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'Embarrassing enlightenments': Continuous Text Play in Flann O'Brien's 'John Duffy's Brother'

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The ubiquity of 'John Duffy's Brother' in recent Flann O'Brien scholarship attests to the text's openness. And yet, as the critic Sue Asbee points out, the short story simultaneously resists scholarly and critical approaches by 'send[ing] up the sophisticated reader who is pedantic enough to work out the technical sleight of hand.' This article develops Asbee's insight to examine O'Brien's story as a 'play text' that takes ludic delight in undermining applied readings. The argument draws on Wolfgang Iser's formulation of 'text play' and Roland Barthes's concept of the 'pleasure of the text,' and pursues new comparative readings with James Joyce's 'The Sisters' and Samuel Beckett's 'Imagination Dead Imagine.' Within these frameworks, close attention is given to the story's unconventional opening paragraph, the appearance of the spyglass, and the protagonist's transformation. These seemingly disparate textual events cohere into a metatextual joke via the gradual revelation that the reader is as much a subject of the story as the protagonist.

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In 1975, Anne Clissmann summarised the plot of Flann O'Brien's short story 'John Duffy's Brother'[1] as concerning a day 'in the life of a civil servant who suddenly thinks he's a train,' before dismissing the tale as 'not particularly amusing.'[2] Over the last half-century, appreciation for the story has grown immensely. A turn in the story's reception is noticeable in Sue Asbee's insightful two-and-a-half-page analysis, published in 1991, which re-evaluates it as a 'not-inconsiderable achievement' even as she offers the caveat that '[s]uch lengthy comment may seem disproportionate to the slightness of "John Duffy's Brother".'[3] Subsequent readings have overturned this charge of slightness by drawing attention to the story's complex network of intertextual allusions. Thomas F. Shea and Keith Hopper both note how the central role of locomotives, the shared character surnames, and references to the village of Chapelizod invite comparisons with James Joyce's 'A Painful Case.' Moreover, Shea painstakingly catalogues echoes of John Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' throughout the story.[4] Further comparative readings have been undertaken by Paul Fagan, who adds to the Keats and Joyce allusions a thematic intertextual relation to Ovid's Narcissus scene,[5] and by Dirk Van Hulle, who argues that 'John Duffy's Brother' may be read alongside Joyce's short story and Samuel Beckett's 'Stirrings Still' as a modernist literary exploration of the interactions between mind, body, and environment.[6] The story has been read in formal terms, such as in Marion Quirici's analysis of its use of metafiction and mediation.[7] Other critics have returned the story to its social and historical contexts, as in Shannon Tivnan's historicist analysis of the text as a commentary on 'the paradox that is the Irish Free State,'[8] or Hopper's queer reading of its train imagery as an expression of repressed homosexuality. The story, which Hopper describes as 'against resolution, reason, and certainty,'[9] has become ubiquitous within recent

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[1] Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 55–59.

[2] Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 266.

[3] Sue Asbee, *Flann O'Brien* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 122.

[4] Thomas F. Shea, 'Flann O'Brien and John Keats: "John Duffy's Brother" and Train Allusions,' in *Éire-Ireland* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 109–20; Keith Hopper, 'Coming Off the Rails: The Strange Case of "John Duffy's Brother",' in *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 19–32.

[5] Paul Fagan, '"I've Got You Under My Skin": "John Duffy's Brother," "Two in One," and the Confessions of Narcissus,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), *Contesting Legacies*, 60–75.

[6] 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. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 105–118.

[7] Marion Quirici, '(Probably Posthumous): The Frame Device in Brian O'Nolan's Short Fiction,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds.), *Contesting Legacies*, 46–59.

[8] Shannon Tivnan, 'Counterfeit Goods in Flann O'Brien's "John Duffy's Brother",' *The Explicator* 68, no. 4 (2010): 270–273.

[9] Hopper, 'Coming Off the Rails,' 26.

O'Brien scholarship due to its the incredible openness. However, Asbee also points out that the text's playful resistance to such scholarly and critical approaches 'sends up the sophisticated reader who is pedantic enough to work out the technical sleight of hand.'[10] For Asbee, this skillful deception relates to the text's seemingly 'contradictory attitudes' and 'elaboration[s]' that remain 'irrelevant to the story,' yet which reveal O'Brien's 'real subject' to be 'the problems and pleasure of narrative fiction.'[11]

In this article, I provide an analysis of the major ludic elements in 'John Duffy's Brother.' In doing so, I demonstrate how these seemingly disparate textual events cohere into a sustained metatextual performance made up of 'embarrassing enlightenments.' These enlightenments come, in comedic terms, at the reader's expense with the emergence of an 'embarrassed' self-reflexive reading, which results in the uncanny, gradual revelation that the reader is as much a subject of the story as the protagonist. Just as the greatest jokes are structured in three parts, 'John Duffy's Brother' contains three major ludic elements:

1. the text's unconventional opening paragraph, which invites the reader to engage with 'John Duffy's Brother' as a site of text play;
2. the appearance of the protagonist's spyglass, which is instrumental in establishing the game rules and is paradigmatic in unlocking numerous further ludic elements;
3. the protagonist's transformation, which is the moment of metadiscursive revelation – or, more bluntly, the punchline – of O'Brien's masterful metafictional performance.

