

Flann O'Brien: The Author's Rhetorical Masks: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Poor Mouth*

Baciu Ana-Maria

Doctoral School – "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Abstract— *Each time the author puts up a mask, he does not hide, he exposes himself, he proffers his utterances and asserts his identity. Dissimulation, multiplication of personality, alienation under rhetorical masks characterise O'Brien's most famous works, and these features tell the difference between the nineteenth-century Lives of prominent people, written as examples to be emulated, and the modernist replacement of autobiography with authorial or figural masks. Enfolded selves and their dissolution into quanta of personality towards multiple possibilities are effects of deconstruction of rationalist metaphysics, readers are forced to reconsider their point of view and experience of the story. It is the author's approach of "Spiegel im Spiegel", reflective of a world from which certainty has fled away never to return. Ahead of his time, his writings chime better with our sensibilities.*

Keywords— *modernism, postmodernism, identity, deconstruction, rhetorical masks.*

The difficulty of placing O'Brien in a well-defined context rises out of the metamorphic world he inhabited beginning with the changed status of southern Ireland, which had recently emerged from under the rule of the British Crown as an independent state.

His writings are reflective of the new realities, of all the "newness" and its consequences: the orderly, stable, Newtonian world had been displaced by a heterogeneous worldpicture shaped by Relativity theory, quantum mechanics, quantum physics, fluid and unstable, which provided access to those equipped with the capacity of the mind to accept and understand the mechanics and logic of change. Reflective of a restless reality: a post-revolutionary site in a war-torn Europe, O'Brien's writings are dynamic entities, caught, as it were, in progress. Under modernity's flag, no knowledge is knowledge in the old, traditional sense, where "to know" used to equate with "to be certain"; on the contrary the very knowledge of the world contributed to a sense of its unstable character and unpredictability. The reflexivity of modern life lies in a constant process of reexamination of social practices in the light of incoming information, thus altering their character in representation. Contrariwise, a reflection upon the nature of modernity taking the form of

a critique of its claim to adequate knowledge (the subject assuming control of the investigated object) and accurate representation, as well as the belief that nothing can be known with any certainty is the realm of postmodernism, where the future is regarded as essentially open, a blank page to be written. At this point of history, Flann O'Brien seems to be standing at the crossroads.

The loss of order in the outside world, devastated by the first world conflagration and trivialized by the rise of mass and consumer society, was tentatively compensated by modernists in the act of creation: the writing of a novel was similar to building one's own reality, The evaporating story line or forking into parallel plots mapped out a multidimensional space. The novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* captivates and invites the reader to a game of hide and seek between fact and fiction, realistic pointers and sham, since "a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham" (O'Brien 1961:25) abandoning the readers at the borderline between meaningful and meaningless, in an uncomfortable position, without providing a definite answer, on the contrary, raising questions, for "answers do not matter so much as questions". (O'Brien 1961:201).

At the same time, understood against the background of the Irish Literary Revival, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is intended to be both contemporary and national. His writing was so innovative that it couldn't be satisfactorily processed by the culture of its creation. His works chime better with our sensibilities, attuned to language games and textual phenomenology. The prevailing mood of irony, its mythologizing of experience, its ambiguity, and its attention to the complexities of the individual consciousness attach the novel to modernism. The overlap of styles and narratives underwriting different historical epochs anticipate New Historicist practices. However, in reading his novels we should keep in mind two perspectives: that of our times and that of the author.

Written in a postcolonial context, his works challenge the position of dominant groups. He is a bi-lingual author, commuting from some undecided location, suspended "in-between" languages, so as to allow his books, half-English, half-Irish, neither one nor the other, to come up with ironic and parodic versions of national and linguistic identity, to turn the tables upon the stereotypes of identity

in the colonial context. He refuses restricting forms of identity subverting them, in a context of an on-going process of incomplete decolonization, making the passage from modernist Yeats, who saw folklore as a mark of identity (he even collected "Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry") to postmodernist deconstruction of fixed identities, mocking the construction of identity through appeal to folklore, to idealized peasants. Where others saw substantial Irishness, he saw clichés, stereotypes, not forms of being but of impersonating, of acting out.

