OVERTONES AND DISTURBANCES IN JAMIE O'NEILL'S DISSIDENCE NOVELS*

Juan Ignacio Oliva
Universidad de La Laguna

Abstract

Jamie O'Neill's novels, *Disturbance* (1989), *Kilbrack* (1990) and, especially, *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), portray Ireland as an attractive but complex nation that needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed to acquire new values and meanings. Thus, the main purpose of the novelist transforms into a heroic act to demystify (through the reuse of classic narrative style) both the moral and social constraints of normative rules and to show that "Other" readings and judgments can be made possible. Through a gender/class twofold perspective, this paper aims at distinguishing, following O'Neill's path, the echoes and overtones that prevent Irish citizens from communicating among them (both individually and collectively). Also, it attempts as well to analyze the series of disturbances that affect the representation of Ireland as an *alma mater* land but rather transforms it into a saturnine stepmother.

Key words: Jamie O'Neill, dysfunctionality, contemporary Irish narrative, disturbance metaphors.

Resumen

Las novelas de Jamie O'Neill: *Disturbance* (1989), *Kilbrack* (1990) y, especialmente, *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001), retratan Irlanda como una nación atractiva pero compleja que necesita ser deconstruida y reconstruida para dotarla de nuevos valores y significaciones. De este modo, el propósito principal del novelista es transformar un acto heroico para así desmitificar (a través de la reutilización del estilo narrativo clásico) tanto las restricciones morales como las sociales de la normativización y mostrar que "Otras" lecturas y juicios pueden ser posibles. Siguiendo una perspectiva doble de intersección de género y clase, este ensayo trata de distinguir, siguiendo la trayectoria de O'Neill, los ecos e insinuaciones que impiden que los ciudadanos irlandeses se comuniquen entre ellos (tanto individualmente como colectivamente). Asimismo, se intentan analizar las series de perturbaciones que afectan la representación de Irlanda como *alma mater* y en cambio la transforman en una madrastra saturniana.

Palabras clave: Jamie O'Neill, disfuncionalidad, narrativa irlandesa contemporánea, metáforas disruptivas.

> [...] The entire world grows up on those stories. Only difference is, I told him the truth, that they were lovers, humping physical fellows." Yes, and Jim had grasped instinctively that significance: that more than stories, they were patterns of the possible. And I think, how happier my boyhood should have been, had somebody —Listen, boy, listen to my tale— thought to tell me the truth. Listen while I tell you, boy, these men loved and yet were noble. You too shall love, body and soul, as they; and there shall be a place for you, boy, noble and magnificent as any. Hold true to your love: these things shall be (O'Neill, *At Swim* 608)

Jamie O'Neill (Dun Laoghaire, 1962-) is best known by his third novel, *At Swim, Two Boys*, winner of the Ferro-Grumley Award for Fiction and the Lambda Literary Award in Gay Men's Fiction. He superbly describes, not only in this one but also in the other two, *Disturbance* and *Kilbrack*, the tormented relationship existing between male selves and the hostile environments that surround their quest for true identities. Imbued by Wilde, Joyce or Beckett and gifted with a unique prose style that imitates nineteenth-century realism with contemporary wisdom, O'Neill's attitude is that of a questioning citizen in front of the moral absolutes of his culture, to regain independence from the familiarized eye of mainstream Ireland. Playing wittily and ironically with syntactical and idiomatic expressions, and using an ample and subtle vocabulary, the writer shows a different interpretation of the issue of Irish identity, by creating characters full of irony and nuance. His is a prose that echoes back some of the strength of the Dickensian rascals (such as Fagin in *Oliver Twist,* for instance, mirrored in some of the father figures in his novels), joining together comicity and pathos in the turmoil of socially deprived contexts. Rather loosely, but underlining the ongoing pace of his narrative, intertextual allusions to the Irish tradition, in general, and to the Irish literary revival, in particular, appear in a series of episodes of a modern, postcolonial, innovative and daring prose. It is precisely through the intermingling of both antagonistic attitudes that O'Neill's unique style is shaped, carrying with it, therefore, a longlasting criticism and a new gaze about the Irish dilemma. Such intertextual intention is deliberate, as the very title of *At Swim, Two Boys* allude to Flann O'Brien's famous work, *At Swim-Two Birds*, thus showing how the rewriting of Ireland both diachronically and ethically work as a supra-text in these stories.[1]

The mental struggle of a young half-orphan Irish boy in a house that is tumbling down is the main motif of his short and surprising *opera prima*. In effect, *Disturbance* brilliantly describes how young Nilus Moore tries to evade from chaos and disorder, both physical and mental, by obsessively making and remaking an absurd jigsaw puzzle and by compulsively ordering once and again some of the ele-

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 68; 2014, PP. 185-193

* The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, previously Ministry of Science and Innovation (MINECO, Research Project FFI2011-23941).