With reference to Roland Barthes's distinction between 'writerly' and 'readerly' texts and to Wolfgang Iser's formulation of 'text play,' I explore 'John Duffy's Brother' as a textual site in which the playful reader may observe the interplay between the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. Iser describes the last of these as the 'third element' of reader response that acts as a receptacle for textual elements that '[do] not partake of the character of reality,' but which are nevertheless 'actual and present'[12] – i.e., those elements of the text which are performative rather than mimetic. The present article also introduces textual comparisons to Beckett's 'Imagination Dead Imagine' and Joyce's 'The Sisters' to illuminate how 'John Duffy's Brother' invites a sustained

[10] Asbee, 122.
[11] *Ibid.*, 120–121.
[12] Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Hopkins University Press, 1996), 2.

readerly investigation of narrative authority and reflexive mimesis while remaining aware of its foregrounded textuality. Previous scholars have approached O'Brien's work in similar terms, notably Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja and Michael Cronin, although in both studies the critic's ludic gaze is predominantly reserved for *At Swim-Two-Birds*. More recently, W. Michelle Wang has identified alluring aesthetic experiences and postmodern play within *The Third Policeman* as well as *At Swim-Two-Birds.*[13] Inversely, though Asbee and Hopper both note the 'ludic – or playful – quality' of 'John Duffy's Brother,' neither has made play central to their approach.[14]

Following Iser, I shall outline how the text invites the reader to tilt between two simultaneous readings: that of the primary mimetic narrative and a playful performative metadiscourse, which arise simultaneously from the text's opening line. This oscillation between textual registers produces an effect of ludic readerly self-awareness which, co-opting a term from the text itself, I argue is the first of a series of 'embarrassing enlightenments'[15] in which the fictive elements come to heighten the reader's awareness of the fictionalising act. I shall then argue that the protagonist's spyglass, a key element of the ludic text, assumes an additional aesthetic function as a result of the textual schema outlined above. Here, I will explore how the spyglass provides the playful reader with a key to unlock additional ludic aspects of the text. I shall describe how these aspects concurrently work to sustain metatextual play in addition to the primary mimetic narrative. I conclude by discussing how the protagonist's metamorphosis into a train may be re-encountered as a moment of self-reflexive revelation. Rather than attempt a suspicious reading of Duffy's transformation, this article will maintain the Iserian method of investigating the intentionality of the text in light of what it *does*. I will therefore approach the central narrative event in terms of its intentionality, rather than attempt an account of any extraneous meaning outside of the metadiscourse.

Text Play

In *The Fictive and the Imaginary,* Iser dispenses with 'the old distinction between fiction and reality as a frame of reference,' preferring instead the triad of 'the real, the fictive, and the imaginary.'[16] This triadic model enables the analysis of textual elements

[13] Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, and Georges Perec* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007); Michael Cronin, 'Mental Ludo: Ludic Elements in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune [Anne Clissmann] and Tess Hurson (Belfast: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1997), 47–52; W. Michelle Wang, *Eternalized Fragments: Reclaiming Aesthetics in Contemporary World Fiction* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2020).

[14] Asbee, 122, qtd. in Hopper, 'Coming Off the Rails,' 26.

[15] O'Brien, 54.

[16] Iser, 1–2.

which do not adhere to the referent-representational function of traditional fictional texts, such as aesthetic items which nevertheless elicit an imaginative response through the emergence of a metadiscourse, which Iser describes as an 'imaginary quality that does not belong to the reality reproduced in the text but that cannot be disentangled from it.'[17] Iser's triad allows for the discussion of a text's performative aspects, which arise through a heightened readerly awareness of textuality, in excess of the mimetic functions of plot, character, and location. These performative aspects, which often serve to establish metadiscourses about the act of reading itself, emerge alongside traditional mimetic readings. Iser writes: 'Reproduced reality is made to point to a "reality" beyond itself, while the imaginary is lured into form.'[18] This luring of the imaginary into form through the fictionalising act, which the imaginary then 'points to,' gives rise to the possibility of text play. In the chapter on 'Text Play' in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Iser describes the 'splitting of the signifier as the smallest, though most universal, of "language games",' through which the 'linguistic sign is now freed for unpremeditated uses,' or what Iser describes as 'convention-governed denotation.'[19] He explains that if the signifier 'no longer means what it denotes, then no longer meaning what it denotes becomes itself a denotation, bringing into existence something that does not yet exist.'[20]

The present article shall demonstrate that 'John Duffy's Brother' can be read in two ways simultaneously, if, following Asbee's advice, the reader is willing to be playful. I will show how the opening passage of 'John Duffy's Brother' provides an invitation to text play through the simultaneous activation of what Roland Barthes calls 'two systems of reading': the primary reading that traces the mimetic narrative, and the secondary, '*applied* reading' which sustains the metadiscourse and performative functions.[21] The latter 'applied reading' both sustains *and* alters what Iser describes as the textual 'schema.' Iser claims:

> The schemata of the literary texts generally do not imitate a given empirical world of objects; instead, they reproduce affective attitudes, [...] mental and perceptual dispositions, and so on, whose amalgamation, however, is not brought about for its own sake.[22]

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[17] *Ibid.*, 2.
[18] *Ibid.*, 3.
[19] *Ibid.*, 247.
[20] *Ibid.*, 248.
[21] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 12–13.
[22] Iser, 254.