At Swim-Two-Birds is a novel about the writing of another novel, which becomes a theory about novel writing, his implied poetics of fiction paving the way to postmodernism. It is only in relation to "late-modernity" understood as Peter Osborne defines it in his 1992 essay, "Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category" (Osborne 1992: 79-80), as the critique of the despotic Enlightenment since 1900 to the present, that is, incorporating both modernism and postmodernism in light of their common critique of reason. Osborne's view is endorsed and strengthened by Michel Foucault, whose essay on Georges Canguilhem he quotes in this context:

[...] at the end of the colonial era, people began to ask the West what rights its culture, its science, its social organization and finally its rationality itself could have to laying claim to a universal validity: is it not a mirage tied to an economic domination and a political hegemony? Two centuries later, the Enlightenment returns: but now not at all as a way for the West to take cognisance of its present possibilities and of the liberties to which it can accede, but as a way of interrogating it on its limits and the powers which it has abused. Reason as despotic Enlightenment. (Foucault 1991: 12)

The pseudonyms of Brian O'Nolan - Flann O'Brien, Myles na Gopaleen, Brother Barnabas, etc. - enabled him to put on different masks, to assume different authorial selves, becoming in a way, a means to an end: that of questioning and challenging the nationalist and colonial authority, destabilising the authorial agent in the postcolonial context, making his writings difficult to fit the national canon of his day.

O'Nolan's authorial voice is the sum of its versions, and it can only be understood in this fragmentation. Under the many masks of his pen-names, he makes the best use of Gaelic culture and modernist innovation in a postcolonial Irish context. His first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, becomes a "fictive fiction" about the creation of fiction, a *bricolage*, challenging notions of time, space, matter,

identity, etc. as presented in conventional narratives, highlighting the fact that all narratives are in the end, a fictional product. Thus, as a *fictional product* of the postcolonial stage, his novel makes its readership question the construction of identity as contained in literary fiction, pressing home the idea of fiction's incapacity to generate secure meaning.

To bring into question two of his best works: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Poor Mouth (An Beal Bocht)*, we must bring into question the writer's bilingualism, his duality, his positioning *in-between* English and Irish, modernism and postmodernism, so as to shed light on his notion of identity.

His use of pseudonyms during his literary career is the symptom of his refusal to identify himself with a name. For him the question of identity represented a far more complicated issue. The postmodern concept of human identity – however it may be theorized – maximizes the flexibility, variability and plasticity of human behaviour, so that the individual can be and do many different things, in many different situations, without any necessary requirement of continuity between different "acts" in space and time. As soon as the self is viewed as a performance, masking becomes an intrinsic aspect of the self, since there still exists an "I" which directs the performance and which therefore simultaneously "reveals and conceals" itself.

A *narrator* becomes merely a technical *device* used to tell the story.

The word "*persona*" is derived from Latin, meaning a theatrical mask. It is also linked to the *dramatis personae* which refers to the list of characters and cast in a play or a drama. It can be defined in a literary work as the voice or the assumed role of a character that represents the thoughts of a writer or of a specific person the writer wants to present as his mouthpiece. The writer conceives his "*persona*" from within the story: he conceives of himself from within. The effect is the assimilation of himself to another, to his characters, to his nameless narrator as it is the case in his *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Anonymity hides the key of a traditional interpretation of codes based on identity, on *nomen* and new codes, new forms of communication emerge. This anonymity favours the imagination, sets it free from all constraints. It is also a means to keep the distance in the journalistic manner typical to O'Brien. It is a symbol permitting the writer not only to set worlds apart but also to reshape them. It is a means to an end, it constructs and refigures identity. All situations deprived by the rites of identity favour freedom and relationships hard to imagine otherwise in an ordinary and constraining social context. Thus, it favours connections of all sorts and a burst of truth for it makes

alterity appear in the individual under the form of the unconscious. It makes one “speak his mind”.

