



The Parish Review
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Jessie Burnette, "better in his grave than in that bed": The Construction of Rest in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.10735>



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'better in his grave than in that bed': The Construction of Rest in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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Though not a text that is inherently medical in nature, sleep and rest play central roles in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* at all levels of the novel. O'Brien's representations of rest are ideologically loaded, indexing stigmatising social perceptions of those seen to spend 'excessive' time in bed as inherently burdensome, unpleasant, and deserving of suspicion. These portrayals are found throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*, both in its moments of digression and, more prominently, in the depictions of Dermot Trellis and the student narrator, whose rest is repeatedly linked with deviancy and the grotesque. This article is an intervention into previous criticism of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, reorienting the focus of conversation to the often ableist and disparaging representations of rest and literal, embodied fatigue by recentring the novel's key image of the man in bed.

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Despite the wealth of analyses of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one character that has gone without substantial comment is Bartley Madigan. This is unsurprising, given that he is only the subject of passing comment within one of the novel's many moments of digression, yet the description of Madigan is deserving of attention as an index of the novel's implicit attitudes to bedridden individuals. As told by Shanahan, Madigan was 'paralysed from the knee up' and subsequently lived for 'twenty years on the flat of his back in bed.'¹ Madigan's experience is reported as horrifying and characterised by poor care: he is stated to have been 'carried out by his brother and put in a bath' each Christmas and, because of this substandard ministrations, to have suffered from 'plenty of bedsores,' so that '[t]he sight of his legs would turn your stomach.'² His twenty bedridden years are so awful that it is deemed he would be 'better dead' and 'better in his grave than in that bed.'³ Importantly, Shanahan is unperturbed by the poor quality of nursing that Madigan receives – this is accepted as normal, even good, care – rather, he locates the cause of Madigan's suffering wholly in his disabled body and the fact that he is bedbound.

Two points can be taken from this exchange. First, that impairment of this nature intrinsically entails a quality of life so poor as to be a state worse than death, since becoming bedbound brings with it only further suffering and humiliation, be it from bedsores or a degrading reliance on others. Secondly, and likely at the heart of the first point, that becoming bedbound inherently reduces one to an unpleasant burden whose poor treatment is, if not to be encouraged, at least to be expected. While the effects of such an impairment would indeed call for significant readjustment, the belief that bedridden individuals would be better off dead carries with it deeply eugenicist overtones and is embedded in ideologies which deny that individuals with non-normative bodies could find satisfaction in their own personal abilities and limitations.

This brief discussion between Furriskey, Shanahan, and Lamont highlights the dangers of such a story of disability: by presenting poor quality of care for homebound and bedbound individuals as unremarkable, bad treatment is normalised. Further, when we compare the experiences of Madigan and Trellis, both of whom are said to have spent twenty years in bed – the former out of necessity and the latter out of choice – we see that in O'Brien's novel disability can only be imagined in binary terms. The bedbound body is characterised either as one which, being genuinely impaired, can experience only great suffering and indignity or which, as a body bedbound by choice, is

¹ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 228.

² O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 228.

³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 228.

immoral and deserving of suspicion. Such normative representations exhibit a callous and moralising attitude towards the bedridden body. When we read *At Swim-Two-Birds* with an eye for depictions of rest, it becomes quickly apparent that such representations and beliefs form the foundation of the novel.

Sleep and exhaustion permeate *At Swim-Two-Birds* at all levels of the text. We may think of the role of the bed in obscuring the Pooka's wife, who remains 'hidden and not easy to discern, a black evil wrinkle in the black sackcloth quilts, a shadow,'⁴ or of Sweeny's inability to sleep due to his madness. We may also consider the 'dream-like sequence,' wherein the expected limitations of '[r]ealistic knowledge, spatiality, or vegetation' are made 'irrelevant before lyricism and the narrator's desire to exhibit erudition.'⁵ We may even reflect on the way the novel itself enacts exhaustion through its very structure, requiring labour to be read and more so to be understood.⁶ There is substantial possibility for future analysis of the varied uses of sleep in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but, to begin with, I feel it is first necessary to reexamine the depictions of the literal bodies in bed, especially those central to the novel: Dermot Trellis and the student narrator. As illustrated with the example of Madigan's poor treatment, these portrayals are ideologically loaded and, when not interrogated, risk contributing to the naturalisation of narrow, problematic representations of fatigue. This article is an intervention into previous criticism of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, reorienting the focus of conversation to the often ableist and disparaging representations of fatigue and the body in bed within the novel.

Following an overview of the theoretical framework and key concepts utilised in this article, I briefly discuss the previous critical conversation surrounding disability and rest in O'Brien studies. In the close readings that follow, I interrogate O'Brien's depictions of unpleasant characters spending 'excessive' time in bed. Then, I examine the role of the bedroom and bedroom activities within the narrative of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, looking in particular at the way in which the social stigma surrounding these spaces is both drawn upon by O'Brien and reproduced within the text. Finally, I consider the historical context of fatigue research, conducted in relation to labour disputes and the capitalist ideology of productivity, as well as the uses of fatigue and sleep as tools of punishment.

⁴ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 146.

⁵ Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 26, <http://doi.org/10.5040/9781472543400.ch-001>.

⁶ As found by Samuel Anderson, earlier versions of the manuscript were far less complex: it appears 'that O'Brien wrote the second level of [*At Swim-Two-Birds*] – that is, the Narrator's novel – before he wrote the first level describing the Narrator himself.' The student-narrator's plotline was woven in later on, as if in a deliberate attempt to further fragment and complicate what was already an intricate story. Samuel Anderson, 'Pink Paper and the Composition of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *LSU Master's Theses* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), 6.