Iser notes that 'the text is permeated by a vast range of identifiable items, selected from social and other extratextual realities. The mere importation into the text, however, of such realities [...] does not ipso facto make them fictive.'[23] An item, instead, may function as part of the schema when it 'brings to light purposes, attitudes, and experiences that are decidedly *not* part of the reality reproduced.'[24] In these instances, the item operates aesthetically 'to assimilate the inaccessible' and to 'enable something to be visualised that by its very nature is unseeable.'[25] This visualisation may be characterised as the text's secondary, metadiscursive reading, which in 'John Duffy's Brother' becomes the site of a metafictional joke on the 'aristocratic' reader which, ironically, is only accessed through the pedantic unpacking of such items' aesthetic possibilities.

Secondary analytical reading is often characterised as the preserve of the 'sophisticated' readers, whom Asbee suggests are the butt of the joke in 'John Duffy's Brother.' In 'The Pleasure of the Text,' Barthes describes the 'writerly' aspects of texts that must be read slowly and vertically, so that they might be unlocked by 'aristocratic readers,' as opposed to 'readerly' texts, which are to be consumed quickly and horizontally in a procedural reading of plot, character, and location which 'ignores the play of language.'[26] It is to Barthes that Iser responds when he identifies 'two aspects that are central' to Barthes's 'pleasure of the text':

1. The 'duplicity' that is 'the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve*,' which presents itself as the ineradicable difference that constitutes play and cannot be done away with by whatever form in which it is acted out.
2. Instead, the subject is swept into this split, which itself is 'the subject of the text' insofar as everything that is played in the text emerges from it.[27]

We can see, then, how play texts such as 'John Duffy's Brother' are intrinsically duplicitous: the experience of the 'split' between simultaneous mimetic and aesthetic readings is essential to its ludic aspect. Iser's application of his concept of 'text play' to Beckett's short prose will here provide a model for my analysis. I will compare the openings of 'John Duffy's Brother' and Beckett's 'Imagination Dead Imagine'[28] to explore how both texts establish unconventional schemata that destabilise the primary

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[23] *Ibid*., 2.
[24] *Ibid*.
[25] *Ibid*., 255.
[26] Barthes, 12–13.
[27] *Ibid*., 279.
[28] Samuel Beckett, 'Imagination Dead Imagine,' in *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 182–185.

mimetic narrative to create sites of free text play. On the basis of the coordinates established through this comparative reading, I will interrogate what becomes 'visible' in 'John Duffy's Brother' when the text is approached with a ludic gaze.

'To write it or to tell it is to spoil it': A Paradoxical Invitation to Play

The sending up of the reader begins in the opening line of 'John Duffy's Brother.' At the outset, the reader is confronted with the absurdity of traditional rules of approach to a self-referentially untenable text:

> Strictly speaking, this story should not be written or told at all. To write it or to tell it is to spoil it. This is because the man who had the strange experience we are going to talk about never mentioned it to anybody, and the fact that he kept his secret and sealed it up completely in his memory is the whole point of the story. Thus we must admit that handicap at the beginning – that it is absurd for us to tell the story, absurd for anybody to listen to it, and unthinkable that anybody should believe it.[29]

'John Duffy's Brother' immediately destabilises the reader's approach to the text through a paradoxical framing device. This ludic opening establishes a self-referential schema, which is further augmented by the accumulation of suspect fictionalising events. These subsequent events foreground the act of reading itself by increasing the sense of uncanny familiarity between the representational and symbolic elements of the text's signifiers, resulting in a visceral sense of self-awareness. The state of play has us switching between two readings: the primary plot concerning the protagonist's quotidian existence and fantastical transformation, and a secondary aesthetic reading that exposes the reader's compulsive collusion with the fictive text even as its elements are revealed to be suspect.

Asbee outlines some of the considerations that arise from the principal paradox of the opening of 'John Duffy's Brother':

> It is not a first-person narrative, but, like that of *The Third Policeman*, the position from which it is told is an untenable one. If the story was never told in the first place, how does the present narrator know about it – unless it happened to him and we are, in fact, reading a disguised first-person narration? The straightforward answer is that it is O'Brien's invention; nevertheless, the question is valid because of the

[29] O'Brien, 54.

> gesture towards anecdote: 'the man who had this strange experience *we are going to talk about*' and the sense of authenticity this statement aims to confer.[30]

This combination of devices invites the reader into the text game. By establishing a heightened awareness of textuality through a partial dismissal of narratorial authority, the untenability of regular mimesis is foregrounded. Thus destabilised, a self-conscious 'embarrassed' reading emerges as a result of this self-reflexive textual schema.