The sliding of the author under his characters, his *alteritas*, is also a glide towards his inner self and further unto his unconscious depths so as to reveal all the facets of his personality. Alterity grants him the right to refuse a full stop, “*an end*”, for a more modern “*to be continued...*”. It offers the illusion that we can skip reality and its confines, to step outside it and reconstruct another one, a *simulacrum*.

The author reveals himself in terms of alterity, the Other, who in turn becomes part of his work, of himself. He relates to alterity to construct identity.

There is no longer any clear and consensual view of how “personal identity” or “human character” should be defined anyway (other than by identity cards) and therefore, it is also no longer clear what it means to “mask” them. Roles are constantly being redefined to manipulate power relationships.

In his work *Soi-meme comme un autre*, Paul Ricoeur also stresses the idea that the life, the story of each and every one of us is incomplete, thus, the need of a fictional model to understand it. (Ricoeur, 1991).

It is like in a puzzle: each piece fits its meaning in the puzzle and the complete picture is the sum of its pieces.

O’Brien dares to innovate from inside of his novel, breaking the rules, making new rules. It is a show of magic; he appears and disappears, he hides behind his characters, making, thus, more visible his literary manifesto. His novel “opens-up” to its readers like a game, one of ideas, opinions, subjectivity. Alain Robbe-Grillet in his *Towards a New Novel* advances the idea that the novel must overtly assure its function and play its part in constructing the fiction. O’Brien made change happen, stimulated it from within while constructing and deconstructing, the novel not only reflects his beliefs but also builds the relationship with his readers and sets new perspectives.

His novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* reveals the Self in its quest for identity and the novel in its quest for a poetics. The author becomes a bricoleur who constructs his work where, pretty much as in real life, everything can be restarted, over and over again, where you can devise your own set of values, of rules. The novel also stands for life’s resistance to any single interpretation: a freedom of infinite invention and reinvention. Reflective of the novel’s architecture is the fact that reality is provisional, lacking eternal truths, being rather a construct, an artefact. Looking ahead to postmodernist construction of character, O’Brien reminds us constantly that characters not only construct their own realities but are linguistic constructions at their turn, mere words, signs on a page before anything else. In the novel, the characters perform

the impossible: the author of the novel within the novel is sent to trial by his characters (while asleep) for the injustices he has done to them. This celebrates a world that cannot be understood or controlled.

The fact that the characters rebel against their author who lacks authority whatsoever, is O’Brien’s intention to diminish this concept of author-authority as source, as creator, as origin, for it was a much too sensitive topic to handle for Ireland in its postcolonial context and to account, of course, for the individual’s quest for identity.

As Patricia Waugh well states in her book *Metafiction*, to make a statement in fiction is to make a character:

[...] *in fiction the statement is the character, is the context. Thus characters in metafiction may explicitly dissolve into statements. They may act in ways totally deviant in terms of the logic of the everyday ‘commonsense’ world, but perfectly normal within the logic of the fictional world of which they are a part. They may travel in time, die and carry on living, murder their authors or have love affairs with them. Some may read about the story of their lives or write the books in which they appear. Sometimes they know what is going to happen to them and attempt to prevent it.*” (Waugh 1984: 92,93)

The mask becomes more important than the face. There is one face but multiple masks. His characters have a job which is to serve the governing principle of the whole book. Every character contributes to our knowledge of every other character and so, to the author’s agenda and his ideas. If we are to consider the psychological depth as a necessary feature of a character, then, we face a bit of a problem...the characters turn into mere masks because of their lack in being. The ideas that these characters stand for are the most important. And sometimes the novel is a better vehicle for ideas than anything else - O’Brien’s novel acts out what it wishes to say about narrative and the way to produce it while itself being a narrative.