Bodies of Fatigue

Going to sleep in stories has always been a perilous business. In fairy tales, sleep can become a form of punishment (as in 'Sleeping Beauty') or can be used to overthrow the powerful (as in 'Jack and the Beanstalk'). Within the real world, even where sleep and bed rest are intended to act as a cure, they have simultaneously functioned as a form of disciplinary action, intricately bound up with problematic gender roles (as seen in Silas Weir Mitchell's nineteenth-century rest cure, which is critiqued in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*).⁷ Fatigue and the need for rest have long been of societal concern, especially where sleep is 'done wrong.' With this phrase, I am intentionally evoking Louise Hornby's similar concept of 'the prone body' as 'downwrong,' as opposed to 'upright.'⁸ Hornby interrogates the horizontal 'downwrong position of weariness' in its ability to undo 'the binary structures of ailment and wellness, neutralising their difference in the blank, immobile pose of weariness.'⁹ My use of sleep 'done wrong' encompasses and extends Hornby's 'downwrong' to include non-normative forms of sleep and rest – for example, 'excessive' time spent in bed, unexplained fatigue, insomnia, and sleep walking.

As Hornby notes, the sleeping body and sleep itself can be unsettling. To unpack why sleep and fatigue can be so disturbing, it is useful to draw on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, defined as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, traditions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'¹⁰ Common examples of the abject include bodily excretions and birth which, by crossing the internal/external borders of the body, both draw attention to these borders and to their fallibility.¹¹ Yet another, perhaps subtler, example given by Kristeva is that of 'crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law.'¹² O'Brien's work contains many clear examples of these forms of abjection: as Dirk van Hulle notes in his discussion of *The Third Policeman*, the author shows clear interest in troubling

⁷ See, for example: Silas Weir Mitchell, 'Rest,' in *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria*, ed. John K. Mitchell (London: J.B. Lipincott Company, 1884; Philadelphia: J.B. Lipincott & Co., 1877); Silas Weir Mitchell, *Wear and Tear; or, Hints for the Overworked* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1891; Philadelphia: J.B. Lipincott & Co., 1871). See also: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2017; Boston: New England Magazine Corporation, 1892); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*?', *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 17, no. 4 (2011): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.17.4.265>.

⁸ Louise Hornby, 'Downwrong: The Pose of Tiredness,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 65, no. 1 (2019): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2019.0009>.

⁹ Hornby, 'Downwrong,' 223.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

¹¹ Kristeva also briefly mentions sleep in *Powers of Horror* (209), but sleep is used in a metaphorical rather than literal manner.

¹² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

the borders of self and other, 'leading to an ontological confusion between inside and outside.'¹³

Less obvious, perhaps, are aspects of abjection in, or associated with, the many instances of sleep 'done wrong.' Sleep is simultaneously both a crossing from one state to another, which may be construed as abject, and a state of liminal suspension in which the self refuses to adhere to stable categories, being present yet altered. The sleeping body is uncanny, both self and not-self, laying in a discomfoting state that refuses clear delineation: when in deep sleep, we are alive yet in the position of the corpse, *dead to the world*. Sleep is a state of uncontrollable transformation: ideally, from a state of tiredness to one of reinvigoration, though this is never guaranteed. Furthermore, sleep acts as a suspension of animation which could at any moment resume through waking. The repeated stops and starts of sleep and waking bring to mind Jacques Derrida's discussion of 'living on,' which I will briefly return to when considering Trellis's punishment in *At Swim-Two-Birds* as exemplifying the Derridean 'death sentence.'

As a state of suspension that resembles death, even normative sleep can be disturbing. What then of exhaustion, the even more slippery state at the borders of sleep and waking? The state where one is in the process of waking or of drifting off to sleep, caught in mid-transformation? Is this a liminal self, or an abject, 'contaminated' self? What of when an individual is trapped in this transitional state by a weariness that sleep fails to cure? A self that may begin to act in ways that are unpredictable, less controlled – prone to unexpectedly falling asleep, forgetting tasks, and making unusual errors. This is not usually the version of ourselves we refer to when describing who we are, but rather one we view as a temporary state, one we may apologise for – think of the phrases *I'm out-of-sorts* or *I'm not myself today*. This is a hybrid self, a hyphenation of sleep-awake, a version of the self which draws into question its own identity. To a normative interpreter, then, the permanently tired or resting body (such as those of Trellis or the student narrator in O'Brien's novel) can become a threatening marker of the infallibility of both body and identity; a reminder of the 'provisional and temporary nature of able-bodiedness.'¹⁴ When viewed in this manner, fatigued bodies and sleep 'done wrong' are construed as the deviant forms against which 'normal,' energetic bodies are constructed; bodies which become metonymic of broader societal concerns and which are therefore in need of correction.

Literary representations of disability, including chronic and fatiguing conditions (the outward signs of which are displayed by Trellis and the student narrator), do not

¹³ Dirk van Hulle, "widening out the mind": Flann O'Brien's "wide mind" between Joyce's "mental life" and Beckett's "deep within", in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. John McCourt, Paul Fagan, and Ruben Borg (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 115.

¹⁴ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 14.

exist within a vacuum but operate alongside such pre-existing societal beliefs, which readers bring with them. Prior to their medicalisation in the late nineteenth century, fatigue and sleep 'done wrong' were viewed predominantly as immoral idleness, bound to criminality and fears of social degeneration.¹⁵ While the medicalisation of fatigue at times added legitimacy to those experiencing it (where there was clear cause), fatigue nonetheless remained tarnished with stigma, often characterised as a misuse of energy and a problem of willpower or immorality.¹⁶ Despite legitimising certain patients' symptoms, medicalisation simultaneously reinforced fears of degeneration, as the pathologising of fatigue simply repositioned it as an involuntary, rather than a voluntary, form of deviancy. Even as fatigue was repositioned as a medical and social issue, it remained intertwined with anxieties surrounding increased expectations of productivity and shifting gender roles: anxieties we find reproduced within literature.