The opening lines of Beckett's 'Imagination Dead Imagine' function similarly to O'Brien's paradoxical frame device:

> No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure.[31]

By imploring the reader to imagine imagination dead, Beckett's text simultaneously activates and negates the reader's impulse towards traditional mimesis. What unfolds is a non-mimetic, performative text, in which the shadow cast by the opening line's oblique command foregrounds the veracity of the reader's later mimetic constructions. Exact, precise measurements are later given for a fully enclosed, unenterable space, but which the activated and visible imagination is, however, able to penetrate: 'No way in, go in.' The image of this impossible place is unstable, yet imaginable, the unsustainability of the image gesturing towards its own textuality and giving rise to potential play. Exact geometric positions and measurements are offered as traps, inviting us to imagine simple lines and shapes while at the same time further demands are made which are unimaginable: a room of entirely white light, no single light source or shadow, a description of the unseeable, but seeable through this unworldly, disembodied mimesis, an irresistible consequence of the fictionalising act. Play emerges via the attempt to activate the imaginary made visible through the text's performative elements. Beckett's subsequent invitations to establish coherence among the text's disparate images highlight the insubstantiality and implausibility of mimesis as a reliable representational phenomenon. Beckett's is a dark comedic textual performance, tinged with an atmosphere of existential despair and despair at the limits of language, its 'story the impossibility of stories, its form the disintegration of form.'[32]

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[30] Asbee, 120.

[31] Beckett, 182.

[32] Beckett, qtd. in *The Complete Short Prose*, xii.

Tonally, 'Imagination Dead Imagine' contrasts pointedly with the jovial and ironic 'John Duffy's Brother,' a text in keeping with Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper's assertion that O'Brien's writing constitutes 'a garden in which all of us may play.'[33] Nevertheless, the two texts similarly invite the aesthetic experience of self-consciously performed mimesis through the destabilisation of the coordinates of mimetic representation.

O'Brien's anecdotal tone serves an important purpose in 'John Duffy's Brother' in establishing a sense of familiarity that invites readerly engagement with the text's stranger aesthetic elements. We might consider, for example, a viewer's response to an image of an unreal and impossible staircase by the graphic artist M. C. Escher.[34] On a granular level, each step is comprehensible and seemingly adheres to the spatial logic of traditional representational art. The eye decodes each step of a staircase as rising a level, but to witness the whole is to realise that the rules by which we expect to transmogrify the code of the text have been simultaneously revealed – re-presented – and broken. Escher's drawing style is draftsman-like, formal yet unpretentious. It is the reliability of his technical competence and the unspectacular style of his drawing which allows the eye to entertain the elements of the image which are impossible. Escher himself stated:

> Whoever wants to *portray* something that does *not* exist has to obey certain rules. Those rules are more or less the same as for the teller of fairy tales: he has to apply the function of contrasts; he has to cause a shock. The element of mystery to which he wants to call attention must be surrounded and veiled by perfectly ordinary everyday self-evidences that are recognisable to everyone.[35]

In this way, the initial anecdotal tone of 'John Duffy's Brother' creates a sense of familiarity between the narrator and reader even as the authenticity of the text as a dynamic mimetic event is thrown into question. The use of 'we' and 'us' in establishing the suspect narrative framework ('we must admit [...] that it is absurd for us to tell the story') lends the opening a co-conspiratorial tone, an invitation to join the narrator's unconventional textual experimentation in a site created from 'recognisable' elements of conventional speech. The 'gesture towards anecdote' grounds the text in the referential reality on which the classical conception of mimesis depends. However, 'John Duffy's Brother,' through its absurdity, tests the viability of such referentiality by

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[33] Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, 'Editors' Introduction: A(nother) Bash in the Tunnel,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (2011): 9–20.

[34] M. C. Escher, 'Ascending and Descending,' lithograph, 1960.

[35] M. C. Escher, 'The Impossible,' in *Escher on Escher: Exploring the Infinite*, trans. Karin Ford (New York: Abrams, 1989), 138.

taking it to extremes. If we are to entertain the text's anecdotal contrivance, accepting the as-if reality of the text – which inherently presupposes the existence of the textual reality and co-existence of the text itself – then we are also invited to accept that the characters depicted in the text are liable to receive meta-real repercussions for what the text itself shares. In other words, the text exists as an item within the fictive world of the text, but through an impossible premise.