[1] Regarding this, see all the intertextual references studied in Bertrand Cardin's "Intertextual Re-creation in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*" (23-31).

ments in his room, like the folds of his bedroom sheets. Symbolically depicting his room as a spatial refuge and a place for daydreaming, Nilus meditates and creates a whole universe of reveries and fixations, there.[2] Surrounded by an atmosphere of decadence (a wrecked house, the absence of a passed-away mother and an alcoholic and broke father) Nilus feels himself aloof, almost on the verge of splitting up. This schizophrenic condition appears as well in the character of MacMurrough (the third out of three in a love triangle, in *at Swim*...), who bears within his mind four distinct and controversial *personae*, which can be read under psychoanalytic parameters, as we will discuss further on. Also parallel to some of the elements that appear in *At Swim*..., the paternal characters become quintessential of the "disturbances" that split the personality of each of the young protagonists apart. Both Nilus' and Jim Mack's fathers share most of the characteristics that portray them: both are mean, tough and insensitive good-for-nothings, but at the same time both show their human weaknesses, due to several social and vital wounds, something which provoke certain tenderness in the reader. The pathetic condition that both epitomise makes them a point of reference to ascertain their offspring' reactions afterwards. But what clearly differentiates both stories is the setting. The lugubrious, tumbling down paying guesthouse of *Disturbance* provides an environment adequate for dark humour and melodrama, on the basis of an individual portrait of social injustice. On the contrary, the historical truthful facts concerning the Easter Dublin Rising of 1916 offer a specific panorama in which the homosexual relationship of three young men and the activist urban guerrilla war of the Irish dissidence do melt in a neo-romantic epic. *At Swim, Two Boys* is a lengthy "opus" (almost 650 pages), whose main attractive lies in the complex deconstruction of the Irish process to independence, which works as perfect milieu for the fight for sexual emancipation and idealist rebelliousness under the form of "Bildungsroman."[3] This is roughly the story of two Dublin boys, Jim Mack and "Doyler" Doyle, who set as objective to reach Muglins Rock by swimming. Taking into account that Jim has never swum before and that Doyler should teach him quickly, in a year's time, this goal becomes a real *tour de force*, and almost a Herculean task. Meanwhile, Ireland is approaching one of his most significant fights for independence: the Easter Rising becomes, then, a perfect parallel for an epic tone narration. Let us not forget about the third protagonist: their mentor, MacMurrough; a dandy aristocrat and ex-convict, who is not only a character but also an observer of the whole plot, following the example of Wilde, whom he quotes assiduously. Through the multiple personalities he embodies, he struggles between antagonistic ideas in a trial in which he becomes both the defence and the prosecution. His mind is inhabited by four *personae*: his friend Scrotes, the

[2] Concomitances with Virginia Woolf's metaphorical use of a "room of one's own" could be traced.

[3] An analysis of the "Bildung" elements in this novel can be found in González Acosta and Oliva.

only real character, Nanny Tremble, and old granny matchmaker, The Chaplain, his religious consciousness, and Dick, the personification of his sexual desire.

His second work, however, will be discarded in this analysis because it is the least Wildean of all in argument and intention, although it shares most of the dark comic effects and stylistic devices of the other two, and especially his main concern in describing new versions of the Irish landscape. *Kilbrack* plays with a quite diverse trio: 25-year-old O'Leary Montagu, a patient suffering from amnesia, taken care of by nurse Mary, and obsessed by the description of the rural village of Kilbrack offered by writer Nancy Valentine in her novel *Ill Fares the Land*. The main knot of the plot develops through the parallel structures between reality and fiction, and the play between neurotic identities. Both, O'Leary and Nancy are as mysterious and cryptic as the actual Kilbrack shows in the diverse narrators' eyes. In this sense, the creation of alternative realities becomes recurrent in O'Neill's novels and approaches him even more to O'Brien's, as we shall see later on. Alcoholism (suffered by Mary after coping with Montagu's traumas for more than a decade), poverty and ill-omen, cynicism and peasantry are also present in this story, which tries to rewrite biography but invents it instead.