The representation of disability within literature is often limited in function. As posited in work by disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, literary disability serves 'first, as a stock feature of characterisation and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device,'¹⁷ often intricately linked to ideas of nation and morality as a signifier 'of social and individual collapse.'¹⁸ The depiction of disability then 'oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical,' as such portrayal 'transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it.'¹⁹ Critics have previously and compellingly discussed O'Brien's complex literary engagement with disability. However, O'Brien's uses of sleep 'done wrong' within *At Swim-Two-Birds* have not previously been subject to analysis.

While critics have previously engaged with laziness, deviancy, and the novel's complex narrative structure, in this article I present the first analysis of any of O'Brien's depictions of the fatigued body and sleep 'done wrong.' Identifying engagement with an often invisible symptom so slippery as fatigue, one which often cannot be definitively measured, presents a substantial challenge, and the tendency to overlook or read fatigue through a metaphorical rather than a literal lens is understandable. In fact, I posit that the novelty of my focus on literal, embodied fatigue is symptomatic of

¹⁵ See, for example: Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 6, 28–31.

¹⁶ See, for example: Andrew Wilson, *Brain and Body: The Nervous System in Social Life* (London: James Bowden, 1900), 112; David G. Schuster, *Neurasthenic Nation: America's Search for Health, Happiness, and Comfort, 1869–1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 86–90.

¹⁷ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 47, 4.

¹⁸ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 'Narrative Prosthesis,' in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 222.

¹⁹ Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 19.

a broader societal tendency to underestimate tiredness. As discussed by Ato Quayson, 'the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability,' as for readers, 'aesthetic nervousness overlaps social attitudes to disability that themselves often remain unexamined in their prejudices and biases' and are, as such, difficult to recognise.²⁰

Several critics, including Maebh Long and Yaeli Greenblatt, consider O'Brien's depictions of grotesque and abject bodies: Long examines Orlick as an autoimmune self, the 'abject body turning on itself: a self that is transgressive, porous and hybrid, a subject at war with itself,' and Greenblatt explores how O'Brien 'conceive[s] the physical body as the site of a materialised uncanny.'²¹ I suggest that the fatigued body, existing in a liminal state that challenges preconceived beliefs of identity, can also be considered an abject, autoimmune body in line with Long's analysis; its uncontrollable and inopportune calls to sleep functioning as an attack upon itself. Further, the sleeping or fatigued body is also a site of the uncanny, a self with reduced function that sits in the uneasy position of the corpse. O'Brien's work has also been compellingly read through a disability studies lens in analyses from Yael Levin and Siobhán Purcell, both of whom examine the role of the disabled subject and the 'thematics of disability and prosthetics' in *The Third Policeman*.²² Though these analyses consider the bodies within O'Brien's work in such a closely adjacent manner to my own, none to date have extended such analysis to his many bodies in bed.

Engaging with the colonial politics of indolence in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Gregory Dobbins argues that idleness 'attains a utopian quality,' as the novel rebels through its structure and narrative style against the imperial-capitalist 'process by which even relaxation and free time take on structural forms derived from alienated labour.'²³ Yet, the utopian quality Dobbins ascribes to idleness is only attributed to the male body, and then only when the idle body is deemed to be engaged in active rebellion. In earlier work, Joshua D. Esty considers the ways in which 'O'Brien uses the stock character of

²⁰ Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 15.

²¹ Maebh Long, 'Abject Bodies: Brian O'Nolan and Immunology,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 177; Yaeli Greenblatt, "'the tattered cloak of his perished skin": The Body as Costume in "Two in One," *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Borg and Fagan, 135.

²² Yael Levin, 'Who Hobbles after the Subject: Parables of Writing in *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 4 (2017): 105–21, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.40.4.08>; Siobhán Purcell, 'Reading the Regional Body: Disability, Prosthetics, and Irish Literary Tradition in *The Third Policeman* and *Molloy*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Borg and Fagan, 196.

²³ Gregory Dobbins, 'Constitutional Laziness and the Novel: Idleness, Irish Modernism, and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *Novel* 42, no. 1 (2009): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2008-005>.

the lazy, learned Irishman' to present a 'satire of the Irish artist.'²⁴ Simultaneously, Esty argues, O'Brien resists the 'imagined opposition between the "civilised" mind of the English and the comic body of the Irish' as well as 'the rationalised work ethic of the modern metropolis and the "erudite irresponsibility" of the backward Irish.'²⁵ Such analyses are valuable for their engagement with the novel's postcoloniality. Yet they simultaneously accept without question the negative representations of the body in bed. For example, it is taken for granted that when the student narrator is 'reclining safe from ill and infection in the envelope of [his] bed,' citing concerns of the dangers of cold 'to persons of inferior vitality,' this is simply yet another example of his laziness.²⁶

Where O'Brien's depictions of rest in *At Swim-Two-Birds* have been previously subject to comment, as in the analyses of Dobbins and Esty, it has largely been in relation to their metaphorical implications, their connection to immorality, or their class commentary.²⁷ More readings have considered O'Brien's works as deconstructive and metafictional, exemplifying aspects of Barth's literature of exhaustion, yet focus on structural rather than literal exhaustion.²⁸ Analyses of the metaphorical uses of rest have contributed significantly to our understanding of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, in the analysis that follows, I provide a new perspective, instead interrogating the depictions of embodied fatigue and recentring the base image from which the novel grows: that of the man in bed.