O'Brien's narrator justifies the text's limited scope with an appeal to the protagonist's need to maintain dignity and privacy as a real-world citizen:

> We will, however, do this man one favour. We will refrain from mentioning him by his complete name. This will enable us to tell his secret and permit him to continue looking his friends in the eye. But we can say that his surname is Duffy. There are thousands of these Duffys in the world; even at the moment there is probably a new Duffy making his appearance in some corner of it. We can even go so far as to say he is John Duffy's brother.[36]

The passage foregrounds the text's simultaneous claims to both the real and the imaginary, by reference to its basis in a homogenous but fluctuating real world. That the act of consuming the text is presented as having a potential narratological effect on the text itself is the second paradox of 'John Duffy's Brother,' which gains greater prominence by the gesture towards censorship in its title. This paradox performs a tri-part negotiation between the fictive, the re-presentation of reality, and the subsequent activation of the imaginary. How can the reader enter into a traditional mimetic reading of Duffy's subsequent metamorphosis on such terms, without a corresponding and parallel interrogation of the unconventional conditions under which we are invited to attempt it? In this way, the paradox sustains the performative metadiscourse that emerges from the opening lines, and the state of play continues in the subsequent activation of textual elements into either the primary or secondary reading, or rather to both readings at once, as the tilting of the position of such elements in the service of mimetic or performative functions becomes visible.

In such a ludic reading of 'John Duffy's Brother,' the text's subsequent fictionalising flourishes serve simultaneous mimetic and performative functions in anticipation of the state of heightened reading affected by the text's paradoxical opening. Under such a foregrounding of the fictionalising act, the fate of John Duffy, for example – which in

[36] O'Brien, 54.

a traditional story may be regarded simply as tragic[37] – becomes the endpoint of an *ad absurdum* act of narrative distancing:

> We do not break faith in saying so, because if there are only one hundred John Duffys in existence, and even if each one of them could be met and questioned, no embarrassing enlightenments would be forthcoming. That is because the John Duffy in question never left his house, never left his bed, never talked to anybody in his life, and was never seen by more than one man. That man's name was Gumley. Gumley was a doctor. He was present when John Duffy was born and also when he died, one hour later.[38]

Multiple mimetic misdirections are evoked in the passage only to be swiftly negated. The plurality of John Duffys and their fictive potentialities are dismissed first in practical terms – 'even if' they could be questioned – in a gesture to the authenticity of the narrator's anecdote. The narrator implies extra-textual activity outside of their control, suggesting that other agents could challenge the privacy of the text through interviews with related parties. The narrator signals that the story is not of their own making, that it has somehow been received, although they themselves admit that this would be impossible. The identification of the 'true' John Duffy – as it were, the brother of 'John Duffy's brother' – foregrounds the text's fictive dimension via the reader's potential misinterpretations that might arise from the repeated use of the word 'never.' We are invited through these ambiguities to entertain the idea of John Duffy the agoraphobe or hermit, the shut-in or layabout, the mute or the recluse, before the brief appearance of Gumley and the revelation of John Duffy's death as an infant. The effect of this garden path passage is telescopic. All John Duffys, and the fictive possibility of their existences, are reduced and negated until the emergence of a single John Duffy, whose existence lasted just one hour and involved only interactions with his mother and doctor. Nevertheless, the passage's ludic invitation to imagine alternative John Duffys – evoked in shadow form as apparitions – undermines the anecdotal construct at the same time as the narrator claims to verify it.

We can identify in the narrator's framing of the tale, then, the emergence of the text's performative elements – or, following Iser, 'items' – occurring as aesthetic expressions of their own self-presentation. It is telling that the opening paragraph of 'John Duffy's Brother,' which establishes its 'openness,' was a later addition to

[37] For a discussion of tragic passions in 'John Duffy's Brother,' see Ruben Borg, *Fantasies of Self-Mourning: Modernism, the Posthuman and the Finite* (Leiden and Boston: Brill | Rodopi, 2019), 161–164.

[38] O'Brien, 54.

an earlier draft which lacked this metadiscursive aspect.[39] Such elements maintain, through their disruptiveness, the tilting alternation between the fictive possibilities contained within the text, even as they and sustain its ludic quality. The mimetic reading is reinforced by the narrative voice, ostensibly grounded in reality by these anecdotal gestures and the necessity of real-world privacy in response to the inherent voyeurism which accompanies the reading of fiction.[40] However, this anecdotal tone is vital both in establishing the schema that allows the story's dynamic metadiscursive register to emerge, and for the reader to self-consciously encounter the text as a tissue of fictionalised events. If we imagine the text as a coat we are invited to wear, 'John Duffy's Brother' offers itself inside out: it remains functional but is given to us in such a way that the wearer is confronted with the seams and stitching and is invited to trace how the various materials have – or have not – been sewn together.

'About the spyglass': A Not So Gnomic Clue

I have noted how Joyce's 'A Painful Case' has been identified as an undeniable point of reference for O'Brien in the writing of 'John Duffy's Brother.' However, I now wish to invoke 'The Sisters,' another story from *Dubliners*, towards a description of how our protagonist's spyglass might be shown to function as a paradigmatic ludic element within 'John Duffy's Brother' when approached in terms of text play.

