



## ‘The Eminent English Writer’: Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and Flann O’Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Irish writer Brian O’Nolan, better known as Flann O’Brien (1911-1966), among other pseudonyms, published *At Swim-Two-Birds*, his first novel, in 1939. Early reviewers and contemporary critics alike have hailed it as a metafictional masterpiece, relevant for its *mise en abyme* narrative structure, lawless characters and mock-epic bravado. However, little attention has been devoted to *how* such an innovative design was originally conceived by its author in the first place. This article holds the belief that Huxley’s fourth novel, *Point Counter Point* (1928), stands as a major intertext among the many literary sources O’Brien might have perused when composing *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Apart from the presence of several direct references to *Point Counter Point* within O’Brien’s novel, Huxley’s text encompasses metafictional mechanisms that function in a similar way to those at work in O’Brien’s novel. Although there is no factual proof that O’Brien had read Huxley’s novel before he wrote *At Swim-Two-Birds*, this article endeavours to prove the existence of formal links between both metafictional assemblages by means of a detailed comparative analysis, ultimately concluding that O’Brien had indeed read *Point Counter Point* before setting out to write his first novel and found the self-referential features of Huxley’s work potentially productive.

**Keywords:** Flann O’Brien, Aldous Huxley, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Point Counter Point*, Metafiction.

### [es] ‘The Eminent English Writer’: *Point Counter Point* de Aldous Huxley y *At Swim-Two-Birds* de Flann O’Brien

**Resumen.** El escritor irlandés Brian O’Nolan, mejor conocido como Flann O’Brien (1911-1966), entre otros pseudónimos, publicó su primera novela, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, en 1939. Tanto los críticos de la época como los actuales han recibido la novela como una obra maestra de la metafiction, relevante por su uso de la estructura narrativa *mise en abyme*, además de destacar sus anárquicos personajes y su bravuconería en parodiar el género épico. No obstante, se ha prestado poca atención a *cómo* diseñó el autor un armazón narrativo tan original. Este artículo cree firmemente que la cuarta novela de Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (1928), es un elemento intertextual de importancia entre las muchas obras en las que O’Brien se inspiró mientras componía *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Además de la existencia de referencias directas a *Point Counter Point* en la novela de O’Brien, el texto de Huxley hace uso de mecanismos metafictionales similares a los diseñados por O’Brien. Aunque no existe prueba fehaciente de que O’Brien leyese la novela de Huxley antes de escribir *At Swim-Two-Birds*, este artículo trata de probar la existencia de conexiones formales entre ambos esqueletos metafictionales llevando a cabo un análisis comparativo, con la conclusión final de que O’Brien había leído *Point Counter Point* casi con total certeza antes de escribir su primera novela e intuyó que las características autoreferenciales de la novela de Huxley podrían funcionar productivamente en su novela.

**Palabras clave:** Flann O’Brien, Aldous Huxley, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Point Counter Point*, Metafiction.

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## 1. Introduction

*At Swim-Two-Birds*, the first novel by multifaceted Irish author Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966)—better known as Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen,<sup>2</sup> among many other pen names—was quietly published in 1939. Despite having been immediately praised by twentieth-century towering literary figures such as James Joyce, Graham Greene, Anthony Burgess or Dylan Thomas, it was not financially successful from the outset: merely 240 copies were sold before Longman’s warehouse in London was destroyed by German bombs during World War II. Years passed, and its author began to gain national notoriety thanks to his long-running satirical column entitled *Cruiskeen Lawn*, appearing in *The Irish Times* almost daily from 1940 to 1966, the year of his death.

By the time O’Nolan died, *At Swim-Two-Birds* had been republished twice and critics were beginning to view it favourably. Nowadays many consider it to be O’Brien’s (post)modernist masterpiece, along with *The Third Policeman* (1940, published posthumously in 1967), and one of the most important works of twentieth-century Irish literature. As such, it has been the focus of indefatigable attention by scholars over the last fifty years. Nevertheless, critics have almost systematically neglected one of the most important aspects of the novel: its inception.<sup>3</sup> The question whether O’Nolan professed any admiration for a particular writer who might have inspired and influenced the creation of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is central to the novel and has not been straightforwardly answered as yet. To begin with, O’Nolan’s early literary fixation with Joyce, rapidly spotted by early reviewers,<sup>4</sup> places him as a major influence. And although this might be true to a certain extent, I want, however, to direct the reader’s attention to the following passage extracted from the beginning of *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

My bedroom was small and indifferently lighted but it contained most of the things I deemed essential for existence—my bed, a chair which was rarely used, a table and a washstand. The washstand had a ledge upon which I had arranged a number of books. Each of them was generally recognized as indispensable to all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature and my small col-

<sup>2</sup> As is customary with scholars dealing with O’Nolan’s different personas, the penname Flann O’Brien will be used when referring to the novel. Brian O’Nolan, his real name, will be used when referring to the man himself.