Returning to our point, in both, *Disturbance* and *At Swim, Two Boys* homoeroticism and dissidence underlie in latent form in each of the protagonists' stories, being the first of them probably a seed of the latter evolution of the male portraits. For instance, Nilus' "disturbance" in the first novel becomes a voluntary role to fight against hostile environments. Nilus shows himself as an orphan boy in urgent need of affection, thus he desperately tries to find an adequate interlocutor who could answer his existentialist doubts regarding the meaning of life and death. His father being no good example at all, he deviates to self-aloofness and is haunted by his dead mother in a series of repetitive remembrances. From the very beginning of the story (as it also happens in *At Swim, Two Boys*) the clash between the ideal and the real world works as an instrument of "disturbance" (one more meaning to be added to this polysemy) and provokes feelings of mental dislocation and personal rebelliousness in equal parts. The Irish society that is depicted here cracks under the force of three potent, though crooked pillars, if we make use of the metaphor of the ruinous building that is his house: the repressive Catholic church with its taboos, the time of social depression in which they happen to live and, of course, as a consequence of the previous two, the lack of personal ambition and strength, which leads to paralyzing immobility.[4] Nothing is straightforward in the novel, neither physically or spiritually: wall-cracks and mind-fissures, chaos outside and mental disorder inside, economic failure and family meanness, bad habits in society and in the paternal figure, and so on. Even nudity becomes a problem, in the very

[4] All of them are recurrent to Irish literature. See i.e., to name such a few, Frank McCourt's recent bestseller, *Angela's Ashes* (1996), or even Joyce's *Dubliners* ("The Dead," for instance) for a portrait of well-off, provincial and sterile lives, dancing in the void like moths around an electric bulb. (This image is analysed in my essay, "James Joyce").

beginning of the book, when his father says that "there is nothing to be ashamed of," and "men don't need to hide themselves. We've all got the same mechanics. No need for locked doors" (1). This little lesson contrasts with the sexual constraint and abomination traditionally felt for the naked body and its fluids—which has religious origin in the expulsion from paradise and moral leaf-covering of Adam and Eve in the Catholic doctrine. It turns the natural into something lascivious and sinful. Thus, Nilus becomes a little exhibitionist in front of his father, using his voyeurism as another "disturbing" weapon:

> I stripped off, splashed some soapy water round my groin, and lathered away, making cooing noises about the lovely cold sensation. My father turned up the volume on the radio. I started towelling myself with the small hand towel, slowly and ever so thoroughly, with my bum stuck almost point-blank in my father's face. (2)

The result of this engaged posture is twofold: "I had no more lectures about nudity" and "we were back to normal," consequently transforming spontaneous action into something artificial and imposed by norm. In this sense, the whole plot underdevelops situations that were primarily and spontaneously naïve, but which get rotten by the socially malevolent human judgment. Accordingly, Nilus keeps recurrently saying that he lives in a "queer" world, full of "queer" deeds and "queer" reactions. The ambiguity in the terminology employed proves the gender interest of the story and its implicit meaning: "'there's more to life than politics' He gave me that queer look again. 'Well, yes,' he said. 'Of course there's more to life than politics.'" (127). These words, uttered by Joe in a conversation held with Nilus at school, surrounded by work outside and the shrieking sound of bulldozers, seem to superbly exemplify an epiphany process of rising conscience not only to young Irish schoolboys but also to Ireland as a collective self:

> I felt depressed, then. It was never easy reading how my father had planned my destruction. How fragile was life. It was only an accident that I had been born at all. Only an accident.
> Anyway, the bulldozers outside were finishing work for the day. It was five-thirty, time for Disturbance. (126)

The final "disturbance" in the story takes place at the very end of it. Using a description of physical decay, it seems to summarize all the desolation, paralysis, unfulfilment and sorrow felt by this puzzled boy and occurs precisely after his father's "grand," albeit tender, monologue:

> The banging was on my father's bedroom door now. Cracks were splintering in the mouldings. It was interesting to note which mouldings gave way first. Such a disturbance. Over the banging and the thin strains of 'Nobody's Child' that I fumbled on my mother's piano accordion, somewhere inside or outside my brain, and the chill of my brain, I heard a baby's tiny disturbed voice—so tiny a listening ear might crush it... crying. (191)

Nilus' inner universe, in *Disturbance,* stays at a pre-emancipation level at all senses. Either because he is still too young to take part in activism, or because of his own personal frailty, the fact is that he has not yet been able to make his own decisions; in fact, his only resistance fight occurs in the mental turmoil of his daydreams. Hypersensitive as he actually is, he has not truly overcome the lethargy of his environment. Quite on the contrary, the Dublin boys, Jim Mack and Doyler, together with the complex figure of Anthony MacMurrough (in *At Swim...*) will perform a romantic, heroic fight for utopianism.