Grotesque Bodies

From excretions to criminality, many of the actions taken by the characters within *At Swim-Two-Birds* display abjection. In addition, the bodies of characters exhibiting sleep 'done wrong' are made particularly grotesque – think again of Madigan's legs, the sight of which would 'turn your stomach.'²⁹ Many of the abject processes in the novel – for example, vomiting – occur in bedrooms, and many of the grotesque attributes of characters such as Trellis are directly ascribed to laziness and irregular time spent in bed. Depictions of both Trellis and the student narrator indicate a desire to make bed

²⁴ Joshua D. Esty, 'Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the Post-Post Debate,' *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26, no. 4 (1995): 31, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/34426/28462>.

²⁵ Esty, 'Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the Post-Post Debate,' 31.

²⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 83.

²⁷ See also, for example: Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, 32–8; M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University press, 1995), 10.

²⁸ See, for example: Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, 'Veni, V.D., Vici: Flann O'Brien, Sexual Health, and the Literature of Exhaustion,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Borg and Fagan, 146–62; R. M. Berry, 'Metafiction,' in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, eds. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012), 128–40.

²⁹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 228.

rest not only visible but grotesquely so, as descriptions of these characters highlight not only physical indicators of their significant time spent in bed, such as paleness and frailty, but also poor hygiene, as with the student narrator's vermin-ridden bedclothes. Simultaneously, the possibility that any genuine fatigue could be present is denied: Trellis being bedridden is described as a choice and the student narrator's exhaustion as performative. The effect of these portrayals is that claims of fatigue or need for additional rest are presented merely as excuses for poor behaviour, and therefore as indications of immorality.

When Trellis is first introduced, his bedbound status is utilised to accentuate his unpleasantness. He is described as 'flabby and unattractive, partly a result of his having remained in bed for a period of twenty years,' and he is labelled as 'voluntarily bedridden,' as he has 'suffered from no organic or other illness.'³⁰ This initial description is, as with much of the Trellis story, given as a succinct overview, within which Trellis's bedbound state becomes synonymous with laziness, ugliness, and general poor character. The potential that any legitimate condition or physical suffering could have contributed to Trellis's twenty years in bed is immediately denied. Since no medical explanation is provided, Trellis's sleep 'done wrong' is positioned instead as a moral failing and is, as such, deserving of judgement. Regardless of the cause behind Trellis's decision to remain in bed, he is presented in the student narrator's manuscript strictly as tyrannical and demanding, 'subject to extreme irritability and "tantrums".'³¹ Trellis posturing as 'a philosopher and a moralist' and 'writing a book on sin and the wages attaching thereto,' while concurrently engaging in several of the sins he protests, is a source of amusement.³² Simultaneously, his hypocrisy makes Trellis's later crimes more believable, as his immorality is marked upon his body by an ugliness tied from the first to his bedridden state.

The student narrator's time spent in the bedroom is also made visible through grotesque attributes and actions. He 'rarely undresse[s],' only cleaning his suit by 'a brisk application with a coarse brush before going out,' with the result that he is unable to dispel 'the curious bedroom smell which clung to [his] person and which was frequently the subject of humorous or other comment.'³³ Following a night of excessive drinking, the student narrator vomits beneath his mattress so as to stay in bed. He leaves the mess so that, during a later visit, his friend Brinsley remarks 'that there [is] a queer smell in the room.'³⁴ Eventually, 'the discovery of lice in large numbers' in the

³⁰ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 34.

³¹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 293.

³² O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 47.

³³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 11.

³⁴ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 30.

student narrator's bedclothes prompts him to resolve 'to make an end of [his] dissolute habits.'³⁵ In O'Brien's novel, beds become sites of a filth that spills over to encompass the characters that frequent them. However, these examples of the grotesque bodily effects ascribed to 'excessive' time spent in bed are only one way O'Brien makes the effects of tiredness visible: exhaustion is also shown to be enacted with ulterior motive and therefore worthy of suspicion.

Though the student narrator presents himself as weak and unwell, staying in bed out of necessity, this frailty is consistently framed as a performance. Following a bout of excessive drinking, the student narrator remains in bed 'for three days on the pretence of a chill.'³⁶ He states that he 'fell back again as if exhausted by [his] effort, [...] raising [his] shoulders feebly from the bed' and giving 'a low moan of exhaustion.'³⁷ While we as readers know the true cause of his desire to stay in bed – he is hungover and does not want his uncle to find out – by framing his exhaustion as consciously performative early on in the text, all complaints of exhaustion that he has throughout the rest of the novel are also marked as disingenuous.

Just as the student narrator uses exhaustion as an excuse to mask his alcohol intake, a few pages later, when writing about Trellis, he positions sleeplessness as an excuse for excess alcohol consumption. Accused of having regularly 'indulged to excess in the use of wine,' Trellis gives the justification that he 'should not be able to sleep if [he] did not use wine as an opiate.'³⁸ Trellis's use of 'an opiate' in order to sleep is then immediately described as unnecessary, a 'failing of so great a man.'³⁹ The need for sleep is again used as an excuse for negative behaviour, undermining any genuine need for rest. That the two central characters who are shown to spend 'excessive' time in their beds do so for reasons deemed illegitimate draws into question the legitimacy of all individuals seen to spend unwarranted time in their beds.

At Swim-Two-Birds is a work of satire, in which none of O'Brien's characters escape ridicule. Indeed, there are as many levels of mockery to the novel as there are levels of narration. However, the danger for the writer is that it becomes increasingly difficult to recognise the difference between satire and the (unconscious) adoption of the very position being ridiculed. Determining the intentionality of O'Brien's representations is neither possible, nor entirely necessary for the aims of this article, which is not focused on the author's personal beliefs so much as the societal beliefs about sleep 'done wrong'

³⁵ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 61.

³⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 30 (emphasis mine).