<sup>3</sup> I have addressed the matter of the origins of *At Swim-Two-Birds* elsewhere (Asensio 2015) with a particular focus on an early short story, “Scenes in a Novel” (1934). Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (2013) have claimed that this short story is the precedent of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a kind of proving ground where to test his newly acquired metafictional notions. Although it is not within the scope of this article to analyse “Scenes in a Novel”, it must be mentioned that it contains many of the metafictional elements present in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: the use of the *mise en abyme* technique, a despotic novelist and characters who rebel against their creator.

<sup>4</sup> Such as Sean O’Faolain’s, who reviewed the book in *John O’London’s Weekly*, claiming that there was “a general odour of split Joyce all over it” (Quoted in Cronin 1990: 101).

lection contained works ranging from those of Mr Joyce to the widely read books of Mr A. Huxley, the eminent English writer. (O'Brien 2003: 11)

Joyce's influence over O'Nolan has fascinated many scholars ever since the author's death.<sup>5</sup> However, Joyce's books happen to share the protagonist's ledge with English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) who, according to Murray (2003: 167), had achieved international reputation long before 1939. There seems to exist an implication here as to the sources of inspiration O'Nolan perused when writing *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Apart from Joyce, then, Huxley—and in particular *Point Counter Point* (1928), one of his most famous novels, second to *Brave New World* (1932)—emerges as a potential influence. However, no intertextual analysis of O'Brien and Huxley's novels has been carried out to date. Some scholars, such as Ann Clissman (1975), Rüdiger Imhof (1985), Monique Gallagher (1992), Hopper (2009) and Linda Hutcheon (2014), acknowledge and argue that Huxley's use of self-referential strategies at some point in *Point Counter Point* influenced in many ways the metafictional structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Nevertheless, none of them examine this connection in a systematic way. My intention is to delve into this insufficiently explored topic and to carry out a comparative analysis between Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, aiming at shedding some light on the intertextual relationship of both works and the technical influence that the former exerted over the latter.

## 2. *Point Counter Point* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*

The prime question to be addressed before engaging in the connection of both novels is precisely to justify said connection. To be sure, since no apt evidence exists, it might be impossible to determine whether O'Nolan had actually read *Point Counter Point* or used it as direct reference or source from which to draw material for his own book. In actual fact, there is no empirical proof that O'Nolan had read Huxley's novel before or after 1939. Recently, *The Parish Review* (2013) provided a full inventory of O'Nolan's personal library and *Point Counter Point* is nowhere to be found. However, one may safely assume that he read it in a library, borrowed it from a friend or even lent it to somebody given the obvious popularity that the novel enjoyed within intellectual and literary circles<sup>6</sup>. So much so, that Samuel Beckett famously claimed in a 1932 letter that he had just “finished [...] Cunt Pointercunt. A very painstaking work. The only thing I won't have forgotten by this day week is Spandrell flogging the foxgloves” (2009: 111).

On top of that, there are some further signs that strengthen this hypothesis. The narrator's shelf is, for example, a cogent indicative if he is to be identified as being O'Nolan's own Stephen Dedalus; that is, his own fictional persona. This identification has been readily carried out by many scholars. For example, Maebh Long writes that “*At Swim-Two-Birds* is an autobiographical text on a number of levels” and that

<sup>5</sup> For further introspection on this matter see Cohen (1987), O'Grady (1989), Dotterer (2004), Harriman (2010) or Abblit (2014), to mention but a few.

<sup>6</sup> This extreme popularity among intellectuals would have detrimental effects for the future of this novel in Ireland. The Censorship of Publications Act, 1929, made *Point Counter Point* the first novel to be banned in the country. The ban was announced in the *Iris Oifigiúil*, in May 1930. The book, however, came out in 1928, thus allowing previously sold copies to escape the censor's radar.