At Swim-Two-Birds defies traditional understanding of the novel. It reflects change while changing itself - the author’s irony, satirical attitude towards human search for measurable, controlled, dependable truth. Identity of the characters, identity of the world are out of the question, nothing is stable but under continuing transformation. His on-going process of textual self-invention serves to disrupt identity, be it personal or cultural, to reveal its fluidity always open to change.

The fictional world is akin to a distorted image in a mirror, as the mirror effect is the appearance of doubles. The word “mirror” originates in the latin word *mirare* which means *to look at something in wonder*. “*Spiegel im Spiegel*” in German literally can mean both “mirror in the mirror” as well as “mirrors in the mirror”, referring to

an abysmal mirror which produces an infinity of images reflected by parallel plane mirrors back and forth. The author's use of "frames" in his work is to separate fiction from fiction: the construction of parallel dimensions. The story within story or Chinese-box structures are such framing devices to render the world of interrelations and multiple realities. O'Brien's superposition of plots and his transfictionality (moving back and forth between fictions like the eye of a camera), the breaking of narrative centers explodes his readership's expectations, or as Ronald Sukenick's choice of words in his *Death of the Novel and Other Stories*: "A story is a game someone has played so you can play it too." (Sukenick 2003:56-57).

A prop for his overall picture, intertextuality favours a dialogue between his cowboy stories, myth, contemporary fiction helping him construct alternative realities in his process of negotiating the Self in a language puzzle game.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he introduces his nameless narrator *in medias res* while reflecting on the subject of his 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 1961:9) stating crystal clear, from the very beginning, his literary manifesto about producing literature in an age of mechanical reproduction. The novel exposes the stream of consciousness of a novelist in the process of creation, under the inner and outer stimuli he is affected by. Thus, placing side by side the image of an Irish mythological hero that comes to his mind and a toothache which distracts his mental activity, vanishing the borderline between his exposed selves, rendering in this way, the chaotic, fragmentary, elusive workings of the human mind. The narrator's technique of writing, breaking his narrative line into separate fragments signposted by commentaries and short titles, such as: "Extract from my Manuscript", "Interjection on the part of Brinsley", "Description of my uncle:", offer, actually, only an illusion of transparency and structure; they interrupt the flow of narration and confuse the reader further. The novel becomes a chain of illusions and inclusions, one leading to another, a testimony of the "illusion of life", provided by Trellis's characters, who transcend their author's controlled novel, offering the readers a "spiegel im spiegel" play and feeling. In the main, the fictional frames embedded in the novel reach number four: the narrator's story, the narrator's novel (with Trellis acting as character), Trellis's novel (with Trellis as author imposing on his characters) and the story of Trellis's characters (with Trellis as character); what

undermines, actually, this construct of frames is the flexibility of their content: inserts, letters, quotations, etc. an ongoing process of constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing in their process of becoming. Instead of moving from one frame to another, the reader is spinning a rhizome with different narrative digressions, in all directions. The borderlines between texts explode, the characters being able to wander from frame to frame, leading to an overlapping of fictional worlds, positioning the reader "in-between" fictional worlds. Wandering around, the characters bring along in the new context employed, their background and experience acquired before their present employment, contaminating the new context, damaging its integrity. The multi-levelled characters of O'Brien's book are built in strata, migrating from one frame to another, overlapping, the author subverting the conventions of "make-believing" of the characters, turning them into masked actors on a stage where multiple plays are performed at once, at the same time, while, giving us, the readers/the audience, access back stage, giving us more insight and at the same time, more confusion, making us doubt his characters. Let's take the case of Trellis, for example, his status changes during the course of the book: he is a character in the narrator's creation, an author of his own, a character in another book written by his mal-treated characters as an act of revenge against Trellis. The characters are at the same time, authors, readers, critics, all in one book. The young narrator, who seems to be the last puppet master to be pulling the strings of the other authors and characters from the book, is himself a mere character at the mercy of yet another author: Brian O'Nolan (not so clearly identified) hiding behind the mask of an author: Flann O'Brien, one of his pen-names.