³⁷ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 31 (emphasis mine), 35.

³⁸ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 41.

³⁹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 41.

that are reflected in consistent negative characterisation of individuals in bed throughout the novel. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, there are not bad characters who happen to spend 'excessive' time in bed, so much as bad characters whose badness is fundamentally entangled with their time spent in bed. Given that the unpleasant traits of Trellis and the student narrator are directly associated with sleep 'done wrong,' it is necessary to analyse exactly how their proximity to beds is used to depict them as grotesque and immoral. Neither Trellis nor the student narrator are ever provided with a diagnosis, and so their exhaustion is never legitimised. The absence of a prognosis, which would locate *At Swim-Two-Birds* more clearly within the realm of the medical, means that their time in bed becomes allegorical, tied instead to concerns about morality, and their sleep 'done wrong' is made subject to societal judgement. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, such depictions are also reflective of the social judgement directed towards real-world bodies in bed. Further, as the difference between legitimate and faked exhaustion can be near impossible to identify, the depiction of all main characters seen to spend time in bed as faking symptoms supports the stigmatising narrative that so too are other bedridden individuals.

The need for anyone without clear, visible impairment to remain in bed for extended periods of time is repeatedly and explicitly questioned across the novel. The student narrator's uncle, for instance, states that spending too much time in bed is 'a very bad sign in a young lad' – particularly one who 'is healthy as far as [he] can see.'⁴⁰ Those who fail to be productive, he continues, exhibit the sin of sloth: 'the lazy man is a burden to his friends, to himself, and to every man woman or child he'll meet or mix with.'⁴¹ As the uncle specifies, 'you would understand an old person or an invalid,' but the student narrator 'looks as fit as a fiddle' and therefore simply needs to make the effort to 'rise and use [his] God-given strength to the best of [his] ability.'⁴² Again though, in the case of many fatiguing conditions there is no clear, visible way to differentiate between those who are and those who are not genuinely experiencing exhaustion. The truth of the uncle's claim that he would 'understand an old person or an invalid' then comes into question, given that he denies any possibility that the student narrator's exhaustion could be legitimate.

As the subject of such accusations, it could be predicted that the student narrator would empathise with others who spend significant time in bed. Instead, as seen in the negative bodily depictions of Trellis, he perpetuates the stigmatising, moralistic narratives that his uncle attaches to bodies in bed, even as he himself generates these

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 233.

⁴¹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 234.

⁴² O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 233.

stories 'from the bed.'⁴³ Just as the uncle derides the student narrator for engaging in sloth and, through association, lust – qualities which he links to the bedroom and any excess time spent there – the student narrator likewise uses Trellis's bedbound state to index these same qualities. Once again, within the student's manuscript, tiredness is reduced to a narrative tool, and the tired body is subjected to moral judgement. That Trellis is often understood by critics as a parody of the student narrator's uncle adds further complexity to this issue⁴⁴ – in exacting his literary revenge, the student narrator likens his uncle to a hypocritical tyrant who demonstrates the very sins he disparages most. And, to quickly characterise Trellis as immoral, the student narrator gives him the most offensive form he seems able to muster: the bedbound body, vilified for the sake of comedic narrative revenge.

Spaces of Sin

The stigma attached to fatigue is inherently bound with expectations of productivity. Failure to meet these expectations can lead to the attribution of negative moral judgements upon these 'unproductive' bodies – bodies which, when viewed strictly within the confines of a capitalist framework, become burdensome and devoid of value. However, Trellis and the student narrator are offered a possible social 'redemption' in that, for both characters, their beds, as spaces of literary creation, are sites of production as well as rest. Yet, the manner in which Trellis and the student narrator complete their work is still viewed with suspicion, as the bedroom '[s]pace is linked with morality.'⁴⁵ The most blatant cause of suspicion pertains to the potential laziness of bedroom workers, as is repeatedly voiced by the student narrator's uncle. Stemming from this initial cause for concern, two more arise. First, the potential for other, also stigmatised, bedroom activities to occur instead of productive work, and secondly, in the case of Trellis, the potential for an overly demanding and lazy employer to place unfair labour burdens on workers.

From the first few pages of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the student narrator is repeatedly faced with allegations of laziness from his uncle, even as we, the readers, are privy to the literary work he is undertaking. The uncle's explicit accusation of laziness is not the only complaint being levelled at the student narrator. When he argues that his bedroom is his space of work early in the novel, the uncle's response echoes medical narratives

⁴³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 35.

⁴⁴ David Cohen, 'An Atomy of the Novel: Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 39, no. 2 (1993): 219, <https://doi.org/10.2307/441839>.

⁴⁵ Laura Lovejoy, 'Urban Degeneracy and the Free State in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in *Irish Urban Fictions*, eds. Maria Beville and Deirdre Flynn (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 131.

warning of the potential dangers and symptoms of onanism, or masturbation: 'I know the studying you do in your bedroom. [...] Damn the studying you do in your bedroom.'⁴⁶ Just as in descriptions of onanism, idleness – itself regularly listed as a symptom of onanism⁴⁷ – is described by the uncle as something for which '[y]oung people especially would have to be on their guard,' and for which the best defence is to 'keep on the move, and you'll move towards God.'⁴⁸ When discussing the student narrator's indulgence in 'the sin of sloth,' it is never simply his indolence that is being discussed, but by extension his lustfulness.⁴⁹ Any socially redemptive quality the bedroom may stand to gain from its reconstruction as a space of work is tainted by its potential as a space of perversion.