“many of the narrator’s ‘Biographical reminiscences’ have been noted to be actual events from O’Nolan’s time as a student” (2014: 30-32). If this is so, then it follows that the books the narrator owns and reads were probably among those enjoyed by O’Nolan in real life. This point can be further argued by examining a passage where the unnamed narrator in *At Swim-Two-Birds* entreats his uncle to give him money to buy a book, Heinrich Heine’s (1797-1856) *Die Harzreise* (1826):

Could you give me five shillings to buy a book, please?  
 Five shillings? Well, dear knows it must be a great book altogether that can cost five shillings. What do they call it?  
*Die Harzreise* by Heine, I answered.  
 Dee...?  
*Die Harzreise*, a German book. (O’Brien 2003: 33)

*Die Harzreise* appears listed as an item in his personal library at Boston College (2013: 37) and Caoimhghín Ó Broilcháin briefly explores the connection between Heine and O’Brien’s novels by arguing that “we find in [*Die Harzreise*] an unnamed student who neglects his studies and sets out on a trip during which he meets an amazing variety of characters, at least three of whom [...] make a re-appearance in *At Swim-Two-Birds*” (1999: 12-13). It seems, then, that *Die Harzreise* played an important role in shaping some of the themes and characters of *At Swim-Two-Birds*; therefore, by analogy, *Point Counter Point* must have had some sort of influential presence in O’Brien’s novel. In fact, Hopper deems it “a key intertext in *At Swim-Two-Birds*” (2009: 72), also asserting that “while still a student O’Brien had become familiar with the works of international modernist literati—Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, *Huxley*, Kafka” (2009: 35) [My emphasis]. The only other instance where Huxley is openly mentioned in O’Nolan’s oeuvre was on 8 February 1952, in a *Cruiskeen Lawn* article, one in which he mockingly mentions in passing that “a number of people, including Aldous Huxley, have pondered the relationship between plumbing and literature”.<sup>7</sup>

Before moving on with an analysis of the metafictional devices at work in both novels, there is an excerpt from *At Swim-Two-Birds* which demands attention if we are to compare both novels. Towards the middle of the novel, the Pooka, the Good Fairy and several characters are engaged in an intellectual discussion on music. They mention two crucial elements that connect O’Brien’s novel with Huxley’s: the technique of counterpoint and Bach, who happens to play a vital role in *Point Counter Point*—he is Lord Tantamount’s musical fetish:

The fugal and contrapuntal character of Bach’s work, said the Pooka, that is a delight. The orthodox fugue has four figures and such a number is in itself admirable. [...] Counterpoint is an odd number, said the Good Fairy, and it is a great art that can evolve a fifth Excellence from four Futilities. (O’Brien 2003: 110)

This passage unmistakably echoes John Bidlake’s musical musings at the beginning of *Point Counter Point*. Upon listening to a Bach concerto in Lord Tantamount’s mansion, “he had gone on to reflect in the fugal allegro. You seem to have found the *truth*; clear, definite, unmistakable, it is announced by the violins; you have it, you trium-

<sup>7</sup> *The Irish Times*, “Cruiskeen Lawn”, 8 February, 1952.

phantly hold it” [My emphasis] (Huxley 2004: 30). While the Pooka and Bidlake’s enthusiasm for Bach’s melodies is not a particularly critical point of convergence, the fact that the Good Fairy considers counterpoint to be “an odd number” is. Coincidentally, at the end of the novel we are made aware of the fact that “truth is an odd number” (O’Brien 2003: 216). For Bidlake, Bach’s contrapuntal fugues bring truth to the fore; for the Good Fairy, counterpoint in Bach is an odd number and so is truth.

Most certainly, mentions to the technique of counterpoint and Bach are not incontestable evidence that O’Nolan read Huxley’s work but they certainly imply this. Moreover, the fact that *Die Harzreise* is featured in *At Swim-Two-Birds* after being central to the construction of the novel suggests not only that O’Nolan was equally acquainted with Huxley’s work but also that the latter’s structure was revelatory and ultimately essential in the composition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The following section will be devoted to analysing the structural parallelisms between the two novels in detail in order to determine the extent to which O’Nolan perused *Point Counter Point* for the composition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

### 3. Metafictional structures and devices

Interestingly enough, both novels are completely dissimilar in terms of theme and plot. *At Swim-Two-Birds* deals with a young novelist writing a novel about another novelist, who is in turn writing a novel about several characters—some of them being novelists as well—who are being held captive in their author’s residence so as to prevent any possible mischief. *Point Counter Point* offers a different kind of story: the novel deals with London’s roaring 1920s, deriding the society of the time and exploring the events surrounding a multifarious group of mostly wealthy individuals whose hypocrisies and intrigues are brought to light indiscriminately. I contend, however, that O’Nolan did not take an intertextual interest in the novel’s plot or themes but in its experimental modes of narration. Therefore, the similarity between both novels is of a technical, rather than thematic, nature. A defining experimental element of O’Brien’s novel shared by *Point Counter Point* is metafiction. Metafiction has been defined as being

fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 1984: 2)

