tracy, Henderson, the poet Jem Casey, and an unnamed "Belgian author" [99]), created characters (Trellis creates Furriskey, Peggy, Sheila Lamont, and the Pooka; Tracy creates Shanahan, Slug, Shorty, and the Red Indians—some of whom Trellis borrows), "hired" characters (Antony Lamont of unknown origin and Finn MacCool from Celtic mythology [57–58]), at least one begotten character (Orlick Trellis), familiar figures from Celtic folk and fairy lore (the Good Fairy and Sweeny), and Teresa of the Red Swan Hotel.

This eclectic configuration of characters that constitute TAPW 1 comically stages O'Brien's "irritation" with Ireland's intellectual environment of his time (Taaffe 2008, 27–28). Published in 1939, *At Swim-Two-Birds* was composed during a period of volatile cultural and political change as an increasingly independent Ireland moved from the formation of the Irish Free State to the establishment of its own constitution in 1937. Carol Taaffe notes that though O'Brien was "disdainful of modernism's elitism, he was

also nevertheless ambivalent in his attitude to the populism extolled by Gaelic Revivalists and other cultural nationalists” (3). This “impatience with all forms of literary pomposity” (31) is playfully invoked in *At Swim-Two-Birds* when Finn MacCool’s recitations of Celtic lays and ballads are constantly interrupted by Shanahan’s complaints (“bloody blather” being one of his choice responses) that the old Irish lays fail to account for “the man in the street” like himself (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 9–16, 69–77, 82).

O’Brien’s response was finally to playfully parody all of these attitudes, mercilessly poking fun at them both in his novels and in “Cruiskeen Lawn,” his newspaper column in the *Irish Times*. His playful irreverence is emphasized by the decision to situate this diverse “rag-bag” of characters and “incongruous styles” (Taaffe 2008, 40) in TAPW 1—a world that operates on the principle of maximal departure and is characterized by frequent and radical departures from the AW he was responding to. O’Brien’s decision to situate these characters and their corresponding voices—a parody of the inherent conflict that characterized Ireland’s intellectual environment at the time—in a textual world twice removed from AW reality implies how far removed such polemical attitudes were to the fruitful development of a rich, independent Irish culture.

Though I situate Finn MacCool in TAPW 1, what we are to make of the character (particularly given his bardic tendencies) remains critically disputed. Even within the conventional four-book structure many O’Brien critics favor, there are debates as to whether the tale about Finn MacCool is “part of the Trellis book” or “a ‘book’ in its own right” (Imhof 1985, 168). Compounding the confusion is the fact that the Finn mythology exists in the AW—and by the principle of minimal departure, we take it to exist in the TAW as well—leading readers to wonder if Finn’s narrative possibly warrants a new TAPW of its own, like the narrated events from William Falconer’s poem “The Shipwreck.”⁵

Readers are explicitly told from the beginning that “Finn MacCool was a legendary hero of old Ireland” who was subsequently “hired by Trellis on account of [his] venerable appearance and experience, to act as [Peggy’s] father” (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 5, 57). Finn, however, turns out to be an abusive cad of an adoptive father, since Peggy’s “virtue has already been assailed” by him a quarter way into the novel (57). Some critics are inclined to delineate two different Finns in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one being the cad-like adoptive father and the other being the legendary Irish giant

who recites Celtic lays and ballads. However, using my revision of the possible worlds model based on mediated accessibility relations, I suggest that we are dealing with the same Finn in both cases (excepting the judge/jury member “F. MacCool” [193], who indeed belongs to a different textual world—a point to which I shall return).

Readers are likely to consider Finn as part of TAPW 1 based on several textual cues. First, like other characters in TAPW 1, Finn recognizes his own existence as a character and remarks on his own fictionality: “Small wonder, said Finn, that Finn is without honour in the breast of a sea-blue book, Finn that is twisted and trampled and tortured for the weaving of a story-teller’s book-web. Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story?” (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 15). Not only do we learn early on that authors and their created characters coinhabit TAPW 1, but we are explicitly and repeatedly reminded that this is a world in which characters are aware of their own roles as characters: Shanahan, for instance, recalls being soundly chastised by his creator, Tracy, when he responds to a false summons from someone impersonating Tracy (49–50).