The connection between the body in bed, even when productive, and masturbation is one that O'Brien toys with throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Indeed, it is at the heart of the novel's central joke about aestho-autogamy, or successfully reproductive mental masturbation. As each form of production is imbued with qualities of the other, creative reproduction and productive masturbation become increasingly intertwined and linked to the space of the bedroom. In turn, 'excessive' time spent in the bedroom becomes associated with both laziness and self-indulgence in sexual activity, a connection that appears to be so socially entrenched that it has been widely accepted in previous *At Swim-Two-Birds* scholarship.

Where O'Brien's aestho-autogamy joke has been problematised previously, this has largely been due to the positioning and treatment of women. Aestho-autogamy allows for the creation of fully grown adults, 'born already matured, teathed, reared, educated, and ready' to enter the workforce,⁵⁰ becoming a form of production bound with the drive to generate greater efficiency. Thus, reproduction becomes solely about the creation of immediately productive bodies. Of course, Trellis manages to streamline the reproductive process even more, producing the character Furriskey without the need of the female body at all and showing the potential for a means of production that requires fewer bodies. In fact, inclusion of the female body in this process is presented as a cause of great concern: while 'the male author's creative masturbation is portrayed as a laudable literary act, [...] heterosexual sex, with its lamentable involvement of the female, is the result of common, base desire condemned for its lack of literary purity.'⁵¹ Further, within the text, the only instance of such involvement is the instance

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 12.

⁴⁷ See, for example: R. J. Brodie and Co., *The Secret Companion*, (London: RJ Brodie & Co., 1845), 17, 23–26; *The Family Doctor: A Dictionary of Domestic Medicine and Surgery*, (London: George Routledge, 1890), 550.

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 309.

⁴⁹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 13.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 56.

⁵¹ Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, 36.

of the violent, incestuous rape of Sheila Lamont, resulting in the unintended birth of Orlick, who later spearheads the revenge plot against his author-father. Yet, the entire revenge storyline born, so to speak, of Trellis's aestho-autogamy, relies firmly upon his tiredness and need for sleep, as we see in the unintentional creation of Orlick.

As the student narrator's friends are quick to state, by the logic of the story, Trellis could have prevented the birth had he immediately required 'the expectant mother to make a violent end of herself.'⁵² What prevents Trellis from doing so is that 'the author was paying less and less attention to his literary work and was spending entire days and nights in the unremitting practice of sleep.'⁵³ This scenario is shown to be a recurring one, as we learn Trellis also fell asleep following his immaculate conception of Furriskey. While the misogynistic reasoning behind the student narrator's story certainly contributes to Trellis's ruin, treating this factor as the sole reason for his downfall has hidden the role played by sleep and the body fatigued from its productive effort. When refocusing analysis on exhaustion, I find that there is an even more explicit positioning of literal fatigue as the central factor in Trellis's defeat.

Sleep, Fatigue, and Punishment

As the value of Trellis's creative productivity is repeatedly undermined by its proximity to the bed and, in turn, by its connection to immorality, the overarching image created of Trellis is not one of a productive creator, but rather one of an oppressive, negligent employer. Central to this depiction is the image of the bedridden body, its 'bulging exuberance' and 'white worthless legs'⁵⁴ signs of Trellis's excessive time in bed that are contrasted with the 'muscular and well-developed' masculine bodies of his character-employees.⁵⁵ The bedridden body is treated as symbolic of degeneracy and tyranny, a 'corporeal metaphor [offering] narrative the one thing it cannot possess – an anchor in materiality.'⁵⁶ The bedroom, as the site of Trellis's literary work, further functions as something of a boss's office. It is from the bedroom that Trellis directs his characters – not only as actors performing literary roles, but as hired and/or created employees with their own private lives and expectations of decent working conditions and wages.

⁵² O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 206.

⁵³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 207.

⁵⁴ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 42.

⁵⁵ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 54. Juxtaposition between the 'masculinist' and idle or disabled body is a recurring theme across both O'Brien's fictional works and his journalistic work as Myles na gCopaleen. See, for example, Richard T. Murphy's analysis of Myles's Cruiskeen Lawn column's 'recurring interest in non-normative, stubbornly material bodies' and how this 'troubles the metaphorical work performed by the sound, active body of the GAA man in allegorising the organic integrity of the nation.' Richard T. Murphy, 'Spare-Time Physical Activities: *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the GAA, and the Irish Modernist Body,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Borg and Fagan, 64–5.

⁵⁶ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 63.

The climactic trial of Trellis is, at heart, an employment dispute: the central conflict between Trellis and his characters stems from his poor treatment of them, as Trellis refuses to provide sufficient rights, wages, working conditions, and time with which to indulge in personal freedoms. When read with consideration of historical context, O'Brien's inclusion of an employment dispute within the novel is striking, due to the connection between the emergence of fatigue research and the history of employment concerns. As employers sought to extract the greatest possible productivity from employees by minimising worker fatigue, fatigue research committees and occupational health boards were created, and, ensuingly, labour laws that also protected workers from poor treatment.⁵⁷ Given that *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published a mere two years after the passing of the 1937 Factories Act in the neighbouring United Kingdom, the concerns raised by Trellis's characters about poor working conditions suggest that the connection between overwork and fatigue were likely socially salient within Ireland at the time of the novel's publication.⁵⁸

On initial consideration, it may then seem counter-intuitive that O'Brien should invest the figure of Trellis, the overly demanding employer, with the stigma of fatigue, rather than ascribe this trait to his overworked character-employees. My suggestion is that, here, the novel exemplifies an instance of 'aesthetic nervousness' (to return to Quayson's concept): in this case, via the struggle to separate fatigue from the moralistic judgement it is so strongly linked with. Even when engaging with prominent discourses of labour rights and fatigue, the negative social perception of the fatigued body proves more powerful than the scientific and political efforts of the time which aimed to shift fatigue from the realm of morality to that of the scientific and the medical.⁵⁹ The symbolic association between sleep 'done wrong' and immorality means that where fatigue is made visible, it must be shown on a villainous body: in this instance, on that of the tyrannical employer who profits from his workers' labour from the bed. Despite the many moments within *At Swim-Two-Birds* that appear to celebrate rest, sleep 'done wrong' is still repeatedly constructed as a moral failing, and one deserving of punishment.