Basically, a metafictional novel, or metanovel, is one which explores its inner fictional mechanisms by explicitly referring to the composition of the novel, its style and the relationship between fiction and reality. Metafictional approaches are commonplace in O’Brien studies, especially regarding *At Swim-Two-Birds*, but not so much in connection with Huxley and his work.<sup>8</sup> Although some critics have neglect-

<sup>8</sup> There are a number of studies which briefly examine *Point Counter Point* in relation to metafiction. Some examples are Lowenkron (1976), Wolf (1990) or Standish (1993). This article is particularly indebted, however,

ed the glaring experimental quality of the work, *Point Counter Point* is actually a highly metafictional novel, as this article will endeavour to prove.

First and foremost, there is the significance of the novel's title: what does *Point Counter Point* mean? A counterpoint is a musical term which implies "the relationship between and movement of two or more voices" (Laitz 2008: 95), also called "polyphony". Huxley, who most certainly was music connoisseur, decided to use this term to mirror his novel's inner arrangement; that is, the simultaneous juxtaposition of different and sometimes discordant voices and characters with the goal of creating a musical narrative that flows, note after note, until the end of the song. The story is thus told from the different but intertwined points of view of characters who live and suffer the same events, each of them perceiving reality differently. In this respect, Wolf (1999: 173) has argued that "the musical term 'counterpoint', applied to the structure of this novel, cannot be dismissed as purely metaphorical". One of the most important metafictional statements of Huxley's text deals precisely with this quality:

The musicalization of fiction. Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound. (Pleuvent les bleus baisers des astres taciturnes. Mere glossolalia.) But on a large scale, in the construction. Meditate on Beethoven. The changes of moods, the abrupt transitions. (Majesty alternating with a joke, for example, in the first movement of the B flat major quartet. Comedy suddenly hinting at prodigious and tragic solemnities in the scherzo of the C sharp minor quartet.) More interesting still the modulations, not merely from one key to another, but from mood to mood. [...] Get this into a novel. How? The abrupt transitions are easy enough. All you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots. (Huxley 2004: 384)

The idea that different voices could string together a narrative in a soft, melodious tone surely contributed to the structure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* given the existence in the novel of multiple characters drawn from totally unrelated backgrounds. In fact, the famous threefold opening can be understood as being the practical representation of Huxley's idea. *At Swim-Two-Birds* opens as follows:

One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings. (O'Brien 2003: 9)

Long argues that *At Swim-Two-Birds* "opens with the impossibility of making any firm first step, and thereby begins, *in medias res*, by commenting on the multiplicity and arbitrariness of origins" (2014: 22). At the outset of O'Brien's novel, the narrator unveils the three different plot samples or storylines to be followed by his novel: the Pooka MacPhellimey, John Furriskey and Finn Mac Cool's. Anthony Burgess keenly commented that "Flann O'Brien did, in fact, discover a means of *counterpointing* myth, fiction and actuality through the device of a sort of writer's commonplace-book" (1985: 71) [My emphasis]. In doing so, he is not only intertwining myth

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to some others, like Wolf (1999), who pursue a metafictional interpretation of *Point Counter Point*.

(Finn Mac Cool) with folklore (the Pooka MacPhellimey) and contemporary reality (John Furriskey), but he is also offering a multiplicity of viewpoints from which to approach the story; that is, Huxley's musicalization of fiction. Indeed, the narrator has "a sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots" to musicalize his narrative. Some critics, like Gallagher, have stressed the importance of the technique of counterpoint in association with the fragmented configuration of O'Brien's novel:

Each 'background' insert is given as much importance as the foreground, and the reader proceeds through a sort of labyrinth. This recursive labyrinth suggests the technique of Bach who, in his 'Little Harmonic Labyrinth,' creates a maze of quick key changes, and often gives as much relief to the accompaniment as to the melody. (1992: 131)