The Pooka’s account of “one of the old Irish sagas” (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 138) ultimately allows readers to pin Finn to TAPW 1. As the Pooka and others await the birth of Dermot Trellis’s son at the Red Swan Hotel, the Pooka relates having “played a small part” in “the old story about Dermot and Granya” a “long time ago” (138–42). The old story to which the Pooka refers—“The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne” (original Celtic forms of the Anglicized names Dermot and Granya)—is a well-known tale from the Fenian cycle of Celtic mythology, a series of narratives centered on Finn MacCool, wherein Granya rejects her betrothal to the aged Finn and elopes with one of his warriors, who is named Dermot.⁶ Since the Pooka met Dermot and Granya while they were on the run, readers are thus cued to treat the Finn narrative as events that happened at an earlier time in TAPW 1, such that AW myth is transposed into TAPW 1 history.⁷ When the mythological in the AW is made historical in TAPW 1, readers are correspondingly prompted to consider the potentially “mythic” dimensions of historical accounts rendered in our own AW—not in order to negate the existence/reality of events that did occur in the AW past, to paraphrase Waugh, but to foreground the difficulties of comprehensively rendering accurate accounts of those events, that is, what we call “history.” To simply treat the Finn narrative as a separate TAPW would be to miss such nuances.

At Swim-Two-Birds does, however, feature at least two subworlds that are satellites of TAPW 1. Though the mythologies that Finn narrates (first his own and later Sweeny's) belong to the "historical fabric" of TAPW 1, so to speak, I suggest that the companions who prompt Finn to relate his story at the beginning of *At Swim-Two-Birds* belong to the subworld TAPSW 1.1, which I identify as part of Finn's imaginings. Finn's recitation begins and then stalls repeatedly, even as Conán, Diarmuid Donn, Caolcrodh Mac Morna, Liagan Luaimneach O Luachair Dheaghaidh, and Gearr mac Aonchearda urge him on in turn (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 9–16).⁸ Like Finn, all five characters are adapted from the Fenian cycle of Celtic mythology, but several textual cues suggest that Finn's interactions with these characters exist only in his own mind. Adrian Oțoiu, for instance, notes that Finn "seems to have . . . lost his eye-sight, or to be sitting in complete darkness," as he addresses his "invisible" companions (2012, 295–96). Furthermore, Conán, who initially instigates Finn to tell these stories, is later revealed as "hidden Conán" (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 12, 60).

We encounter Conán once more when Finn, Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan are gathered in a room after Dermot has fallen asleep: "Relate, said hidden Conán, the tale of the Feasting of Dún na nGedh. Finn *in his mind* was nestling with his people" (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 60, emphasis added). Even though Conán's remarks are interspersed with Furriskey's, Lamont's, and Shanahan's comments, Conán remains ontologically distinct from TAPW 1 and likely exists only in Finn's mind, since the other three characters do not react or respond to Conán's remarks. I thus suggest that the interactions between Finn and Conán (and likely their other "invisible" contemporaries mentioned earlier) exist only in Finn's mind, TAPSW 1.1, though the stories he tells are part of his memories and belong to the historical fabric of TAPW 1. The shift between worlds here is relatively covert and infrequently encountered, since it happens only twice, making it easy for the reader to misread these moments as belonging to TAPW 1. O'Brien's textual worlds thus constantly threaten to collapse or blend into each other if our attention lapses even momentarily. We have to constantly shift gears as we traverse between worlds in order to make sense of the chaotic, game-like structures that characterize *At Swim-Two-Birds*' textual universe. Using possible worlds theory to delineate such ontological shifts suggests how readers gain a tentative interpretive foothold in O'Brien's complex, disorienting layering of worlds.