The encounter of the Celtic heroes Finn Mac Cool and King Sweeny with the working-class modern characters of John Furriskey, Antony Lamont and Paul Shanahan enables a re-assessment in a parodic key of the function of Celtic mythology within the context of national self-consciousness. It becomes much more clear, when these working-class men refuse to listen to such nationalist discourse (Finn's narrative of the 'Madness of Sweeny') choosing instead to create their own narratives with their own versions of modern heroes (representing modern Ireland's reception of the image of old Ireland) forwarding the idea that it is ridiculous to look to past imaginary heroes as the only identity markers for the present.

At Swim-Two-Birds is a bricolage structure of intra-textual activity between different texts: cowboy stories, encyclopaedia entries, poetry, gambling letters, folk tales and details of his own life. For Barthes, the author is not a solitary genius but a scriptor engaged in a variety of other

texts and discourses, an idea reflected by O’Nolan’s authorial personas or styles, exemplified by the student-narrator from the novel, who in the privacy of his bedroom thinks about a variety of discourses ranging from Celtic mythology to cowboy stories. He, indeed declares that “the modern novel should be largely a work of reference” (O’Brien 1961:25) sustaining O’Brien’s bricolage aesthetic, where the novel becomes “a self-evident sham” where “characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another” (O’Brien 1961:25) challenging the assigned function of an author and his writing, mocking the seriousness of modernist literary experiments, trying to pave the way for a new postcolonial aesthetic. His writings, perceived as “minor” literature, go against the mainstream of his day, questioning concepts of identity, authenticity, the very concept of development itself, posing a challenge to the development of official ideologies. He disrupts the traditional literary structure relying on authentic identification, linear progression or authorial autonomy, where “control” of content stands in a way for a certain control over “reality”. He disrupts all this in his attempt to evade both imperialistic and nationalistic representations in the postcolonial context of Ireland. His jumbled, unfinished, fluid narratives refer rather to a continuous state of “becoming”, rather than one of fulfillment and achievement. As the bricoleur that he is, he offers new readings of the dominant forms of identification of his day, positioning his work “in-between” Irish and English languages, the high-modernist aesthetic and the pastoralism of Gaelic autobiographies, his different forms of writing ranging from the novel to the newspaper column. His characters fail to achieve identity due to the structures of his texts and to the author’s musings and puns attesting his refusal to ground identity on the recovery of origins, roots, tradition only, that is why his reliance on parody, translation, intertextuality, irony, destabilises identity and language, as well. The unreliability of language, which can also confuse instead of clarifying shows the unstable nature of signification, the power of manipulating through words, their power to create illusions of experience, of reality. Words evoke other words, the meaning slipping away from the object it was supposed to refer to. The text, thus, refers back to itself, the only reality existent being the one of the text leading to an insecure apprehension of language, a distrust of words. The unstable identity of the characters, who are at the mercy of their author, who acts like a puppet master, is well emphasized by the words of the character Finn MacCool, an Irish mythic hero, who comments upon his own use and abuse in literature, his simultaneously given identities: “I am Cuchulain, I am Patrick. I am Carbery-Cathead, I am Goll. I am my own father and my son. I

am every hero from the crack of time. [...] I am a tree for wind-siege. I am a windmill. I am a hole in the wall.” (O’Brien 1961:15,19). Thus, a mix, a confusion of selves transgressing humanity. There are no clear-cut, well-defined identities, everything seems to merge, to escape the stability of its own identity: king Sweeny is bird as well as man, Pooka wonders whether his wife is a woman or a kangaroo, or even a “shadow”. This merging of the worlds: human, animal, vegetal, matter, spirit, concrete, abstract, leads towards a dissolution of the self, of a well-defined, distinct identity.