"*At Swim-Two-Birds*", W. Michelle Wang writes, "demands that we forsake all reliance on secure ontological boundaries and precisely delineated narrative levels [...] to flit in, out, and between [them]" (2011: 134). Ontological boundaries are thus shattered in *At Swim-Two-Birds* by means of different fragmentary inserts or extracts of multifarious origins, such as letters, excerpts from encyclopaedias, other books or his own writings, biographical reminiscences or separate and purely descriptive passages and explanations of a metalinguistic nature. Conversely, at first sight Huxley's novel unfolds in an orthodox manner: the novel is divided into thirty-seven chapters which involve characters in a succession of events that take place following a coherent chronological order; unlike *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a novel composed of a single chapter in which each piece of the puzzle rarely has any discernible relationship with the previous one. Although some critics have claimed with regards to Huxley's novel that "logical transitions from event to event, the author's explanations of why one event followed a previous one or— not quite the same issue—why the author has chosen a certain order—all these were absent from *Point Counter Point*" (Watt 1977: 511), the truth is that reality is less distorted in Huxley's novel than in O'Brien's.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, readers are commonly at a loss to understand the degree of factuality of what they are reading, and thus need to chart their own progress through the narrative; in contrast, the chronology of *Point Counter Point* is unspecific at times but certainly coherent and stable. Therefore, the metafictional structure of *Point Counter Point* is not as explicit as in O'Brien's novel. Whereas the main aim of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is to assert itself as a fictional product in contention with factual reality, *Point Counter Point* hides its metafictional devices under layers of characters and events so that it becomes almost undiscernible. The ringleader of the novel's profound but at the same time obscure metafiction is Philip Quarles, a novelist. Although he does not play a critical and direct role in the story, he is in charge of crafting the entire metafictional apparatus of the novel. His relevance has been stressed by critics such as Norman Friedman (1955: 1172), who has thought Quarles to be Huxley's alter ego in the story. In this sense, Quarles is analogous to the anonymous novelist in *At Swim-Two-Birds*; that is, Quarles becomes the author of *Point Counter Point* at the same time that the Irish student is the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In fact, Steven G. Kellman classifies both novels within the typology of the self-begetting novel, "an account, usually first-person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading" (1976: 1245).

Philip Quarles' metafictional actions are manifested in many ways throughout the novel, but perhaps the most important instances are featured in some chapters—or sections of chapters—labelled “From Philip Quarles' Notebook”. These comprise a sort of literary diary in which the author reflects on some of his views on the novel as a genre, at the same time that he notes down potential motifs and ideas for his own work in progress. Apart from the many comments on literature that abound in the novel on the part of several characters, Quarles' notebooks constitute the main self-referential element of *Point Counter Point*. An interesting comment of his to be contrasted with some ideas present in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the following:

Novel of ideas. The character of each personage must be implied, as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece. In so far as theories are rationalizations of sentiments, instincts, dispositions of soul, this is feasible. The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas to express — which excludes all but about .01 percent of the human race. Hence the real, the congenital novelists don't write such books. But then I never pretended to be a congenital novelist. (Huxley 2004: 385-386)

Quarles' manifesto-like discussion of the novelistic genre and some of its conventions is somewhat echoed by the student-narrator in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, who writes down the following considerations on one of his notebooks:

Nature of explanation offered: It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters. The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort; the novel was self-administered in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic. In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity. (O'Brien 2003: 25)

The writers, as we may observe, are literary critics as well. These two fragments help to identify the self-referential nature of the novels, to the extent that plot—nearly at all times in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, at that precise moment in *Point Counter Point*—becomes subordinate to structure and form: both writers devote many pages to discussing generic or thematic literary conventions or their own plans for their works in progress. Also, and perhaps more importantly, these fragments prove that a) both novels are intrinsically related in formal terms and b) both novels boast fully-fledged metafictional structures that work in a similar manner at their core. One of such metafictional devices used by Huxley and O'Brien is the *mise en abyme* technique. First observed by the French writer André Gide, several attempts at a definition of the term have been made by many scholars, most of them based on Gide's own original conception. A famous definition is Lucien Dällenbach's, who claimed that the concept *mise en abyme* broadly refers to the following idea: “*toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l'oeuvre qui la contient*” (1997: 11). Many others have elaborated on that definition. Sharon Mouanda, for instance, suggests that it



“encompasses not just narratives within the narrative but any entity which reflects, wholly or in part, the content, the structure, or the writing process” (2008: 36). Additionally, Moshe Ron has established the criteria that any narration needs to fulfil in order to be considered an example of *mise en abyme*: “(1) the presence of at least two narratorial instances, marked by a clear-cut diegetic down-shift from one to the other; and (2) a relation of homology between the relation of the higher narrator to his narrative and the character- narrator’s to his” (1987: 419).