The characters' retribution against Trellis consists of the violent torture and trial of his fatigued body, and this punishment seemingly draws upon several of the unsettling aspects of sleep and exhaustion. The sequence begins and ends in the bed, as Trellis is awakened into a 'stasis of the natural order'⁶⁰ characterised by timelessness,

⁵⁷ See, for example: Mark Paterson, *How We Became Sensorimotor: Movement, Measurement, Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 204; Rudolf Kucera, *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914-1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 64.

⁵⁸ Paterson, *How We Became Sensorimotor*, 209.

⁵⁹ Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 6.

⁶⁰ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 252.

a mutating bedroom, and disorientating repetition: a waking nightmare, an invasion of the night into the realm of the day that prevents Trellis from regaining control of his daytime self. Further, the sequence ends only to begin again, its repeated starts and stops reminiscent of the suspensive Derridean 'death sentence.'⁶¹ Trellis is given multiple 'death sentences,' as again and again he is tortured past the point a human body could withstand, yet each time he survives. Each death, then, is interrupted by a restarting, a *living on* governed by radical uncertainty, as each near execution is narrowly and unexpectedly averted. In this punishment scene, Trellis, suspended in a state of sleep throughout the majority of the text, only awakens to enter yet another state of suspension, one which is quite literally 'over – and over again.'⁶²

The initial torture sequence involves disturbing Trellis from bed three times. Each time he is wrested from a liminal state in which he 'neither slept nor woke but lay there in his bed, a twilight in his eyes [...] at peace.'⁶³ The bedroom, supposed to be a space of privacy and safety, is intruded upon and made dangerous, as first a cleric, then a saint, and finally the devil Pooka interrupt his rest. When informed by the Pooka of the torture he is to undergo, Trellis refuses to 'arise and [dress] against the hour of [his] torment'⁶⁴ – in consequence, he is set upon while still in bed. The bed, metonymic of Trellis's rest, is then further soiled by abject processes, as 'a general re-arrangement of his interior' results in 'a meat repast in the process of digestion' being 'ejected on the bed.'⁶⁵ The bed is made not only uncomfortable, but disgusting – and, in turn, so are Trellis's sleeping habits. Yet this degradation is not enough, as even the bedroom itself is turned against Trellis: 'the walls parted, diminished and came back again with loud noises and with clouds of choking lime-dust,' 'light was frequently withdrawn without warning and there was a continuous loud vomit-noise offensive to persons of delicate perceptions.'⁶⁶ Trellis is violently ejected from his bedroom, only for the Pooka to return him for further torture. In this way, 'the security of [his] bedroom' is actively weaponised, morphed into yet another tool of torment and turned against the resting body it is intended to shelter.⁶⁷

⁶¹ See Derrida's consideration of the death sentence in his reading of Maurice Blanchot's novel *L'arrêt de mort*, the translation of which is complicated by wordplay that means it could be understood either as 'death sentence' or as 'suspension of death.' Jacques Derrida, 'Living On,' in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds. Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman and J. Hillis Miller, trans. James Hulbert (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 75–176.

⁶² Derrida, 'Living On,' 77.

⁶³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 237.

⁶⁴ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 252.

⁶⁵ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 253.

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 253.

⁶⁷ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 257.

Though this manipulation of the bedroom could be understood as a purely vengeful act, there are also several uncomfortable resonances here. Firstly, I think of how the bed became weaponised through the attempts of Weir Mitchell to cure bedridden women, either by forcing them to exert themselves or to partake in rest that 'is not at all their notion of rest,' such that 'repose becomes [...] a rather bitter medicine, and they are glad enough to accept the order to rise and go about.'⁶⁸ Just as there is discomfort surrounding the ability of the disabled body to experience pleasure, the body in bed performing sleep 'done wrong' becomes especially offensive when it seems to receive any enjoyment.⁶⁹ While it may be logical that Trellis's torture occurs in the bedroom given that he spends most of his time in bed, the connection between torture and the bedroom is nonetheless significant. These particular acts not only appear geared toward punishing Trellis's bedridden body, but toward shocking him out of his offensive enjoyment of the bed through pain and humiliation. Indeed, throughout this violent sequence and Trellis's later trial, the torture of 'the cripple' is positioned as a source of amusement and celebration, justified by his own moral failings.⁷⁰

Trellis's connection with the bed is most visibly located in the pyjamas that he wears throughout his punishment, and which are made into a source of further humiliation for him. When ejected from his bed, Trellis is still clothed in 'his sweat-wet night-shirt and day-drawers.'⁷¹ Even when moved from the bedroom to the courtroom following his torture, Trellis remains in his bedclothes: his pyjamas act to further mark him with the exterior signs of fatigue. That he is tortured and eventually cast from his bedroom while still in his pyjamas, which are by that point 'disarranged and torn and piteously stained with blood and other fluids discharged probably from his many wounds,'⁷² adds to Trellis's punishment a layer of degradation evocative of 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' as he is shown to be fallible and grotesque. Cast from bed, Trellis's space of both power and weakness, his vulnerability is paraded; his invisible fatigue externalised and literally brought before court. Already enfeebled, exhausted and in pain, Trellis is forced to defend himself while wearing his bedclothes in a final act of shame, one that centres on making his 'incorrect' sleep – so offensive to the energetic, able-bodied world – equally offensive and embarrassing to Trellis himself.