The development of his narrator is set against his uncle’s traditional figure: “Rat-brained, cunning, concerned-that-he-should-be-well-thought-of. Abounding in pretence, deceit. Holder of Guinness clerkship the third class.”

(O’Brien 1961:30). He escapes his uncle when he embraces his student life which includes “...shouting, horseplay, singing and the use of words, actions and gestures contrary to the usages of christians.” (O’Brien 1961:48) Thus, the young narrator himself is a multi-faceted person, in what his attitude towards his uncle is concerned, he hides his true face behind masks, thus, an unstable, unreliable identity. He even leads a double life at home: the lazy student who never opens a book and the hard-working writer, misleading his uncle in his beliefs. He moulds his own identity to fit different contexts.

In the end he almost reaches to find and accept his place in Irish society under the approval granted by his uncle, but not quite...for he is a bit out of time, actually – the watch he receives as a present from his uncle is fifteen minutes behind, not quite in time and in tune with society. Also, coming to terms with his uncle suggests that is up to everyone to find a place, the right place, being only a matter of choice. This coming to terms with the world, in the novel: the young novelist decides to save Trellis from the vengeance of his characters, Sweeny had reconciled himself with the church, dying in St. Moling’s arms, is actually an illusion, a misguidance, for, we are constantly being reminded throughout the book that “truth is an odd number”.

The novel stands for the artistic freedom of creation, not only what he writes but the way he writes it place it between cultural object and critical theory. He shapes the novel from within, thus, strengthening Irish culture from within his very essence.

O’Brien produced fictional versions of himself complicating even more the relationship between writer and subject. His *in-between* English and Irish languages complicates even more his identity as an Irish writer.

The Poor Mouth, his only Irish language novel, written under the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen is a merciless satire on the different texts (autobiographies) that claim to present an authentic picture of Irish

peasantry (though they have far departed the harsh reality) as a symbol of Irish identity. The author unveils the associations between Irish language, rural poverty and the picture of the western Gaelic area (seen as a pre-colonial, un-anglicized area whose poverty, culture, landscape, peasantry, become symbols of authentic Gaelic life) and subverts such symbols of identity to mock the literary representations of the day concerning the idealised, imagined, Irish peasant.

In *The Poor Mouth*, he brings on stage Irish identity, with language as a key factor and satirizes the school-based revival policy of the Free State government which made it compulsory for students to take Irish at the primary and secondary levels – an enforcement that turned many people against their mother tongue. He deconstructs, what was perceived in the postcolonial context as the icons of authentic Irishness: the Gaelic peasant and the Irish language, presented and promoted as markers and makers of nationalism.

His irony is well aimed at language revivalists when he states that “the accuracy of Gaelic (as well as holiness of spirit) grew in proportion to one’s lack of worldly goods...” (O’Brien 2003:49).

The novel begins with Bonaparte, the main character, writing down a record of his life because he is about to die. Myles’s presentation of Bonaparte’s autobiographical narrative imitates the Blasket Island autobiographies which recorded the life of the islanders from birth until old age. He identifies himself by surname, first name and country to describe his Gaelic identity: “O’Coonassa is my surname in Gaelic, my first name is Bonaparte and Ireland is my little native land.” (O’Brien 2003:11). All his account becomes an illusion of identity, for, as seen in the novel, he cannot remember properly his own biography. The truth behind his Gaelic origins is out of reach, he is not sure if his mother is really his mother, rumour has it he was born by another woman “All that, nevertheless, is only the neighbours’ talk and cannot be checked now because the neighbours are all dead and their likes will not be there again.” (O’Brien 2003:13) He also has uncertainties about his paternity, confusing, as a child, his grandfather, the Old-Grey-Fellow for his father. The truth regarding his origins, his identity, evades him, as it remains trapped in the disappearing Gaelic culture.