*At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Point Counter Point* meet the requirements stipulated by Ron, although “O’Brien uses Gide’s *mise en abyme* to such an extent that it is nearly unrecognizable” (Thibodeau 2003: 41); that is, *At Swim-Two-Birds* presents an all-encompassing metafictional fabric based on the *mise en abyme* technique which is remarkably more sophisticated than Huxley’s, something in turn easily accountable for: whereas *At Swim-Two-Birds* is directly addressed at turning upside-down the foundations of the novelistic genre, Huxley, on the other hand, seems to be using metafiction to merely toy with narrative conventions so as to make his novel formally more distinctive. Right on the very first pages of the notebook, the author professes that his text follows a *mise en abyme* pattern when he philosophically asserts that “every object and event contains within itself an infinity of depths within depths. Nothing’s in the least like what it seems” (Huxley 2004: 384). There is indeed a clear association between the words “depths” and “abyss”—English translation of the French word “*abyme*”,—an association which inevitably implies that Huxley was familiar with André Gide’s concept of *mise en abyme* and used it as formal experimentation in *Point Counter Point*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Huxley’s standard interpretation of the *mise en abyme* technique is outrageously extrapolated in *At Swim-Two-Birds* with the construction of a deeper and more intricate system of interconnected narrative levels, which will be meticulously explored in the following section.

#### 4. Authorial presence and intrusion

In Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen pronounces his famous literary aphorism: “the artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence” (Joyce 2003: 233). This is simultaneously the epitome and punchline of Stephen’s aesthetic theory in that it is conspicuously unapplied by Joyce himself: his theory is debunked by his flagrant intrusion into the creative process of the novel and the narrative itself as Stephen. Likewise, the authors in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Point Counter Point* disrupt the ontological barriers separating fiction and reality and enter their narratives. Both novels feature novelists who are trying to write a novel and both make use of their authorial power within the text to prioritise the exposition and exploration of their literary manifestos over the rest of the narrative elements. While the narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* proudly asserts that “it was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich” (O’Brien 2003: 32), authori-

<sup>9</sup> Aldous Huxley was most certainly proficient in French—he taught the language for a year at Eton—and lived in France from 1930 to 1937; moreover, as P. Mansell Jones (1937: 9) implies, Huxley’s knowledge of French philosophy and letters was quite extensive, and throughout *Point Counter Point* there are countless references to French thinkers and writers such as Descartes, Voltaire, Balzac, among many others.

al control goes beyond characters. As Gallagher aptly affirms, “he exerts control over his text, composing, eliminating, organizing, categorizing, segmenting, dividing his page into punctuated paragraphs” (2007: no pagination). This authorial control is also present in *Point Counter Point* to a certain extent. In this section, I will argue that the unnamed narrator and Quarles perform the role of authoritative, and authoritarian, custodians of their own worlds.

After discussing his project of a novel of ideas and introducing his theory of the infinite succession of depths within every object, Quarles—and, by extension, Huxley himself—muses over the seamless possibilities of such a structural narrative design, and wonders at the implications of arranging a number of descending plots envisaged by writers subordinate to a superior writer who has created them:

Put a novelist into a novel. He justifies aesthetic generalizations, which may be interesting — at least to me. He also justifies experiment. [...] But why draw the line at one novelist inside your novel? Why not a second inside his? And a third inside the novel of the second? And so on to infinity, like those advertisements of Quaker Oats where there’s a Quaker holding a box of oats, on which is a picture of another Quaker holding another box of oats, on which etc., etc. (Huxley 2004: 385)

This excerpt is at the core of the metafictional apparatus of *Point Counter Point*. The Quaker Oats image, a pictorial rendition of the theory of the depths within depths, powerfully illustrates an idea normally allegorized by the Russian *matrioskas* simile; that is, the existence of a matrix object—or, in this case, plot—which contains within it another interrelated, essentially similar and necessarily dependent object, and so on. In using *mise en abyme* narration, both novels follow the same matrix pattern: their main character is a novelist who is writing a novel about a novelist; in a sense, it is safe to argue that there are at the very least two narrative levels. Be that as it may, the distribution and priority of the different narrative levels do prove to be contentious for this analysis. In order to shed some light on the issue, the *mise en abyme* structures of both novels will be examined below.

*At Swim-Two-Birds* consists broadly of four narrative levels:

1. The unnamed Irish student is the main character of the novel. He is writing a novel about a novelist, Trellis.
2. Trellis is writing a novel about several characters—some of them borrowed from Tracy, another writer in the story. The main characters of this story are those to whom the different openings at the beginning of the novel are devoted. Some of the characters, such as Furriskey, are created through the process of aestho-autogamy:<sup>10</sup> “he was born at the age of twenty-five and entered the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it” (O’Brien 2003: 9).
3. One of Trellis’s minor characters is Sheila, deliberately devised to fulfil the role of Angel in the House. Trellis rapes Sheila—his own character—and the outcome of their sexual encounter is Orlick, who instantly becomes a young novelist.