Orlick Trellis, Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey are members of TAPW 1 who fantasize about wreaking vengeance on Dermot Trellis, with Orlick recording these imaginings in his manuscript, the events of which constitute TAPSW 1.2. Inhabitants of TAPSW 1.2 include Shanahan the philosopher, Justice Lamont, Justice Furriskey, other jurors/judges/witnesses (including Sweeny, F. MacCool, M. Tracy, J. Casey, R. Kiersay, a talking cow), the Pooka, a Sweeny-like Dermot Trellis, and other characters adapted from the Sweeny/*Suibhne* legend (including Moling and an unnamed cleric likely to be Ronan).⁹ Dermot is recast as the protagonist of Orlick's rescrambled *Suibhne* tale in TAPSW 1.2, but continual interruptions from characters in TAPW 1 cause the events of TAPSW 1.2 to be restarted several times (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 163, 168, 170)—yet another game-like quality of O'Brien's postmodern textual universe. The impish spirit inherent to *At Swim-Two-Birds* is evident in the explicit, deliberate overlap in the taxonomy of character names between TAPW 1 and TAPSW 1.2, which heightens the affective disorientation we experience in our attempts to make sense of O'Brien's tangled textual worlds.

Toward the end of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, while TAPSW 1.2 Dermot is on trial for his life and about to be put to death, Teresa finds “to her surprise” in TAPW 1 that Dermot's room is empty—an unusual occurrence, since we learn early on that he rarely leaves his bed and spends his days mostly in a drugged coma (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 214). It is only when, by “a curious coincidence,” she accidentally burns “the pages which made and sustained the existence of Furriskey and his true friends” in TAPW 1 that “just at that moment, Teresa heard a knock at the hall-door,” and it turns out to be Dermot (215). The “curious coincidence” of TAPW 1 Dermot's reappearance immediately after Teresa burns the pages containing TAPSW 1.2 strongly suggests that intrauniverse relations between the two worlds have been deliberately muddled, as O'Brien coyly implies the confluence of Dermots from TAPW 1 and TAPSW 1.2.¹⁰ Dermot's identity comes into question, since “taxonomic compatibility” (Ryan 1991, 33) between the two worlds becomes an “undecidable relation”: is this an instance of “transworld identity” (Bell and Alber 2012, 171) or of “homonymy”? (Ryan 2001, 232). Leaving this accessibility relation indeterminate leaves room for our playful imaginations to fill these gaps as we will, reinforcing the fluid shapes of worlds operating according to the principle of maximal departure.

Conclusion: An Aesthetics of Play

Postmodern texts like *At Swim-Two-Birds* frequently foreground fiction's "text-as-game" mode, whereby much of the readerly pleasure we encounter in these texts is driven by their engagement of our cognitive capacities in their play with "informational chaos" (Ryan 2001, 240). A large part of the fun involved is the difficult yet pleasurable process of navigating these texts' complex worlds, which are not simply given but gradually uncovered during the reading process.

Play, which I argue is the dominant aesthetic mode of postmodern fiction, has been identified by "neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, social scientists, and researchers" to be a "profound biological process" that correlates to cognitive processing (Brown and Vaughan 2010, 5, 33–35). Drawing on the neuroscientific work of Nobel laureate Gerald Edelman, Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan note that human "perceptual experiences are coded within the brain in scattered 'maps,'" the vitality of which "depends on the active and incessant orchestration of countless details. It seems likely that this orchestration happens most fully through play" and our engagements in "storytelling, art," and other sorts of play activities (35–36; see also Brian Boyd's chapter, "Art as Cognitive Play," in *On the Origin of Stories* [2010, 80–98]). By attending to textual cues such as the position, frequency, and nature of the novel's deviations from the AW, my analysis works to explicate one way by which readers orchestrate the myriad details involved in our cognitive processing of ontologically complex postmodern fictional worlds.

One possible objection that may be raised against my use of possible worlds theory to interpret texts like *At Swim-Two-Birds* is that the approach—in its "clean" delineation of worlds—violates postmodern fiction's fundamental spirit of entropic play. I do not deny that postmodern novelists intend for these worlds to appear extremely chaotic, but I attempt to critically elucidate the text in a way that best approximates the reading experience by using textual cues that mediate accessibility relations to account for how readers deal with the textual mayhem. I suggest that many postmodern fictional worlds are designed to *simulate* pandemonium, forcing the formal instinct to kick into play as readers attempt to dispel the feeling of vertigo and restore stability of perception in order to apprehend the novel's larger concerns (in the case of *At Swim-Two-*

Birds, with metafictionality and parodying sociocultural politics). Furthermore, as I pointed out in my analysis, there are certain characteristics of O'Brien's textual universe that remain indeterminate or undecidable; thus, my use of the possible worlds approach is not incompatible with postmodern fiction's purposeful chaos and ambiguity but functions as a useful heuristic tool to explicate some of the implicit cognitive tasks we likely engage in when we encounter such anarchic texts.