Margot Norris posits that the trinity of italicised words in the opening paragraph of 'The Sisters' – paralysis, gnomon, simony – govern our reading of the themes of *Dubliners* as a whole. Quoting Jean-Michel Rabaté, Norris notes that these 'hermeneutic signals' allow *Dubliners* to present a 'theory of its own interpretation, of its reading, of its possible metadiscourses about textuality.'[41] Norris goes on to offer a 'suspicious reading' of the text based upon the gnomic nature of the child's-eye view of the story, where the child-reader negotiates elliptical dialogue told in recollection by the adult-narrator.[42] In Iserian terms, the suspicious readings that emerge from the elliptical style of *Dubliners* themselves do so from a state of play. And although the text of 'John Duffy's Brother' is indeed open enough to accommodate suspicious readings – as Hopper has successfully demonstrated[43] – that is not my intention here. Instead, my argument is that the spyglass operates as a hermeneutic signal which confirms our suspicion that

[39] Clissmann, 266.

[40] See Fagan, 68.

[41] Margot Norris, *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's 'Dubliners'* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 17.

[42] The suggestion being that, like a child interpreting the world, the reader's conception of the fictive text is essentially gnomic.

[43] Hopper, 'Coming Off the Rails,' 31–32.

we are encountering yet more ludic elements, through which further text play might be realised.

As a result of the opening paradox and the telescopic fictionalising of John Duffy, the reader's eye comes to rest, like that of the protagonist, on the spyglass, in a moment of self-reflexive voyeurism. In a split reading affected by the schema which highlights the invasion of privacy, and following an invasive peering into the short tragic life of John Duffy, the spyglass performs a dual function, exposing the power relations between author and reader while simultaneously drawing parallels between the reader and the protagonist. As Fagan has noted, John Duffy's brother is a reader himself – 'a *mis*reader,'[44] who scans the valley with an eagle eye for signs that he is liable to misinterpret:

> The man carried in the crook of his arm an instrument which Mr Duffy at first took to be a shotgun or patent repeating rifle, but one morning the man held it by the butt and smote the barrels smartly on the ground as he walked, and it was then evident to Mr Duffy – he felt some disappointment – that the article was a walking stick.[45]

The protagonist's disappointment uncannily mirrors that of the sign-interpreting reader. Yet like the protagonist's spyglass, the act of meditation offers the potential to interpret signs in multiple ways, to misinterpret, or to create meaning from what is not immediately visible in the text. From a distance, both the protagonist and the reader are looking for signs to elevate what is surveyed to an interpretative level above the quotidian. In the 'embarrassed' reader's case, our distance from the mimetic text is affected by the activation of the text's performative aspects and our heightened awareness of its textuality. The narrative voice, which slyly implicates the reader and makes them complicit through the use of the term 'we,' claims the dominant ability to make visible that which is not present.

A spyglass may survey a panorama, but the view is granular, and never truly panoramic. Like the protagonist, we, putting our eye to the spyglass of the text, extrapolate not just signs, but signals of intentionality. But the imagination is liable to create meaning and offer assumptions which are, though imaginatively viable, absent from the fictive world of the text. Following the introduction of the spyglass we read: 'The village of Chapelizod was to the left and invisible in the depth but each morning the inhabitants would erect, as if for Mr Duffy's benefit, a lazy plume of

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[44] Fagan, 63.
[45] O'Brien, 55.

smoke to show exactly where they were.'[46] The reader's self-conscious identification with the protagonist's act of voyeurism leads them into a game of suspicious sign-reading, having been warned through the gun/walking stick misreading that, in this text, the seemingly remarkable can soon be revalued as mundane, creating imaginative dead ends. Yet that which frustrates the traditional narrative is sustenance for our embarrassed reading and for potential play.

'John Duffy's Brother' is filled with 'lazy plume[s]'[47]: textual smoke signals that seemingly invite us to engage in playful acts of suspicious sign-reading. The intense, performative narrowing of fictive possibility that we encountered with John Duffy receives its inverse when applied, here, to the figure with the stick surveyed across the valley:

> *It happened* that this man's name was Martin Smullen. He was a retired stationary-engine driver and lived quietly with a delicate sister at Number Four Cannon Row, Parkgate. Mr Duffy *did not know his name* and was destined *never* to meet him or have the privilege of his acquaintance, but it *may be worth mentioning* that they once stood side by side at the counter of a public house in Little Easter Street, *mutually unrecognised*, each to the other a black stranger. Mr Smullen's call was whiskey, Mr Duffy's stout.
>
> Mr Smullen's sister's name was not Smullen but Goggins, relict of the late Paul Goggins, wholesale clothier. Mr Duffy had *never even heard of her*. She had a cousin by the name of Leo Corr who was *not unknown* to the police. He was sent up in 1924 for a stretch of hard labour in connection with the manufacture of *spurious currency*. Mrs Goggins had *never met him*, but *heard* that he had emigrated to Labrador on his release.
>
> About the spyglass.[48] [my emphasis]

This chain of interrelations is a site of play governed by the narrator's interstitial focus and a relinquished narratorial omniscience, delimited, here and there, by the anecdotal mode of gossip which maintains a claim to insider knowledge. The result is a tilting of narrative distancing, as the narrative voice switches between fictive-omniscient and fictive-anecdotal registers. As the text's fictionalisation has been foregrounded by peering into the lives of John Duffy and his doctor, the reader encounters the passage's mimetic aspects with suspicion. Just as if viewed through a spyglass, each new link is