At Swim, Two Boys uses the water element as the perfect matter for hobby-horses and idealism. The aforementioned reference to O'Brien's *At Swim, Two Birds* is not at all irrelevant, for this title alludes to a specific place full of literary echoes on the river Shannon, called "swim-two-birds" or Snámh-dá-éin. Also, O'Brien uses the Chinese box technique —in which a story refers to a story, which refers to another story, which refers to another, and so on, in a sort of mirror effect.[5] This process of introspection is narrated by a college student of Gaelic —himself possibly an *alter ego* of O'Brien, whose name is indeed no more than one out of many pen-names used by Brian Nuall'in[6]— a compulsory smoker who does not usually attend to class. He begins writing a novel about another novelist who only writes Westerns, but who suffers from the same loneliness and lack of interest than the student. What makes it a more difficult reading is that the narrative levels are many times interconnected and characters merge between them. Like in Luigi Pirandello's plays[7], fictional characters appear personalized and even dare judge the novelist's dubious narrative talent. Many secondary plots work at very complex and metafictional levels, like the student's translations of legendary characters such as King Sweeney, or Finn MacCool, which satirize Lady Gregory's translations, and so on so forth. This peculiar novel includes three beginnings and three endings, told by three different characters, and it has been compared to other experimentalist works, starting with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and finishing with James Joyce's last works, especially *Finnegans Wake*. Being aware of the tremendous distance that exists among them, O'Brien's shows a primary interest for ironic metafictive discourse, which is at the same time appropriated by O'Neill in the colonial setting of 1916's Ireland.

---

[5] It is curious to notice how Jamie O'Neill's production can be easily compared to Cornwall writer Donald Michael Thomas, shortlisted for the Booker Prize for his novel *The White Hotel*, in 1981. Specially the cycle of *The Russian Quintet* (*Ararat, Swallow, Sphinx, Summit* and *Lying Together*) published from 1983 to 1990, uses the same Matrioshki technique in which improvisation of stories within stories is the main motif; but also, in relation to schizophrenia and splitting-up personalities, see his second book, *Birthstone* (1980).

[6] Born in Strabane, Tyrone, in 1911 and died in Dublin, 1966. He studied Celtic literature at Dublin University and used several pen-names in newspapers and other publications, like Brian O'Nolan, Myles Na Gopaleen, George Knowall, or Count O'Blather. *At Swim-Two Birds* appears in 1939, published in Longman, due to the war all the copies were destroyed by a blast. It was later re-edited by MacGibbon and Kee in 1959.

[7] Of which *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) stands as the most appropriate example.

At Swim, Two Boys also shares with O'Brien's masterpiece the complexity of the multiple voices that interact inside MacMurrough's head, together with a taste for the deconstruction of actual identity stereotypes that affect a social reading of Ireland. If we take this into account, a correlate of Oscar Wilde's attitude can be easily traced. In the use of fine subversive humour, full of irony and subtlety, and in the aristocratic, defiant view of the protagonists of the novel, O'Neill clearly states a deliberate political engagement and therefore proclaims him to be one of Wilde's coreligionists in this long-lasting moral fight that still affects the image of Ireland. Also, in the portrayal of MacMurrough and of his *alter ego* Scrotes (the most important *persona* that comes out of his four mental splits, as we have mentioned afore) as human beings who skeptically and ironically question their own process of doubting, producing as a result a critical way of thinking, once again one tends to find Wilde's shadow. In this sense, MacMurrough can be defined (using John Fowles' classic definition of the *Aristos*) as one of the "few", and Doyler (Jim's lover) one of the "many."[8] Regarding morality and dissidence, Doyler becomes more and more of an extremist, which makes him follow his truth blindly; MacMurrough, instead, questions about his convictions every time, and chooses many times to disagree. The following paragraph is key to understand how Wilde becomes an absent parallel of MacMurrough throughout the novel. It is the moment in which MacMurrough confesses his homosexuality to a former classmate to whom he had felt certain physical admiration:

> "I was thinking: Parnell and Wilde, the two great scandals of the age: both Irish. It's good to know Ireland can lead the world in something."
> Something less charming he found behind his ear this time. "Morbid thing to say."
> "You know, what my aunt said —about the charges being trumped up against me."
> "Water under the bridge."
> "Not exactly." MacMurrough wondered was he going to say what was on his mind, and after a while discovered that he very possibly was. "When we were at school together that year, I quite admired you." (.../...)
> "It's quite true. I was guilty as charged." (.../...)
> "You are telling me that there is a flaw in your character?"
> "I am telling you that I do not think it is a flaw."
> The empty glass went down on the table. "There's nothing more to be said." (...)
> "Damn it all, MacMurrough, are you telling me you are an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort?" MacMurrough answers: "If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes" (308-309)

Notice how both sexual defiance and the statement of the sexual condition of the individual go inseparably together with the cause for the independence of Ireland and romantic national ideals. This chiasmic symbiosis converts the heroic

[8] Also, we could follow Michael Walzer's division between the "best" and the "worst" citizens, according to free thought and sensitivity, on the one side, and irrational passion and stubbornness, on the other.

deed into a question of honour and the sexual plea into a social fight; it makes the issue of the masculinity of Ireland a core process of patriotism, subverting thereby the orthodox, canonical reading of Irish history. The introduction of eroticism inside a national struggle gives a step further into the Wildean trial, that has affected Ireland ever since. Let us not forget that homosexuality did not cease to be a crime until as recently as 1993, the year in which the 1861 law that served to morally judge Wilde's episode was derogated. It can be connected to the sub-plot of the Sacred Band of Thebes (or the "Sacred Band of Lovers" as Jim would say), the famous 300 brave men who went to fight in pairs, something which provided them with a special powerful courage in this life without women, because "it would be awful hard to do anything dishonourable with your friend by your side" (584). A little later, it can be read that "the sergeants had only sergeants for their friend," showing in this way the moral sameness that intimate friendship was supposed to create; once again, another romantic concept merged in the heroic discourse.[9]

O'Neill's novel can be, thus, read as an epic story in which the romantic idealism that these three symbolic heroes (who come from different origin, social class and ethical behaviour) incarnate turns into a sacred quest for the "holy grail," to soothe the waste land of Eire. And, at the same time, this heroic ordeal becomes, so to say, a long day's journey into spiritual freedom, for the paladins who dare undertake it.

Received for Publication: September 2, 2013; Acceptance for Publication: March 2, 2014.

WORKS CITED

Cardin, Bertrand. "Intertextual Re-Creation in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys.*" *Estudios Irlandeses* 1 (2006): 23-31.

Crompton, Louis. *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-century England*. Swaftham: The Gay Men's, 1998.

González Acosta, Marta and Juan Ignacio Oliva. "Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys* and the Formation of the Heroic Romantic Self." *Insights and Bearings: Festschrift for Dr Juan Sebastian Amador Bedford*. Ed. Manuel Brito, Matilde Martín González, J.I. Oliva, and Dulce Rodríguez González. La Laguna: Servicio de Publicaciones ULL, 2007. 211-219.

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes*. London: Scribner, 1996.

Oliva, Juan Ignacio. "James Joyce: el exilio como sustento narrativo." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 21 (1990): 179-185.

[9] The Sacred Band of Thebes became popular in the U.K. after the publication of John Potter's *Antiquities of Greece*, in the 18th century. Lord Byron, for instance, refers to them and he even visited some of the battle scenarios of the band during his journeys to Greece, as Crompton points out in *Byron and Greek Love* (1998).

O'Neill, Jamie. *Disturbance*. London: Scribner, 2003.

—— *Kilbrack*. London: Scribner, 2003.

—— *At Swim, Two Boys*. London: Scribner, 2002.

O'Brien, Flann. *At Swim-Two Birds*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

Rivero Taravillo, Antonio. *Nadan dos chicos*. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2005.

Thomas, D.M. *Ararat*. London: Abacus, 1984 [1983].

—— *Birthstone*. Harmondsworth: King Penguin, 1987.

—— *Lying Together*. London: Abacus, 1991.

—— *Sphynx*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1986.

—— *Summit*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1987.

—— *Swallow.* London: Abacus, 1985.

Walzer, Michael. *Razón, política y pasión: 3 defectos del liberalismo*. Trad. A. Gómez Ramos. Madrid: Antonio Machado, 2004.