The revised possible worlds model works as an interpretive apparatus that allows readers to establish provisional formal order based on textual cues. Through our participation in their puzzle- or game-like structures, postmodern texts partly shift the onus of co-orchestrating narrative form onto readers. In this way, postmodern literature redefines aesthetic experience by bilocating the form-impulse: both as part of the author's textual design and of readers' participation in the task of cognitively coconstructing the textual universe.

Notes

1. Experiential reality not only refers to readers' firsthand knowledge and experience of the AW but also includes various forms of textual knowledge (fictional or otherwise) that we use as frames of reference in the AW (Ryan 1991, 54). Thus, depending on each individual's experience, knowledge, and "literary competence" (Culler 1980, 101), readers' sense of what departs from experiential reality will vary.
2. Critics including Andrew Shipe (1997, 291) and Monique Gallagher (2005, 2) observe that no other chapters appear in the rest of the novel.
3. Cathal G. Ó Háinle (1987) notes that the use of "various kinds of linguistic register and stylistic detail is utterly haphazard" (42), while Herman (1997, 144) observes that O'Brien's use of "register-switching" and "register-mixing" makes it difficult to rely solely on stylistic delineations to order narrative structure in *At Swim-Two-Birds*.
4. Ryan explains *homonymy* as "a proper name borne by two different characters" (2001, 232), while the term *transworld identity* has been used by numerous critics to describe a character's "identity across possible worlds" (Mackie and Jago 2013; cf. Ryan 1991, 52).
5. We are cued to consider narrated events from Falconer's poem as a satellite world of the TAW (rather than of TAPW 1) because we are explicitly told that this is a poem that the student-narrator peruses in "a volume [he took] from the mantelpiece" (O'Brien [1939] 2007, 207, 209–10).

6. The play on nomenclature arguably creates an “undecidable relation” (Ryan 1991, 39), since readers are unable to determine for certain if this Dermot refers only to the mythological Diarmuid or if the two Dermots (Gráinne’s Diarmuid and Dermot Trellis) have been playfully cobbled together.
7. Crucially, the figure of Finn MacCool has repeatedly weaved back and forth between the pages of *AW* Celtic myth and history: “Originally a mythological figure . . . confined in the learned lore of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries,” Finn was then believed to be a historical figure by eleventh-century chroniclers, only to be displaced yet again “to the realm of mythology” by later historians (Ó Hainle 1987, 15; O’toiu 2012, 302). O’Brien reverses this displacement in *At Swim-Two-Birds* by transposing myth into (fictional) history once more, insistently exposing their porous frontiers.
8. Ó Hainle identifies this scene as being modeled on two Fenian tales, where Conán is drawn from *Feis Tighe Chonáin* (or “The Feast in Conán’s House”), while the remaining four characters are drawn from *Tóraigheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair* (alternately known as “The Pursuit of the Hard Gilly / Difficult Servant” or “The Adventures of the Troublesome Fellow”) (Ó Hainle 1997, 25, 32; O’toiu 2012, 304; MacKillop 2004).
9. *Buile Suibhne* recounts the legend of Mad King Sweeny, whose violent temper and confrontations with the cleric Ronan lead the latter to put a curse on him (O’Keeffe 1913). The bulk of the *Suibhne* narrative deals with the consequences of this curse, with Sweeny eventually finding absolution with the help of the cleric Moling shortly before his death.
10. The physical abuse sustained by Dermot in TAPSW 1.2—extracts from Orlick’s manuscript note that many of Dermot’s bones were broken (O’Brien [1939] 2007, 194)—does not seem to translate to any (lasting?) physical damage on Dermot in TAPW 1 once the pages sustaining the existence of Furriskey and company are burnt. TAPW 1 Dermot does, however, seem to carry physical traces of TAPSW 1.2 Dermot’s time in the woods, going by the “dead leaves attached to the soles of his poor feet” and his being attired in a “night-shirt,” since TAPSW 1.2 Dermot was unceremoniously yanked out of bed and sent on his travails when Orlick’s narrative began (182, 215, 163).

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