Forced to leave his home and travel to court, Trellis is put on display while simultaneously being denied not only appropriate clothing, but food, shelter, and a bed. Sleep continues to be weaponised, as Trellis, increasingly weakened by a lack of food,

⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Fat and Blood*, 57–8.

⁶⁹ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 102–4.

⁷⁰ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 281.

⁷¹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 254.

⁷² O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 280.

is denied rest. While the Pooka dresses in silk pyjamas and sleeps in an elaborate bed in a tent, Trellis is forced to rest in 'tufts of piercing thorns and tangles of bitter spiky brambles.'⁷³ When Trellis does drift into sleep, this is immediately disciplined as he falls through thorns and to the ground. The result of such deprivations is that, when Trellis finally stands for trial, he has to be 'stretched on the ground in an unconscious state.'⁷⁴ On seeing him, Shanahan (performing the role of philosopher-constable) determines that '[h]e looks a very criminal type.'⁷⁵ The appearance of the visibly exhausted body is explicitly deemed morally suspicious in contrast with Shanahan, 'a reservoir of strength,' on whom the 'glory of manhood in its prime was stamped on every line of his perfectly proportioned figure and the rhythm of glorious youth was exemplified in every movement of his fine athletic stride.'⁷⁶ As the novel repeatedly insists, vigorous and energetic masculinity is aligned with good character and exemplary manhood, whereas the exhausted body, still clad in dirtied bedclothes, is determined to be criminal without need to 'bother about the charges at all.'⁷⁷

Trellis's verdict is already determined before the trial ever commences: indeed, the trial is only held so as to enact an additional form of humiliation. Trellis is given lawyers who cannot speak English and so must defend himself in a trial that is by design unwinnable as his vengeful characters act as both judge and jury, appearing as kings while he remains in soiled pyjamas. Ultimately, Trellis is of course deemed an 'unsavoury example of the depraved and diseased mind,' and, when making a final attempt to save his life, he is 'unable to rise or, for that matter, to raise his voice above the level of a whisper,' such that 'nobody in the court was aware he had spoken at all.'⁷⁸ Trellis's struggles throughout the trial are designed by Orlick so as to incorporate psychological as well as physical torment into his punishment, especially the increasing pain and exhaustion that impedes Trellis's ability to govern his body. The fatigued body is shown to be grotesque, criminal, deserving of punishment, and, ultimately, it is penalised with additional fatigue, as is Trellis's poetic due.

Conclusion

Throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds*, sleep and the body in bed are often subject to verbal glorification by the student narrator and his friends. I think, for example, of the group's presentation of sleep as such a blissful escape from the painful 'illusion of existence'

⁷³ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 265.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 279.

⁷⁵ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 279.

⁷⁶ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 269.

⁷⁷ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 279.

⁷⁸ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 296, 298-9.

that they suggest '[w]e must invert our conception of repose and activity' and 'should not sleep to recover the energy expended when awake but rather wake occasionally to defecate the unwanted energy that sleep engenders.'⁷⁹ Such defences of sleep, along with the substantial amounts of time spent in bed by the student narrator and Trellis, may on a surface level suggest that *At Swim-Two-Birds* sits within the realm of what Michael Greaney terms the '*Schlafroman*, a novel with a sleeper for a hero and with sleep as its primary activity.'⁸⁰ However, where the concept of the *Schlafroman* entails a 'rejection of the normative frameworks encoded in the *Bildungsroman* – from the capitalist work ethic to compulsory heterosexuality – in which negative judgements on sleep find validation,' *At Swim-Two-Birds* ultimately reinstates such judgements upon the literal bodies in bed. Despite Dobbins's suggestion that the concept of '[i]dleness [...] attains a utopian quality,' such utopian constructions are permitted only on a philosophical level or when rest is used as a political action, and are denied to literal characters in bed.⁸¹ The contradictions inherent in the student narrator's outward praise of 'blissful' sleep and simultaneous literary critique of abnormal sleep seem to challenge him throughout the text. His eventual denunciation of 'excessive' rest indicates his closing attempt to perform maturity and perhaps to resolve the tensions that arise from his attempts to interpret the body performing non-normative sleep. However, the ease with which he renounces his commitment to the bedroom illustrates the superficial nature of his prior glorification of rest and reinforces negative constructions of sleep 'done wrong.' As noted by Carol Taaffe, the student narrator's abrupt decision to revert to upholding the status quo and 'the convenient tidiness of this conclusion undermines the conventional *Bildungsroman* ending.'⁸² Further, we can locate a clear 'disruption of developmental time' in the student narrator's lingering inability to align himself with productive common time.⁸³ As such, we could consider *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a failed *Bildungsroman*, critiquing both capitalist work ethic and 'the contradictions inherent in mainstream developmental discourses of self, nation, and empire.'⁸⁴ However, O'Brien fails to extend his critique to the negative constructions of actual bodies in bed that arise from these same discourses – indeed, he relies upon them.

⁷⁹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 137–8.

⁸⁰ Michael Greaney, *Sleep and the Novel: Fictions of Somnolence from Jane Austen to the Present* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 111.

⁸¹ Greaney, *Sleep and the Novel*, 112; Dobbins, 'Constitutional Laziness,' 106.

⁸² Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 58.

⁸³ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

⁸⁴ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 3.

Acknowledgements

The author is deeply grateful for the invaluable guidance and support of their supervisor, Dr Maebh Long, and to the Marsden Fund of the Royal Society of New Zealand, whose scholarship supported their master's thesis research. The author also thanks the editorial team and reviewers for their generous feedback and assistance.

Competing Interests

This article stems from the author's master's thesis, which was completed under the supervision of a member of the editorial board (Maebh Long). Though Dr Long has advised the author throughout the writing of this article, she was not involved in the review or production processes of the piece.

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