<sup>10</sup> For further insight on the concept of aestho-autogamy as it relates to metafiction, see Melamphy (1978) and Steven (2014).

4. Orlick, outraged and disgusted by his father's behaviour towards his mother, is encouraged by some of the other characters to write a story in which he beats his own father to death.

Constanza Del Río (1994) establishes four narrative levels or “framed narratives”, as she puts it. John Mays (1973: 85), however, claims that the novel is composed of three narrative levels. Mays pays no attention whatsoever to Orlick's narrative level, whereas Del Río discusses it in depth. Orlick's narrative is indeed important because it contains another novelist—following Huxley's prescription—and also because of the fact that he attacks his own father by writing a story, an element which heavily contributes to the metafictional structure of the novel. On the other hand, Cohen (1993: 210) interestingly points out that as the novel progresses all narrative levels begin to mingle unexpectedly: Trellis, who naturally belongs to the second level, rapes Sheila, from the third level. In holding his father for trial, Orlick interacts with Trellis, “simultaneously [existing] on two separate planes of fiction” (*ibid.*: 211); so do all of Trellis' characters, who are present during the trial. Even more important is the fact that all characters, including Trellis himself, live in a place called the Red Swan Hotel. It is described as being “a large building of four storeys” (O'Brien 2003: 26), and we are also informed that the “cellar is full of leprechauns” (*ibid.*: 35). Thibodeau (2003: 17) claims very aptly that the Red Swan Hotel “is important because the narrator uses it as a physical representation of his manuscript as a whole. At the same time, *At Swim-Two-Birds*' structure is also displayed by this hotel's shape”. Indeed, the novel is constructed upon four narrative levels, something that O'Brien seems to have wanted to emphasise. Also, the metaphorical idea that the internal architecture of the novel resembles a four-storied building automatically confirms Cohen's aforementioned suggestion that narrative levels are in fact intertwined: characters are somehow able and free to climb or descend the stairs if they want to access a different narrative level.

Conversely, *Point Counter Point* presents an outwardly simpler *mise en abyme* structure, yet one which proves more problematic when analysed in depth. The novel consists of two main narrative levels: the actual plot—that is, the story in which we get to know Walter, Lucy, Burlap, Sprandell, Rampion, Lord Tantamount, Old Bidlake, Philip, Elinor, among many others—and Philip Quarles's Notebooks. Philip's entries in his notebook are, however, scarce, and they are mostly conceived in an essay-like manner rather than as a straightforward story. Nevertheless, the notebooks are not subordinate to the story as it happens in *At Swim-Two-Birds* with respect to the biographical reminiscences. On the contrary, there is an upward direction rather than downward: Philip Quarles' notebooks, apparently pertaining to the story, actually constitute the matrix narrative level. This idea has also been suggested by Friedman (1955: 1172) and observed by Murray Roston (1977: 379); the latter accurately claims that “the novel being planned by Philip Quarles is actually the outer novel, *Point Counter Point*, in which he is a participant”. Quarles wants to write a novel based on the following premise:

Because the essence of the new way of looking is multiplicity. Multiplicity of eyes and multiplicity of aspects seen. For instance, one person interprets events in terms of bishops; another in terms of the price of flannel camisoles; another, like that young lady from Gulmerg, he nodded after the retreating group, ‘thinks of it in

terms of good times. And then there's the biologist, the chemist, the physicist, the historian. Each sees, professionally, a different aspect of the event, a different layer of reality. What I want to do is to look with all those eyes at once. With religious eyes, scientific eyes, economic eyes, homme moyen sensuel eyes... (Huxley 2004: 252).

Quarles' narrative model, based on the virtual absence of a focal or main character, actually accounts for the fragmentary nature of the outer novel; even several of the professions and philosophical perspectives that he happens to mention are those of some of the characters that live alongside him in the story. That is the first proof that Quarles's work in progress is indeed the outer novel *Point Counter Point*. Another interesting, though perhaps minor, piece of evidence can be found at the moment Philip and Elinor are having the conversation from which the quotation above has been extracted. Elinor is curiously reading the *Arabian Nights* (1704), which is conveniently one of the earliest examples of *mise en abyme* narration:

'That simple story of yours,' he said aloud; 'it wouldn't do.'  
Elinor looked up from the *Arabian Nights*. 'Which simple story?'  
That one you wanted me to write.'  
'Oh, that!' She laughed. 'You've been brooding over it a long time' (*ibid.*: 252)