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[46] *Ibid*.
[47] *Ibid*.
[48] *Ibid*.

interrogated as a singular sign-reading event. Fresh fictionalising acts occur under the untenable circumstances of the textual schema, and play arises through the reader's interpretation of how each link performatively claims or disavows narrative authority. Several of the links are non-existent in the fictive world of the text but are created through suspect narration, becoming 'spurious currency'[49] in the text game being played alongside the primary narrative and performative world-making. The apparent intention of the passage is to create a network of interrelations between the text's characters to expand its fictive world. Yet, the gesture is purposefully cursory, offering a series of apparitions that we are invited to imagine. The specificity of detail seems to offer potential material for the advancement of the plot, though the non-sequitur introduction of the spyglass indicates that the passage is a ludic digression. The linking of the chain of interrelations thus becomes the metafictional subject, and the metadiscourse the core of the text's intentionality. The passage is an inversion of the telescoping effect that focused in on one of the multitudes of potential John Duffys, reaching outwards, via a network of variously linked characters that presents another site of imagining, that of John Duffy's brother's world and its fictive interconnections. The ludic aspect of this passage is derived from our interrogation of the veracity of each link in the chain through which intentionality becomes visible.

The authority of the narrator is relinquished at the end of the passage, where the performance of omniscience withers in the unsubstantiated knowledge of one of the text's most minor characters. By the time we 'hear' the rumoured emigration of Leo Corr, our awareness of the spurious nature of each fictionalising act gives way to the passage's performative aspects, heightening the playfulness of the narrator's granular spyglass-like interrogation. The narrator returns to the spyglass immediately after this fictionalising chain, underlining its paradigmatic function in establishing the game rule[50] through which the preceding passage might be approached aesthetically. But where the spyglass here clarifies what precedes it, the history of the spyglass's former owner that follows is an exercise in obfuscation, whereby euphemism and ellipsis actively invite suspicious readings. We are told that John Duffy's brother's father 'had gone to sea at the age of sixteen as a result of an incident arising out of an imperfect understanding of the sexual relation.'[51] The sentence's declarative opening contrasts with its euphemistic ending, the unspecificity of which presents the reader with a ludic challenge to concretise narrative despite the sentence's absence of detail. Such narrative distancing occurs from a point of intentionally diminished narrative

[49] *Ibid*.

[50] See 'Playing and Being Played,' in Iser, 273–280.

[51] O'Brien, 55.

authority, which similarly can only offer what has been 'heard' about Leo Corr. But here, the narrator exploits the supposed real-world necessity of self-censorship and deftly repurposes it as an aesthetic device that aids the metadiscourse, spurious as the narrative currency may be.

'Something queer, momentous and magical': A Self-Reflexive Punchline

Though just a single elliptical paragraph deals with the history of John Duffy's brother's father, it foreshadows the protagonist's imagined transformation in both the primary mimetic and secondary performative readings. I shall briefly sketch how this passage sustains the text's ludic state through the interplay between the mimetic narrative and performative metadiscourse. Then, I will discuss how the textual schema and accumulation of ludic elements encountered so far might govern how the playful reader could encounter the protagonist's metamorphosis, so as to emerge with a keen sense of uncanny familiarity from their embarrassed reading.

John Duffy's brother's father, we are told, 'was of a scholarly turn of mind and would often spend the afternoons of his sea-leave alone in his dining-room thumbing a book of Homer [...]. On the fourth day of July, 1927, at four o'clock, he took leave of his senses in the dining-room.'[52] These two sentences offer a mise-en-abyme of both the narrative and performative aspects of 'John Duffy's Brother' as a whole. The reader enters voyeuristically into the privacy of a character's mind just prior to a moment of madness. Whereas the reader can access the protagonist's private mind through the text's untenable paradox, here the schema of the text – sustained, as we have seen, through performative events such as the narrative telescoping and chain-linking of character interrelations – means that this infiltration, though offered plainly, is rendered similarly suspect and distant. The non-specificity of the repeated scene, occurring over many afternoons just as the protagonist's spyglass voyeurism occurs over many mornings, contrasts with the identification of the exact moment of Duffy's father's psychological disturbance. Similarly, the protagonist's transformation is given along with a specific date and time.[53] Most intriguingly, however, the passage suggests it is the act of reading – or, more fittingly, 'over-reading,' in that Duffy's father's habitual reading sessions all focus on a single text – that may have led the 'scholarly' father's mental collapse. Fagan has previously suggested how we might interpret the protagonist's use of the spyglass as analogous to the act of reading; it follows, then, that the transformation is the result of an imagination gone off the rails from the attempt

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *Ibid.*, 56.

to interpret and give meaning to suspect, distant signs. Foreshadowed by the miniature history of his father, Mr Duffy's terrifying experience is seemingly the result of over-reading, an activity in which the 'embarrassed' reader – Duffy's sign-interpreting parallel – realises they, too, are actively engaged.