The annihilation of identity is well presented during the protagonist’s

(Bonaparte O’Coonassa) first day of school when he is forced to give up his Irish identity as the English-speaking school master baptizes him “Jams O’Donnell” (O’Brien 2003:30). Even more, he is deprived of his own individuality for all his classmates are given the same name: “[...] every creature in the school had been struck down by him and all had been named *Jams O’Donnell*.”

(O’Brien 2003:31). This institutional baptism is a complete suppression of his identity: “It was always said and written that every Gaelic youngster is hit on his first school day because he doesn’t understand English and the foreign form of his name and that no one has any respect for him because he’s Gaelic to the marrow. There’s no other business going on in school that day but punishment and revenge and the same fooling about *Jams O’Donnell*. Alas! I don’t think that there’ll ever be any good settlement for the Gaels but only hardship for them always. The Old-Grey-Fellow was also hit one day of his life and called *James O’Donnell* as well.” (O’Brien 2003:34).

The loss of language due to colonial policy implies a disruption of identity, of a sense of self, needed for self-expression, transforming them into passive victims.

The author uses in his novel, scenes and characters from other Gaelic texts presenting the idealized image of country life, subverting such images, as well as colonial stereotypes: from the pig sharing the house with Bonaparte’s family to the endless rain pouring down upon the miserable peasants.

The author also blurs the distinction between man and beast to cast doubt and question the concept of identity: the description of Sitric O’Sanassa praised for his Gaelic poverty which made him appear “so truly Gaelic” (O’Brien 2003:88) as Bonaparte O’Coonassa remarks: “I often saw him on the hillside fighting and competing with a stray dog, both contending for a narrow hard bone and the same snorting and angry barking issuing from them both.” (O’Brien 2003:89). Also, human beings and beasts share the same living area, Bonaparte himself repeatedly fails to make a difference between the people and the beasts surrounding him; the same when his wife gives birth to a baby boy, he imagines that they have “acquired a new piglet in the end of the house.” (O’Brien 2003: 86). The confusion persists to the very end, when in a conversation with the Old-Grey-Fellow he wonders out loud whether Gaels are human:

“ ‘Are you certain that the Gaels are people?’ said I.

‘ They’ve that reputation anyway, little noble, said he, but no confirmation of it has ever been received. We’re not horses nor hens; seals nor ghosts; and, in spite of all that, it’s unbelievable that we’re humans – but all that is only an opinion.’” (O’Brien 2003:100).

The institutionalised suppression of identity is also exemplified towards the end of the novel when Bonaparte O’Coonassa is arrested on charges of murder and theft and left at the mercy of the justice system, a law he cannot follow or understand during his trial because he doesn’t speak a word of English, as he well admits: “I never understood a single item of all that happened

around me nor one word of the conversation nor my interrogation.”

(O'Brien 2003:122). Thus, a picture of the injustices suffered by the Irish poor during the colonial period...no wonder the Irish peasant was out of place in his very own Irish society. The Irish peasant is left with no choice, no voice, rootless, to accept his designated role in the process.

In the end, Bonaparte follows in his father's footsteps: the same sentence, the same place to serve the sentence. Powerless. Rootless. Faithless.

With his mastery of character, use of language and boundless imagination, the author subverts Irish Identity, poses questions and makes the reader search for answers. His use of masks becomes, in their process of revealing a space of uncertainty reflective of his context, a counterpoint and critique of Cartesian epistemology.

As shown, O'Nolan's pseudonyms come together like the pieces of a puzzle to unveil his own authorial identity collecting from social roles in a split and fragmented civilization. The author behind his masks proved to be actively engaged in the concerns of his day, but, in a highly original manner, challenging the dominant symbols of signification, positioning his authorial identity "in-between", choosing the middle ground of multiple self-positioning.

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