Philip's contention of writing *Point Counter Point* is repeatedly evidenced throughout the novel. Firstly, when talking about what he calls "the musicalization of fiction" and the multiplicity of points of view in his notebook and how to apply them to his upcoming novel, he argues that the "abrupt transitions are easy enough. All you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel, *contrapuntal* plot" [My emphasis]. In using the word "contrapuntal", he is referring to the very title of the novel, yet another indicator of Quarles as author of the novel. The second and perhaps more important instance that definitively evidences this idea is the following:

'I've been thinking,' he went on reflectively, 'that it would make an excellent subject.'  
'What?'  
'This business of Walter's.'  
'You don't propose to exploit poor Walter as copy?' Elinor was indignant. 'No really, I won't have it. Botanizing on his grave—or at any rate his heart.' 'But of course not!' Philip protested.  
[...]  
'But, my dear, I never intended to use more than the situation. The young man who tries to make his life rhyme with his idealizing books and imagines he's having a great spiritual love, only to discover that he's got hold of a bore whom he really doesn't like at all' (*ibid.*: 249)

He finds Walter a source of inspiration for the main character of his novel. This is of major importance principally because Walter's storyline opens the novel and though it is not particularly focused on him, his presence looms over the rest of the story. After all, his repetitive act of adultery towards Marjorie and his irrational obsession with the luscious and cold-hearted Lucy depict "the break-up of communal society

into an amorphous collection of tangential egoists, each of whom inhabits his own private world” (Meckier 1966: 284). Despite Elinor’s complaints, he pursues the idea of using Walter as a character in his notebook: “I shall begin the book with it. My Walterish hero makes his Lucyish siren laugh and immediately (to his horror; but he goes on longing for her, with an added touch of perversity, all the same and perhaps all the more) sees those disgusting crocodiles he had been looking at in India” (Huxley 2004: 383). It is at this point that Huxley brings to light his structural plans for his novel: by inserting the notebook cuttings he is hinting at their relevance within the bulk of the novel without openly asserting it—the excerpts might as well have been extracted from Huxley’s own notebook. Such a metafictional commentary stands out in a mostly dissertation-oriented story, and the fact that they are thematically cleft from the rest of the narration stresses their importance. In this way, Quarles becomes a kind of narrator-god who comes to the forefront and roams his own novel unnoticed, scrupulously examining his creation under the safe alibi of being a writer. Trellis, the novelist from the second narrative level of *At Swim-Two-Birds* operates in much the same way, inefficiently bossing his characters around and imposing his lofty intellect on them.

## 5. Conclusions

Metafiction reaches a whole new dimension in *At Swim-Two-Birds* in contrast to *Point Counter Point*. Although P.L Henry has claimed that “O’Brien’s major interest in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is technical” (1990: 38), I would argue that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, metafiction is equally employed as a comic subterfuge to fulfil O’Brien’s farcical vision of the fictional process; its use is more widespread as well, while in Huxley’s novel it is just occasionally at work. As seen throughout, the chief element that suggests a metafictional consideration of both novels is the *mise en abyme* technique which constitutes, to a greater or lesser extent, the internal structure of the novels. To serve that purpose, Huxley creates a secondary character, Philip Quarles, who has no decisive role in the story and is practically at all times apart from the main action. However, Huxley leaves visible clues for the reader to find and to realise that the whole story is actually being written and developed by Quarles himself, thereby making him a sort of *deus ex machina* who descends upon his fiction disguised as a writer to play a determined role. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Huxley’s basic, albeit cryptic, structure underwent a technical overhaul with the result of a metaphorical four-storied novel, each of its levels depending on the previous one.

What seems to be clear, however, is that O’Brien largely perused Huxley’s novel when writing *At Swim-Two-Birds*, researching in particular the metafictional aspect of the work. From a relevant technical innovation on the part of Huxley, O’Brien constructed a brand-new ontology of narration where “the fragments of fiction and the fragments of reality merge” (Long 2014: 28) repeatedly. And with that I am not only metafiction, but also to the fragmentary nature of *Point Counter Point* and its intellectually elitist atmosphere which are duly—and sometimes mockingly—refurbished in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. While bearing in mind that both novels hold strong similarities as well as differences, further studies of this intertextual relationship could address some related issues, such as O’Brien’s comic approach to metafiction

as opposed to Huxley's technically serious intent, as well as additional connections between both writers; for instance, the pivotal role that science plays in O'Brien's oeuvre, which might be intrinsically related to Huxley's enthusiasm with scientific advances. Therefore, considering all the above, a conjoint study of Huxley and O'Brien promises to become a fertile soil for researchers devoted to both writers given the current academic revitalization that they are enjoying.

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