The metadiscursive implication of this uncanny climax brings the sending up of the scholarly 'aristocratic' reader full circle. The central mimetic narrative event of Mr Duffy's metamorphosis into Mr Train functions as the punchline of the metadiscourse, to remind the reader that, as they were warned in the opening paragraph, the fictionalising act in which they are engaged is 'absurd.' And most importantly, having identified their playful reading – which has entailed surveying the text for signs with performative functions – with the protagonist's act of looking through the spyglass, the text's ludic readers self-identify with the subsequent metamorphosis:

> John Duffy's brother was certain that he *was* a train – long, thunderous, and immense, with white steam escaping noisily from his feet and deep-throated bellows coming rhythmically from where his funnel was. [...] He glanced often at his watch to make sure that the hour should not go by unnoticed. [...] Precisely at 9.20 he emitted a piercing whistle, shook the great mass of his metal ponderously into motion, and steamed away heavily into town.[54]

The urge to draw a correspondence between John Duffy's brother's strange episode and our dual reading is compounded by the alternation between the protagonist's human and trainlike aspects. As with the interrelating chain of characters that follow the identification of Martin Smullen, these free-floating descriptions require the negotiation of ambiguity amid the imagining of two overlapping images: Duffy-as-human and Duffy-as-train. Some of the protagonist's human aspects remain – his feet, his watch – yet his deep-throatedness is reapplied in relation to a train's funnel, while his metal shakes 'ponderously,' using an anthropomorphic descriptor to humanise and destabilise the train image. The capacity to whistle, a common trait among both humans and trains, functions perfectly for both alternating images. Duffy's watch seemingly remains in its original form, but in a subtle shift it comes to mirror the precise function of a station clock. This tilting between two images simultaneously, both active yet augmented and unsettled by the presence of its opposite, uncannily mirrors the tilting between the mimetic and performative readings in which the reader of 'John Duffy's Brother' has so far been actively engaged. Taken this way as a symbolic representation

[54] *Ibid.*

of text play, which is likewise performative, the event confirms the validity of our metadiscourse as an imaginative extension of the co-existent mimetic narrative.

To expand on the train metaphor further, the forward locomotion of the mimetic narrative maintains its direction, rattles along the linear syntagmatic axis of the text. Meanwhile, our journey is accompanied by a whole metadiscursive machine of bells, whistles, and pistons, firing off on other axes and in different directions; the aesthetics of the text which draw attention to narrative's textuality as they contribute to it. The reader, like the imaginatively rapt protagonist, travels through the linear text, sustaining two forms at once. The journey of this chaotic, fluctuating train-man – and of the reader engaged in the dual nature of text play – contrasts with that of the water of the Liffey, which might describe the experience of a traditional non-performative text: 'Like a respectable married man, it seemed to be hurrying into Dublin as if to work.'[55] Significantly, it is not the transformation itself which the narrator assures us is the 'incident which gives the story its whole significance,' but rather the protagonist's subsequent awakening, when 'John Duffy's brother felt something important, something queer, momentous, and magical taking place inside his brain, an immense tension relaxing, clean light flooding a place which had been dark.'[56] The claim that this is the significant moment in the story seemingly confirms, then, that the ultimate 'point' of 'John Duffy's Brother' is not the depiction of a lack of self-control, but rather, following a period of imaginative reverie, the sense of a new self-awareness, which, while embarrassing, is also magical.

Conclusion

Though this article has identified the more prominent textual elements which give rise to and sustain the potential for text play in 'John Duffy's Brother,' yet more ludic elements may be found in the text, which often arise from the dual function of the narrator's casual, anecdotal tone. I have described how Duffy's metamorphosis serves the function of confirming the validity of text play in 'John Duffy's Brother' while simultaneously sending up the embarrassed reader as part of a comic, textual performance which interrogates the fictionalising act. I would like to conclude by highlighting one final passage which demonstrates the effectiveness of the narrator's performative casualness in opening up the text's ludic qualities:

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[55] *Ibid.*, 54.

[56] *Ibid.*, 58.

> The train arrived dead on time at its destination, which was the office of Messrs. Polter and Polter, Solicitors, Commissioners for Oaths. *For obvious reasons, the name of this firm is fictitious*. In the office were two men, old Mr Cranberry and young Mr Hodge. Both were clerks and both took their orders from John Duffy's brother. *Of course, both names are imaginary*.[57] [my emphasis]

These duplicitous asides serve the narrator's gesture to real-world anecdote, while simultaneously highlighting that the fictionalising act is, of course, imaginary by its very nature. The ludic pleasure of the text emerges from such casual yet sophisticated, unobtrusive yet multifunctional lines. In such passages, the narrator's voice is reminiscent of that of Myles na gCopaleen who, after explaining the mechanics of an interesting grammatical puzzle in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, asks his reader: 'See it?'[58] Though the mock-poetic and mock-Joycean phrases underpinning much of the intertextual activity of 'John Duffy's Brother' have been widely discussed, I argue that the intentionality of the text is best revealed when the narrator is seemingly at his most casual, the tone in which O'Brien is at his most ludic and generous.

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[57] *Ibid.*, 56.

[58] Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Flamingo, 1993), 103.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.